

Chinese Media: Why Did the Hanoi Summit Fail and What Comes Next?

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Chinese media sources reflect a widespread propensity in 2019 to reassure the United States while not compromising vital national interests on the Korean Peninsula. They heartily welcomed Kim Jong-un's turn to diplomacy. They enthusiastically endorsed Donald Trump's embrace of Kim. They strongly approved of Moon Jae-in's bold moves to straddle the two sides and find a way to build momentum. After praising the Singapore summit's accomplishments, the Chinese faced the uncomfortable reality of failure in Hanoi, with calls to redouble efforts to put diplomacy back on track and repeated idealistic assertions about how the differences could be bridged. At the same time, they left mostly implicit the true objectives of a deal that Pyongyang was expected to accept and that China would consider suitable in order to satisfy its geopolitical aspirations.

Reassurances consisted of the following claims: China, as asserted in its 2017 white paper, is not trying to squeeze the U.S. out of the region or break the U.S.-ROK alliance, unlike its earlier policy indications; the Sino-DPRK alliance treaty is a relic of a past era without substantive importance; China is firmly committed to denuclearization, but considers it realizable only by means of talks and a long-term, multi-stage process that encourages Pyongyang to abandon its isolation; China does not take sides on whether a "big deal" is needed first to produce "small deals"; and Moon should be encouraged to keep engaging with Kim Jong-un even if Moon is correct in recognizing that he cannot be a mediator since the ROK is a U.S. ally. Yet, Chinese optimism is premised on notions about limits to North Korean demands, on North Korean willingness to denuclearize in return for conditions that are left vague, and on often unstated assumptions about how the peninsula would evolve during the process of denuclearization and how the U.S. military presence would change.

Expectations for the Hanoi Summit

We can look back to a January 11, 2019 article in *Jiefang Ribao* for more clarity on China's way of thinking.¹ It anticipated a big year for the Korean Peninsula in 2019, building on the positive developments in 2018. It pointed to statements by Kim Jong-un and his four visits to China in ten months that turned a new page in bilateral relations, as well as to the Panmunjom declaration of April 27 and the Pyongyang joint statement of September. Special notice was given to the June 12 Trump-Kim summit in Singapore, noting the North's agreement to denuclearize and the U.S. agreement to provide security guarantees and to forge a new type of U.S.-North Korean relations. Although the two sides agreed on four items in their agenda, the key is denuclearization, the article observes. A half year later, progress on the four points had proceeded unevenly. North-South relations had advanced quickly, and the North's policy moves internally and externally were clear, but U.S.-North Korean progress on denuclearization had stalled without U.S. sanctions relief. In response, Kim's New Year's speech, while preparing for a summit with Trump, offered warnings of a different path if U.S. pressure persists. The North insisted that the U.S. had so far failed to reciprocate for North Korean concessions. In turn, Trump demanded steps toward denuclearization as a precondition for sanctions relief. The future of the peninsula remains unstable and, owing to the special U.S.-ROK relationship, the improvement in North-South relations is not irreversible.

Looking ahead to the Hanoi summit, the article concluded that the key to U.S.-North Korean ties is in U.S. hands. Will it show sincerity, take realistic measures, positively respond to the North, give it reason to be reassured, offer sanctions relief, and allow North-South relations

to advance? The focus was on facilitating the peninsular peace process and improving U.S.–North Korea ties, not denuclearizing. The article correctly predicted that if sanctions were not adequately reduced, the summit would not succeed. By asserting that dialogue and understanding are the only path to resolving the Korean question, it insisted that pressure that stands in the way of these aims is a barrier. Isolation, economic sanctions, and threats to use military force have been proven to fail. At no point, however, did this article acknowledge U.S. concerns that the North might not be sincere about denuclearization or that both sides need to make reciprocal concessions to boost understanding. It mentioned the need for a peace agreement to end the war and for U.S. participation in a Northeast Asian security framework without explaining the relationship to the U.S. alliance system. Ahead of the Hanoi summit, the message from this military source was that only the U.S. side must change course.

