

South Korean Print Media on
Why the Hanoi Summit Failed
and What Comes Next

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Since the first historic summit meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un last June in Singapore yielded a two-page joint agreement without a clear definition of or a timeline for denuclearization, expectations and misgivings further escalated for the second U.S.-DPRK summit, which was officially announced during Trump's State of the Union address to be held on February 27 and 28 in Vietnam. As the dates approached, a hailstorm of news reports from Seoul hinted at the possibility of a "small deal" to be signed in Hanoi; North Korea would make progress on denuclearization, which would likely involve dismantling its Yongbyon nuclear facility and/or intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and, in return, the U.S. would offer economic aid by easing sanctions, probably along with officially ending the Korean War and building liaison offices. This forecast partially stemmed from the political plight Trump faced in Washington due to the impending Mueller report with a Democrat-controlled House and the 2020 election nearing, meaning that he would have to show some progress in nuclear negotiations with Kim so as to break through the ongoing domestic challenge. Against this backdrop, Stephen Biegun, the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea, said at Stanford University¹ in late January, "President Trump is ready to end this war [the Korean War]. It is over. It is done." This was followed by remarks from Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during an interview² with CBS in mid-February, "It's our full intention of getting a good outcome in exchange for relieving those sanctions [economic sanctions.]" Such comments hailed the possibility of a deal quite favorable to Kim. News delivered just prior to the summit, that South Korean president Moon Jae-in and Trump shared a positive outlook for the meeting over the phone, hyped the likelihood of a promising result in Hanoi between Washington and Pyongyang.

Moon, during the phone conversation³ with Trump, suggested his vision of inter-Korean economic cooperation as one of the "corresponding measures" that could be awarded to Kim, lessening the burden on Washington's shoulders, if North Korea gives up its nuclear program and, according to the Blue House, Trump gave a positive response. Moon reportedly said that South Korea is "ready to take over the role of undertaking anything from reconnecting railways and roads between Seoul and Pyongyang to other inter-Korean economic projects."⁴ Such an approach was brought up earlier during an interview which the special adviser to the South Korean president, Moon Chung-in, had with *JoongAng* in January,⁵ right after Kim Jong-un's New Year's address came out; he proposed incremental economic exchanges, limited to only between Seoul and Pyongyang, to bring about the North's denuclearization, and said, "economic exchanges between the two Koreas can exceptionally be exempted from the target of UN sanctions as the two Koreas of the same ethnic group have a special relationship with each other."

Coverage before the Hanoi Summit

Conservative papers in Seoul blasted the potential "small deal" and Moon's suggestion of seeking economic ties with Pyongyang. *Donga* reported on February 18 that the U.S. president seems to have lowered the expectations for the second summit;⁶ the article referred to Trump's remarks during his announcement of a national emergency at the U.S. southern border on February 15, "No more rockets going up. No more missiles going up. No more testing of nuclear," and "We just don't want testing," implying that he may now aim for a small deal, only getting rid of the ICBMs that can hit the U.S. mainland. Citing the same remarks, *Chosun* chimed in⁷ that "in-no-rush" Trump mentioning halting North

Korea's tests, not dismantling its nuclear weapons and missiles, as a primary goal, raises concern that the second Trump-Kim meeting may result in a "low-level" agreement to freeze, not completely scrap, Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. *Munhwa* released an article⁸ also on February 18 titled, "Despite only nine days remaining, format and content of the summit still a 'blank slate,'" arguing that a pressed-for-time situation with little or no preparation before the summit only benefits Kim; Trump, who is under pressure to show tangible progress this time, would have to set the denuclearization bar low so he can keep the concession bar low, and therefore, the Hanoi summit is allegedly on course for a "small deal."

