

# In Kim Jong Un's world, many clocks on the wall

BY KEITH LUSE, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 02/27/19 09:00 AM EST  
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As the Hanoi summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un opens, Korea-watchers are placing bets about the anticipated success or failure of the event, typically defining “success” as the United States securing an ironclad agreement on the steps North Korea will take toward achieving denuclearization.

Many of those critical of the Trump administration’s engagement initiatives possess little knowledge or background on North Korea, or they simply are opposed to engagement. Others are unwilling to explore the merits, and reject the North Korea policy out of hand because of Trump’s involvement and his style of leadership.

Subtly present in these scenarios is a whiff of East vs. West cultural differentiation — the short-term-fix, “get it done” approach by Americans, compared to a longer-term, relationship-building perspective often prevalent throughout East Asia. In the North Korea-U.S. context, pressure is on the Trump administration to deliver, given failures of past U.S. diplomatic overtures to North Korea and skepticism surrounding results of the Singapore summit.

The expectation for immediate, tangible results may be realized; or, the Hanoi summit may be another benchmark in a longer-term, confidence-building road toward North Korea’s denuclearization. While insufficient in the minds of some, ongoing engagement with incremental progress is better than the price of war.

As he begins each day, Kim may contemplate to what degree time is on his side as he balances immense pressures facing him and the North Korean government. It is as if there are multiple clocks on his wall.

Kim knows the “Trump Clock” may run down in two years — six at the most. The “Moon Jae-in Clock” stops running in less than three years. In China, the “Xi Jinping Timepiece” will forever run (and seems to speed up on occasion). And there are two North Korea clocks — one represents the infrastructure of elites, several of whom possess a Cold War-mentality and are wary of Kim’s outreach to the Americans, and the other reflects growing expectations of the larger population, which include a longing for improved daily life and overall standard of living.

The clock metaphor exemplifies varying levels of pressure and reflects a reality check on the North Korean leader. In preparation for the summit, Kim likely calibrated what he must do to satisfy President Trump during his time in office, while concurrently balancing pressures resulting from the limited time remaining with South Korea’s Moon, the incessant chiming of China’s clock, and domestic pressures. It is likely that Kim also pondered the degree to which Trump will remain personally informed and involved in negotiations.

A high bar of public expectation will accompany both leaders in Hanoi. Trump will intend to “close the deal.” Along the 2020 presidential campaign trail, he’ll need to reference some deliverables from North Korea.

Mindful of the watchful skepticism of hardliners within his own country, and the qualms of Chinese leadership, Kim Jong Un’s intent may be to mollify the U.S. president for the moment. However, he surely knows that the Trump Clock on North Korea is running — and that the president and Congress share the goal of silencing the alarm of the North Korean missile and nuclear threat, sooner rather than later.

*Keith Luse is executive director of the National Committee on North Korea. He was a senior staff member for Asia to former Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), chairman and later ranking member of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee. This content reflects his personal opinion.*

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