Reasons for the Inability to Reach an Agreement

In the aftermath of the summit, Chinese media sources attempted to clarify the circumstances under which the Hanoi talks came to an abrupt end. They detailed the basic outline: after a seemingly successful one-on-one meeting between Kim and Trump and a friendly dinner on February 27, the talks apparently took a nose-dive during a second one-on-one meeting the following day, resulting in the cancellation of a planned lunch and the rapid conclusion of the summit without a joint declaration. According to Trump, North Korea “wanted the sanctions lifted in their entirety” but was unwilling to fully dismantle its nuclear program. In a contradictory statement, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho stated that North Korea had expressed its willingness to dismantle the Yongbyon facility in exchange for the *partial* elimination of sanctions, specifically the UN sanctions of 2016–2017 that are “related to people’s livelihoods and unrelated to military sanctions.” Although a U.S. State Department official soon clarified that Ri’s claim that the North Koreans wanted partial sanctions relief was accurate, most Chinese sources took an evenhanded approach to reporting the two official positions.²

Chinese analysts offered a number of explanations for the inability of North Korea and the United States to reach an agreement at the summit. Chief among them was the inadequacy of the preparatory meetings held prior to the meeting. According to typical protocol, the negotiating teams for the two sides should have worked through all of the issues and reached a consensus before the leaders met. In this case, however, the preparations were “seriously inadequate” and the two sides were not ready to meet when the summit occurred at the end of February.³ This lack of preparations led to misjudgments and the discovery only at the summit itself that the gap could not be bridged. This made the best possible outcome cutting the talks short while holding onto the foundation built in Singapore and to the dual freeze put in place on DPRK testing and U.S.–ROK military exercises. Despite the eight-month interval between the summits, Trump and Kim’s negotiators had not reached a breakthrough. Both summits had been rushed, but in Hanoi concrete results were needed, making success more difficult.⁴

The failure to reach a consensus prior to the summit resulted, in part, from the complexity of the issues at hand. Although North Korea agreed to pursue “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” at the 2018 Singapore summit, the United States and North Korea have fundamentally different meanings of “denuclearization” in mind: to the U.S.,

this means the complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, while to the North Koreans it means the elimination of the U.S. nuclear threat to North Korea through its alliances with Japan and South Korea and its military deployments in the region.⁵ Furthermore, at the Hanoi summit, Kim was only willing to give up the Yongbyon site; U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo rejected this offer because it “still leaves missiles, still leaves warheads and weapons systems” in North Korea.⁶

In addition, although the two sides recognize that denuclearization must be linked to sanctions relief, they have been unable to reach an agreement on the terms of such a bargain or on how to sequence it. According to Ma Xiaolin, the United States wants North Korea to fully abandon its nuclear weapons program *before* the U.S. lifts sanctions, while North Korea wants the elimination of sanctions to occur at the same time that it denuclearizes.⁷ An editorial in *The Global Times* took a different view: it argued that the United States recognizes that it must provide sanctions relief and a peace mechanism at the same time that North Korea denuclearizes. In their view, the sticking point in the negotiations was not over the principle that the two sides must act simultaneously, but rather over what kind of action each side must take as the “price” for the other side taking the action it desires.⁸ Worsening matters was the two sides’ inability to compromise on what that “price” might be. Some observers charged that both sides wanted an agreement that was entirely in their favor.⁹ Others placed the blame more squarely on the United States.¹⁰ Li Dunqiu argued that the United States was not clear about its bottom line during the preparatory negotiations, and then threw in conditions that were clearly unacceptable to North Korea at the last minute.¹¹

Many analysts also highlight the domineering leadership styles of Kim and Trump as a key reason for the summit’s failure. The two leaders’ overconfidence in their ability to reach an agreement through one-on-one meetings was a major reason why their negotiating teams did not iron out their differences during the preparatory meetings.¹² According to one analysis, Kim’s and Trump’s firm leadership style also resulted in communication problems with their respective teams of diplomats and technocrats, who were conducting the preparatory negotiations. Knowing that both leaders had a strong desire to reach an agreement and were bullish about the prospects for success, their negotiation teams may have papered over the differences in the two sides’ positions. The fundamental incompatibility of the two sides’ positions may therefore have gone unnoticed by the two leaders until the summit occurred.¹³

Kim and Trump might have been able to successfully negotiate these extremely complicated issues if they had better mutual trust, but this is sorely lacking between the two leaders and their countries.¹⁴ Because North Korea does not trust the United States, it demands a peace agreement and the establishment of diplomatic relations, as well as economic assistance. Yet the United States worries that if it signs a peace agreement, establishes diplomatic relations, and provides economic assistance, but North Korea *still* does not abandon its nuclear weapons, it will be in a far weaker negotiating position. The long and difficult history between the two countries, and their mutual lack of understanding, makes it difficult for the leaders to overcome the many hurdles to a negotiated agreement.¹⁵