As for inter-Korean economic cooperation, *Donga* reported on February 21⁹ that Moon's financial commitment—basically asking the U.S. not to worry about money and to make headway on denuclearization—was an impetuous pledge that would cost Seoul a minimum of 103 trillion won to a maximum of 111 trillion won, according to the National Assembly Budget Office. *Chosun's* editorial¹⁰ dated the same day also condemned Moon for promising economic help, not even as a reward for completely abandoning nukes but as a way of urging Pyongyang to do so and insisted that easing sanctions before the North completely denuclearizes means giving up on the end goal. *Joongang*¹¹ cast a similar concern through an editorial on February 22, that Moon, by impatiently setting joint economic projects afloat (which would only be feasible after Pyongyang's denuclearization process advances far enough), while North Korea has not taken the first step towards denuclearization, can bring down the denuclearization hurdle, and only improves North Korea's negotiating position. It also claimed that Moon's message could have given Trump room to claim, "I will just make a deal with Pyongyang and dump the rest on Seoul."

Progressive papers' general reaction to "a small deal is not enough" was closely aligned with what the Blue House argued a day before the summit; a Blue House spokesperson, who used to write for *Hankyoreh*, said that the concepts of a small deal and a big deal cannot be mechanically segmented, as the boundary dividing the two terms is unclear. The spokesperson claimed that the idea of a small deal is included in the idea of a big deal and intimated that even if the summit concludes with a small deal, it cannot be rated as a failure since it is a part of a lengthy negotiation process. A similar perspective can be found in a *Hankyoreh*-published column¹² written in January by its Washington correspondent titled, "Small deal on North Korean nuclear isn't small." According to the column, many have already acknowledged the fact that North Korea declaring all of its nuclear weapons, materials, and facilities at once, the U.S. immediately lifting sanctions as a response, and the two countries establishing diplomatic relations, would be ideal but realistically impossible and, therefore, an incremental "action for an action" approach is the only solution. The column draws on statements made by U.S. Congressman Brad Sherman, chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific under the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, advocating freezing the North's missile technology and allowing a limited number of its nuclear weapons, while closely surveilling those weapons, as more realistic than seeking its denuclearization. In addition, the report draws on statements by Sheila Smith, who argues that if Pyongyang would not agree to provide a list of its nuclear inventory, it would be important for the two sides to build trust through a nuclear freeze and ICBM dismantlement, and create a way to advance to the next step. Against dominant skepticism in Washington, *Hankyoreh* claimed that a few American experts are pushing for realistic and practical remedies.

Another theme of the “small deal versus big deal” debate concerned North Korea’s Yongbyon nuclear facility—which Kim reportedly agreed to concede in Hanoi—and how highly it should be valued. Unlike conservative editorials in Seoul, which have argued that Yongbyon is no longer Pyongyang’s main nuclear producing facility, progressive papers published stories with the opposite angle, stressing how significant the step of dismantling Yongbyon is. *Hankyoreh*, on February 18,¹³ released an analysis on the Yongbyon nuclear facility and wrote that, despite its deterioration, Yongbyon has long been the heart and symbol of North Korea’s nuclear development and, therefore, tearing it down tops the list of denuclearization measures. *Kyunghyang*, on February 21,¹⁴ also defended the argument that if Trump and Kim were to successfully come to an agreement to destroy Yongbyon, which is capable of producing both plutonium and highly-enriched uranium, it would be highly meaningful, breaking down the foundation of Pyongyang’s nuclear program, and would serve to enable a “big deal.”

With respect to the joint economic projects between the two Koreas, progressive papers welcomed Moon’s suggestion; it can serve as one of the “corresponding measures” meeting Kim’s demands, without financially and politically costing the Trump administration much; so that the U.S. president approves. *Hankyoreh* wrote on February 20¹⁵ that Moon flattered Trump to pave the way for joint economic projects and basically asked Washington to leverage Seoul in order to earn “sanctions relief” first, through the Hanoi summit. Moon took what Trump said into account, “They [North Korea] have really taken advantage of the United States. Billions of dollars have been paid to them. And we won’t let that happen.” Yet, Moon provided a shield for Trump to pacify the American critics who oppose Trump’s second meeting with Kim, the paper argued. *Hankyoreh* also paid attention to the details of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2375, adopted on September 11, 2017, “Joint ventures or cooperative entities, in particular those that are non-commercial, public utility infrastructure projects that do not generate a profit” are possible as long as they have been “approved by the Committee in advance on a case-by-case basis” and referred to the project of connecting railways and roads and modernizing the related facilities, whose groundbreaking ceremony took place in December 2018 but could not proceed further due to the sanctions. *Kyunghyang’s* editorial¹⁶ on April 20 wrote that Moon and Trump, a week ahead of the Hanoi summit, specifically discussed potential compensation that could be awarded to Kim, which is unprecedented, enhancing the possibility of the summit’s success. The editorial claimed that Moon’s suggestion was timely, giving Trump more options to choose from so that he could entice Kim to denuclearize. *Kyunghyang* argued that regardless of what Washington has to offer Kim as a “corresponding measure,” inter-Korean economic projects are something Seoul has to be committed to; it is not ladling out money to Pyongyang, but paying for our share of the unification cost in advance, which could also be a way out of a stagnant economy and a steppingstone to a completely unified nation, one Korea.

Coverage on Hanoi and Shortly After

Day one of the Hanoi summit appeared to be cruising toward an agreement, signaled by the two leaders’ firm handshake for the first time in eight months since the Singapore summit. While seated face-to-face, Trump flattered Kim¹⁷, saying, “It’s an honor to be with Chairman Kim. It’s an honor to be together,” and added, “I thought the first summit was a

great success and I think this one hopefully will be equal to or greater than the first.” Kim cordially responded, “I’m confident that there will be an excellent outcome that everyone welcomes, and I’ll do my best to make it happen.” The two leaders also had a social dinner with their top aides that evening and even then, it seemed like Trump could go back home with something to tweet about, calling it a victory, and Kim could boast about keeping a promise he made to his hungry people, on North Korea’s economic development. However, Trump left the table empty-handed on the second day; he held a press conference with Secretary Pompeo and flew back to Washington, cancelling a scheduled working lunch and joint agreement signing ceremony with Kim. The news caught every stakeholder off guard, including Moon, who was expected to give a speech on the next day celebrating the 100th anniversary of the March 1st Independence Movement, based on the denuclearization measures achieved in Hanoi to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. During the press conference,¹⁸ Trump said, “Basically, they [North Korea] wanted the sanctions lifted in their entirety, and we [the U.S.] couldn’t do that,” to defend his reason for leaving. As soon as the press conference ended, a great majority of editorials and political commentators from Washington and Seoul chimed in with Trump’s contention that “No deal is better than a bad deal” and held Pyongyang accountable for the diplomatic failure. Although North Korean foreign minister Ri Yong-ho held a press conference later that day on behalf of Kim and rebutted what Trump said, claiming that his delegation asked for partial, not entire, sanctions removal, the general public response was that Trump did the right thing. Approximately two hours after the news on “No deal in Hanoi” broke, the Blue House held a briefing on what Trump and Moon shared over the phone and said that the U.S. president asked for Seoul’s engagement as a mediator between Washington and Pyongyang.

In the meantime, some raised the argument that explosive testimony before Congress by Trump’s former fixer and lawyer, Michael Cohen, while the summit was taking place in Hanoi, might have influenced the collapse. Considering that the testimony was viewed as detrimental to Trump and his presidency, many skeptics insisted that the U.S. president was too distracted to stay focused on a deal with Kim in the first place; as Trump, on March 3, basically admitted with a tweet¹⁹ that the Cohen hearing, “may have contributed to the ‘walk’” while abroad, his “righteous walk away” was immediately frowned upon, especially in Seoul. Moon Chung-in picked the Cohen hearing as one factor that contributed to the collapse in Hanoi; yet, he named Seoul’s main opposition party leader Na Kyung-won’s latest visit to Washington as another, blaming what Na said to members of the U.S. Congress, including Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House, that she opposes ending the Korean War, a peace declaration, and inter-Korean economic projects. Another contributor to the “no deal,” who surfaced over time, was John Bolton, the U.S. national security adviser, long-recognized as a hawk. South Korean media outlets, especially the progressive ones, alleged that Bolton’s sudden appearance at the negotiating table without a counterpart during an expanded meeting on the second day, might have had a negative impact on the summit at the last minute. Former unification minister Chung Se-hyun went as far as to insist that the result in Hanoi was an “intended failure” and called Bolton out, asserting that he played a critical role, the villain, and set the denuclearization bar high, which eventually killed the negotiations.