Others attributed the lack of agreement to Trump's negotiating style. One account highlighted the shifting nature of Trump's position. Prior to the summit, Trump indicated that he was in no rush to achieve denuclearization as long as North Korea continued to refrain from nuclear and missile testing. Then he said that North Korea must take "meaningful" actions in order for the United States to lift sanctions. But in the aftermath of the summit, Trump took a much harsher line, charging that North Korea failed to meet U.S. demands for denuclearization.¹⁶ Another account directly criticized Trump for his "overreach," and lamented that, as a result, "an opportunity that may never come again was wasted." Sympathizing with North Korea, Cui Liru observed, "Kim must have felt that he was taken for a ride." Taking his analysis a step further, this analyst asked whether Kim had misjudged Trump's position or whether Trump had changed his mind. He concluded that Trump's erratic nature likely played a significant role: "Given Trump's well-known character, it is very possible that Trump increased his demands in negotiations with Kim on his way to Hanoi. After all, toughening one's position after raising his opponent's expectation for a deal is nothing new to Trump and the man's usual whimsical style of decision-making."¹⁷ In fact, Cui's suspicions proved correct: a month after the summit, news accounts revealed that on February 28, Trump handed Kim a piece of paper that, for the first time, clearly stated Trump's definition of denuclearization and demanded that Kim transfer all nuclear weapons and fuel to the United States.¹⁸

Chinese accounts took note of the domestic pressures potentially impacting Trump's negotiating position. They argued that Trump might have decided to take a harsher line in response to the release of documents by his former lawyer, Michael D. Cohen, during congressional testimony that occurred while Trump was in Hanoi.¹⁹ Perhaps Trump, facing negative press in the U.S., did not want to be accused of being swindled by the North Koreans; on the other hand, his desire to distract public attention from his legal difficulties was seen by many in the U.S. as a key reason for his decision to go forward with the Hanoi summit despite what seemed to be the obvious unpreparedness of the two sides to reach an agreement. Others noted the role of Congress, which has the constitutional power to implement sanctions regardless of the president's preferences.²⁰ Members of Congress applauded Trump's decision to walk away from the negotiating table, indicating, in the view of some Chinese observers, a widely shared U.S. preference for taking a hard line on North Korea.²¹ Others suggested that Trump's ability to freely pursue his preferred North Korea policy depends, to a significant extent, on the stability of his domestic political position and the amount of pushback he receives from "establishment Americans."²²

Finally, some argued that the lack of agreement at the summit indicated that the United States had not yet found a good model for its relationship with North Korea. Initially, hardliners in the United States like John Bolton advocated for the "Libya model," referring to the U.S. policy of building trust and verifying denuclearization steps as part of Libya's voluntary relinquishment of its nuclear program in 2003. However, the subsequent decision to support regime change in Libya in 2011 and Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal undermined U.S. credibility in this regard.²³ Instead, the United States advocated the "Vietnam model" as a way forward with North Korea, citing the improvement of bilateral relations after the Vietnam War and Vietnam's embrace of a market economy

under continued Communist Party rule. However, Jin Canrong questioned whether Vietnam was the right model for U.S.–North Korean relations, noting significant differences: first, unlike Vietnam, the Korean Peninsula remains split. Furthermore, reforms are easier in Vietnam because it is a party-led system. Consequently, it is easier to reject previous policies as mistaken. By contrast, North Korea is led by a single leader, who inherited his power from his father. It is therefore far harder for Kim Jong-un to adopt reforms without rejecting the policies of his father.²⁴

Reactions to the Summit

In the immediate aftermath of the Hanoi summit, Chinese sources were relatively sanguine about the situation. The vast majority of authors referred to the talks, which ended abruptly, not as a “failure” (*shibai*), but as “not reaching an agreement” (*mei tanlong*). They emphasized that the talks ended on positive terms and that the two leaders refrained from any nasty name-calling.²⁵

More importantly, in accordance with the longstanding Chinese policy position, they were heartened by the two sides’ recognition of the importance of face-to-face meetings. The Chinese government has long promoted the peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis through dialogue. Despite the lack of agreement, many Chinese observers noted that the decision to hold the second summit indicated that the leaders were committed to a dialogue process. They argued that negotiations were the best way forward for both leaders: Kim had long dreamed of bilateral talks with the United States, through which he might obtain a security guarantee in exchange for denuclearization. For Trump, a success on the North Korean nuclear issue, where the two previous presidents had failed, would be a diplomatic victory that would strengthen the U.S. strategic position in the Asia-Pacific and which might boost his reelection hopes (and lend credence to his claim that he deserves a Nobel Peace Prize).²⁶ In addition, face-to-face talks allow the two leaders to develop a relationship and move beyond stereotyped understandings of the other, though national interests still outweigh any personal chemistry and mutual understanding that might develop.²⁷