Conservative papers’ immediate reaction to the diplomatic collapse was to denounce Kim’s false commitment to denuclearize and the Moon administration’s incompetence. *Chosun’s* editorial on March 1²⁰ wrote, if there is anything to be learned from the Hanoi summit, it is

that we found out Kim's words, that he would give up his nuclear program, have no fidelity. The editorial also denounced Kim for attempting to exact a complete removal of sanctions at the expense of dismantling a plutonium facility inside Yongbyon, nothing more than an old mass of scrap metal, adding that Kim must have assumed that Trump would accept his offer as the U.S. president was facing political challenges at home. *Chosun* persisted in its view that the sanctions regime against North Korea is the only way, at the moment, to corner Kim and drive him to abandon his nukes, and negotiations should resume with an understanding that Kim, at least for now, will not let go of his nuclear arsenal.

Segye's editorial²¹ released on the same day, concurred with *Chosun* and wrote that the reason why the Hanoi summit failed is obviously because Kim, who had no intention to denuclearize, blindly asked for the lifting of sanctions; since the gap between the two sides has been confirmed, the prospects of resuming the negotiations remains uncertain. *Segye* lastly criticized Moon's timely ill-fitting pledge to consult with Washington on resuming Mount Geumgang tours and reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex, in his address on the 100th March 1st Independence Movement Day, which meant that he will push for sanctions relief against the North, and also criticized that such a commitment was out of touch with reality.

Another criticism, voiced mostly by conservative papers, was over the Blue House's lack of intelligence regarding the summit. *Joongang*, on March 4,²² referred to the "Hanoi mystery" and blamed the Moon administration for assuming a successful Hanoi summit to be a fait accompli. It cited what one of the Blue House key officials said, "No staff members made a report on the possibility of the summit ending without an agreement," and "the overall atmosphere was rather hopeful ahead of the summit." While the Blue House preached "a small deal is part of a big deal," just one day before the summit, which presumably emanated from a concern that the deal in Hanoi would result in something small, Washington actually sought a big, package settlement.

According to *Joongang*, Blue House spokesperson Kim even said, just 30 minutes before the collapse was reported, that he would deliver an official statement after Moon watched the joint signing ceremony with his top aides, which shows that communications between Seoul and Washington were out of sync. With a similar tone, *Chosun's* opinion piece²³ on March 21 questioned the Blue House's capability of reading the situation back then, as its spokesperson laid out positive remarks such as "Inter-Korean dialogue will kick into high gear," on the day the summit ended with no deal. Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha told the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee on March 18 that she was informed of the possible no-deal scenario and reported the information to the Blue House right away but refused to answer specifically when she became aware of and was briefed on the scenario, owing to Seoul's relationship with Washington; in response to the question, whether Seoul was forecasting the lack of a deal, Blue House spokesperson Kim Eui-kyeom merely said, "We were briefed on every possibility." *Chosun* cited a Japanese government official, "Striking a deal in Hanoi was said to be difficult from the working-level stage in Pyongyang and I was briefed on the first day of the summit after the social dinner that the deal won't likely be made," and, therefore, "I was surprised to hear spokesperson Kim's optimistic statement on the next day." On this basis, it criticized the equivocating foreign ministry and Blue House and characterized the current U.S.-ROK alliance as one that exists in name only.

In contrast, progressive papers in Seoul, while acknowledging the challenge, focused on reviving the dormant talks and the importance of Moon's role as a mediator. *Kyunghyang's* editorial on February 28²⁴ wrote that it is regrettable that the summit fell apart but a half-baked pessimistic view should be avoided. As Trump said that he would continue maintaining a good friendship with Kim, and Pompeo said that he hopes the denuclearization talks with Kim resume in a few weeks, Washington showed its will to keep the momentum going. The editorial also argued that the breakdown in Hanoi should just be taken as a reminder about how tough it is to solve North Korea's nuclear issue, and called for the Moon administration's mediating efforts to help the talks revive. *Hankyoreh*, on March 1,²⁵ reported what Pyongyang's state-run newspaper, *Rodong Sinmun*, released and wrote that Kim's message after the lack of a deal in Hanoi, is clear: continued talks and negotiations. To be more specific, *Hankyoreh* argued, it is a call for a third summit through productive dialogue under the principle of "step-by-step, simultaneously parallel actions," as well as a call to achieve a trade between "denuclearization and corresponding measures" in accord with the two sides' level of confidence. The report underlined that *Rodong Sinmun* did not express any anti-American sentiments but put a positive spin on the summit, with a comment, "It was a meaningful opportunity to develop the relations between North Korea and the U.S. to the interests of their people." Both *Kyunghyang*²⁶ and *Hankyoreh*²⁷ on February 28, each with headlines playing up Moon's role, reported that Moon and Trump discussed follow-up measures and decided to meet each other soon; *Hankyoreh* additionally wrote that Trump asked Moon to actively play the mediating role between Washington and Pyongyang and share what the two Koreas discuss after talking to Kim.

Follow-up Coverage of the U.S.-ROK Summit

Since the failure of the Hanoi summit, and throughout all of March, Washington and Pyongyang have fought a war of nerves. North Korea gave a sign of restoring its Tongchang-ri rocket launch site in early March and threw a tantrum through a press conference on March 15, in which it was said²⁸ that Kim is considering quitting talks with Trump. North Korea also arbitrarily left the inter-Korean liaison office on March 22, the day when Trump undid the yet-to-be-announced, additional large-scale sanctions²⁹ against the North via Twitter³⁰; North Korean officials returned to the liaison office four days later, but the U.S. Treasury Department announced that newly-added penalties on two Chinese shipping companies accused of doing business with Pyongyang were kept in place. Meanwhile, two long-standing U.S.-ROK joint military exercises, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, were called off and replaced by a smaller-scale exercise named Dong Meng, causing concern in Seoul, especially among the conservatives, that the U.S.-ROK alliance has weakened. In a bid to save the lost U.S.-DPRK talks and strengthen the uneasy U.S.-ROK alliance, Moon departed to Washington to have his seventh summit meeting with Trump on April 11. South Korean media's attention was on how much Moon would be able to narrow the identified gap between Washington and Pyongyang and revive the negotiations, given his past performances of successfully doing so at every difficult step of the way. Another point to watch for at this summit was, considering the distinct views Washington and Seoul have regarding how to accomplish denuclearization, how the two sides would form a consensus while not hurting the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Three talking points were mainly discussed at the summit: 1) a “top-down” approach is essential in the denuclearization process; 2) reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex and resuming Mount Geumgang tours are premature but giving humanitarian aid is acceptable; and 3) a third U.S.-DPRK summit may happen but will not be rushed. However, against the designed purpose, some experts commented that after the Hanoi summit had exposed the difference in opinion regarding how to tackle the North Korean nuclear issue between the two leaders, as Trump hung on to his position of seeking a “big deal” whereas Moon hoped for a “small deal,” as an incremental step by partially easing sanctions and taking denuclearization measures accordingly, little had changed. South Korean conservatives, in particular, blasted Moon, saying that he earned nothing but got ripped off by Trump to purchase more U.S. military equipment and weapons owing to the summit. In North Korea, Kim gave a speech³¹ at the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly on April 12, the first official statement directly from the leader since the Hanoi summit, calling on Trump to offer acceptable terms by the end of the year and for Moon to stop playing the “officious mediator”; Kim added that he is open to a third summit with Trump but only on the understanding that Washington changes its course. In response to Kim’s address, Trump tweeted³² in less than 24 hours, “A third summit would be good in that we fully understand where we each stand” and “I look forward to the day, which could be soon”; Moon, during his meeting with senior secretaries on April 15, proclaimed that he is now ready for another inter-Korean summit as soon as the North is ready for the meeting.