Given the relatively positive terms on which the talks ended, Chinese observers were cautiously optimistic that a third leadership summit might occur in due course.²⁸ They were also reassured by the continued calm on the peninsula. They noted that the peninsula was the most peaceful that it has been since the end of the Korean War, that North Korea continued to refrain from missile tests (a policy that abruptly ended in early May 2019 when North Korea tested short-range missiles), and that South Korea and the United States had decided to replace their annual joint military exercises with smaller-scale exercises.²⁹ This optimism mirrored the official position of the Chinese government, which applauded the summit as an “important step” that is “worthy of full recognition.”³⁰

Despite the generally positive reaction, however, some Chinese observers were more anxious. Li Dunqiu wrote that the situation was urgent and needed to be resolved quickly. He argued that missed opportunities to resolve the nuclear crisis, like the Hanoi summit, would only make matters worse. Li also asserted that people in North Korea, South Korea, and elsewhere had expected that Trump would be able to resolve the nuclear crisis in his first term, and claimed that it would be very problematic if he was unable to do so, although it was unclear why he believed the matter to be so pressing.³¹ Others recognized the realities of the domestic U.S. political cycle, noting that little progress would be made

once the United States entered into the thick of the presidential election.³² In the midst of his reelection campaign, Trump would face pressure to “show resolve,” which might reduce his policy flexibility and push him back toward a hardline approach.³³

Other Chinese voices expressed concerns that gains on the peninsula might be reversed. One observer noted that domestic changes in North Korea, South Korea, and the United States were narrowing the window of opportunity for future negotiations and cautioned that the situation might enter a “new downward spiral.”³⁴ Writing nearly two months after the summit, Yang Wenjing expressed a far more pessimistic view than those articulated in the immediate aftermath of the summit, arguing that the positions of both the United States and North Korea had hardened. She wrote, “Sadly, the most likely outcome is that a long-lasting stalemate will persist, with negotiations and tensions alternating before any form of final settlement can be reached.”³⁵ In Yang’s view, the United States would be hesitant to give up its sanctions because they provide its best leverage, but Pyongyang would be able to withstand the sanctions for an indefinite period of time. Meanwhile, Pyongyang would not want to give up its nuclear status because it sees that as crucial for its regime survival and for maintaining its national security.

The Future of U.S.–North Korean Negotiations

Looking to the future, Chinese observers argued that China must continue to support negotiations to promote the peaceful resolution of the nuclear crisis.³⁶ In the view of one observer, U.S. acceptance of a nuclear North Korea would be detrimental to Chinese interests because it would provoke the U.S. to increase its military deterrence in the region and because, as U.S. power declines, it would inspire other countries like Japan, South Korea, and Australia to take their own measures in response. Consequently, China must prioritize denuclearization by supporting existing UN sanctions, coordinating with the U.S. and other countries on its North Korea policy, and using its connections with North Korea to persuade the North to renounce its nuclear weapons.³⁷

Nevertheless, Chinese sources give the clear impression that not only was the Hanoi summit not a failure despite its abrupt ending but that the diplomatic process is moving in a direction that is not unfavorable to China even as the status quo is rather tolerable. Compared to 2017, when war was on the horizon with China having little say, and the first half of 2018, when trilateral diplomacy appeared unpredictable with China again on the sidelines, the impasse after the Singapore summit and especially after the Hanoi summit suggests to Chinese observers that there will be no way to bypass China. With frequent Sino–North Korea exchanges now occurring and scant likelihood that Washington and Pyongyang will realize a “big deal,” Chinese anticipate a long, convoluted process in which its voice will be important. Yet, Chinese sources have little to say about the details of the process, since China seeks to remain a secondary actor in Round 1, centered on denuclearization and sanctions relief. China can afford to wait while North Korea sends delegations to examine economic reforms or “restructuring,” as they prefer to say, and until the United States eventually appreciates that it must work through China.

What is left unsaid in Chinese sources suggests a hidden strategy more than doubt about what to do. These omissions also indicate a kind of G2 approach, letting Seoul and Pyongyang wrestle with challenges they are unlikely to resolve and waiting for the U.S. to recognize the futility of a bilateral or trilateral approach with Seoul as the complexities

of lesser deals with some sanctions relief lead Washington to seek more coordination with Beijing. Eventually, China will assert its hegemonic leadership over North Korea, readers can assume. However, this will only come after a Sino–U.S. arrangement in the region is reached, for which this crisis offers an opportunity. According to this reasoning, Seoul has played a positive, facilitating role, but it is not very consequential. Waiting is required—real strategic patience. In the meantime, Chinese publications urge both Washington and Pyongyang to do more to keep diplomacy alive, while China will not relax sanctions to give the latter a way out or provoke the former when a trade agreement is its most immediate priority.

Endnotes

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