Conservative papers pointed out that Washington and Seoul could not find common ground, and condemned the summit for ending without a joint statement. *Chosun* wrote on April 12³³ that Moon suggested a so-called “good enough deal,” in which Trump and Kim agree on comprehensive denuclearization measures first, and once North Korea takes action to dismantle some of its key nuclear facilities, including Yongbyon, the U.S. eases sanctions correspondingly, step-by-step, but Trump insisted on a “big deal” and “comprehensive agreement” exchanging Kim’s complete dismantlement of the regime’s nuclear program for sanctions relief; Moon invited Trump to visit Seoul, but there has been no agreement reached yet on such a visit. Furthermore, while Moon sought a third U.S.-DPRK summit to take place as early as possible, Trump replied he will not hurry the event as it demands a stepwise procedure. *Donga*³⁴ shared a view analogous to that of *Chosun* on the next day; Trump’s comment that reopening the Kaesong Industrial Complex and resuming Mount Geumgang tours would be inappropriate until Pyongyang denuclearizes, was a de facto rejection of Moon’s “good enough” suggestion. *Munhwa* wrote on April 13³⁵ that Moon’s middleman diplomacy is at risk, as Kim raised his voice against Moon, blaming him for being a meddlesome “mediator” and “facilitator,” and argued that Seoul should be the responsible party, protecting the interests of the country. Kim also said in his speech that “Seoul should end its dependence policy on foreign forces and subordinate all to improving inter-Korean relations” and according to *Munhwa*, Kim’s message was to urge Moon to be on his side, not sandwiched between Washington and Pyongyang, escalating a challenge for Seoul to meet the expectations from both sides.

On the contrary, progressive papers appreciated what Moon achieved through his meeting with Trump, solidifying the U.S.-ROK alliance and reconfirming the two presidents’ commitment to accomplish denuclearization. *Hankyoreh* wrote on April 12³⁶ that Moon rebooted the peace process, a relay of talks between the U.S. and ROK, to the two Koreas, to finally, the U.S. and DRPK. According to the report, Trump asked Moon to share as

quickly as possible what he discusses with Kim when the leaders of two Koreas meet for the first time since the Hanoi summit. *Hankyoreh* expected that Moon would send an envoy to North Korea before long, share the U.S.-ROK summit results with Kim, and propose an inter-Korean summit so that the meeting could be leveraged to move on to the next U.S.-DPRK dialogue. *Kyunghyang's* editorial³⁷ on the same day claimed that the greatest outcome from this summit was that Moon was assured of Trump's will to continue the denuclearization talks with Kim. While holding on to his preference for a big deal, Trump said, "There are various smaller deals that maybe could happen" and "You can work out step-by-step pieces," which showed some possible room for flexibility, *Kyunghyang* argued. The editorial also paid attention to Trump's support for humanitarian aid, such as supplying food to North Korea, and appraised Washington's attitude toward Pyongyang as "neither hot nor cold." It added that Moon should meet with Kim to rekindle the talks and suggested that a summit take place on April 27 or close to that day, as it would mark the one-year anniversary of the Panmunjom Declaration.

Now, with the ball back in Kim's court, he recently took another long train ride to meet with Russian president Vladimir Putin on April 25. The first encounter between the two strongmen in Vladivostok sent a message to the world, and especially to Trump, that Kim has more friends to team up with than just China, and Putin can wedge himself into this complicated nuclear negotiation in order to benefit from his position as one of the main stakeholders. On top of that, Chinese president Xi Jinping will reportedly pay a visit to Pyongyang in May, and this supposition was backed by a former North Korean diplomat who defected to South Korea in 2016, Thae Yong-ho.³⁸ With a fast-paced and unprecedented level of boisterous diplomacy in Northeast Asia putting the Korean Peninsula in the spotlight, Moon is calling for another inter-Korean summit, presumably to give new impetus to a third U.S.-DPRK summit and, eventually, to pave the way for a nuclear-free Korea, if things go according to the agenda envisioned by Moon and the progressive media of South Korea.

Endnotes

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