

Paper for Session 1, “General assessment —Current situation about peace and security in North East Asia and denuclearization process of the Korean Peninsula.” (Joint Workshop “From Peace on Korean Peninsula to North East Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone”)

**“How did we get here and where are we now?
From ‘Fire and Fury’ to US-DPRK Summits and the Aftermath¹”**

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Kyodo News/RECNA

1. Trump’s Impromptu Response and Unprecedented Summits

As a long-time watcher of the nuclear crisis surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the US-DPRK diplomatic discourse for past 20 years, it was such a stunning moment for me, also for the entire world, to know the first response of US President Donald Trump to an unusual overture from Chairman Kim Jong Un who sent a private message by two South Korea’s Presidential envoys.

On March 8 in 2018, after listening to Mr. Kim’s oral message through the South Korean envoys, Suh Hoon, Director of National Intelligence, and Chung Eui-yong, National Security Advisor for President Moon Jae In, Trump made an impromptu reaction which astonished his close aides at the Oval Office. A few days before visiting the White House for briefing Trump about recent progress on South-North bilateral negotiation on that day, Suh and Chung met Kim in Pyongyang.

“I want to see him. What about the next month?” Trump said in front of his National Security Advisor, Herbert McMaster and other top aides. So surprised and confused by this instant reply, McMaster invited his colleagues and the South Korean envoys to his office for drafting a press statement. After intense policy-deliberation among the U.S. and ROK top officials, Chung made an announcement just outside the West Wing where U.S. and international press corps had been waiting.

“I explained to President Trump that his leadership and his maximum pressure policy, together with international solidarity, brought us to this juncture.” Chung started to read the statement. “I told President Trump that, in our meeting, North Korean leader Kim Jong

¹ This paper is based on my interviews with current and former officials from the U.S., Japan and R.O.K. from February 2018 to May 2019. The number of the interviews is more than 50. Most of these interviews were conducted under back-ground rule. Several of them are close aides to President Trump, President Moon Jae In and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Un said he is committed to denuclearization...And he expressed his eagerness to meet President Trump as soon as possible. President Trump...said he would meet Kim Jong Un by May to achieve permanent denuclearization,” Chung continued².

According to a South Korean diplomat who is intimate with exchanges between Mr. Trump and the ROK envoys, the “May deadline” stated by Chung was a sort of act of desperation taken by McMaster and the Korean envoys who thought it’s impossible to have an unprecedented US-DPRK summit meeting just in a month away as Trump had floated³.

2. Intelligence Process and Side-effect of Singapore

The first meeting between Trump and Kim in Singapore on June 12 last year was a bold and welcome attempt, because it really did suspend dangerous escalation-course culminated by two leaders’ inflammatory comments in 2017. This historical summit also left some good result as a starting point for complete denuclearization of North Korea and creation of “a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula” as the Singapore Joint Statement articulated⁴.

According to diplomatic sources of U.S., Japan and ROK, a key initiator of this historical summit process was President Moon, who was “so afraid of an outbreak of war between US and DPRK including accidental military contingency.”⁵

After Kim’s about-face remark on the New Year’s Day of 2018, Moon started to accelerate diplomatic rapprochement to DPRK in full speed through secret and quiet dialogues with North. Moon gave a negotiating-mandate to his top side, Suh who intensified covert communications with Kim Yong Chol, Vice Chairman of the Central Committee of the Workers’ Party of Korea. Vice Chairman Kim is a well-known figure as the closet top-aide to Chairman Kim.

“The first US-DPRK summit was all thanks to President Moon. Suh negotiated with his

² “South Korea official's speech on Trump-North Korea leader meeting by May,” Reuters, March 9, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-announcement-stat-idUSKCN1GL03M> (accessed on May 11, 2019).

³ An interview with a South Korean diplomat on March 16, 2018.

⁴ Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit, the White House homepage, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/> (accessed on May 12, 2019)

⁵ An interview with a State Department source on May 3, 2018.

DPRK counterpart in the first, then joined the CIA into this negotiating truck. And, a scenario (succeeding in the first summit meeting) was written by Moon,” one State Department source said to me a month before the Singapore summit⁶.

Also, this source complained that regional professionals and Korean hands of the State Department could not get involved in this process deeply enough until Mr. Suh, Vice Chairman Kim and their CIA counterpart, Mr. Andrew Kim set a stage for the Singapore summit.

However, one side-effect of this unique “trilateral intelligence process” is a lack of preparation for the summit in a normal diplomatic manner. Barely, such a succinct agreement, the Singapore Joint Statement, was signed by President Trump and Chairman Kim on June 12 last year. But it’s not technically detailed, diplomatically robust or well-structured in mechanism enough to sustain and promote further lower-level negotiation to bring about what the statement aims for.

3. Hard Reality before Hanoi

After 7-month hiatus, US-DPRK diplomatic process was re-energized again in the beginning of 2019. Vice Chairman Kim visited the Oval Office again on January 18, which resulted in an official announcement of the second summit meeting by the US

In order to avoid the same mistake as the last one, the US tried best efforts to make a substantial preparation as much as enough to succeed in the second summit. From February 6 to 8, Special Representative for North Korea Steve Biegun visited Pyongyang for presenting the US “shopping list” at the Hanoi summit and comparing it with theirs.

However, according to several diplomatic sources, the DPRK counterpart, Mr. Kim Hyok Chol, did not have either enough negotiation-mandate or technical knowledge about the DPRK nuclear program. It suggested DPRK set their summit strategy already; only Chairman Kim can make a strategic and final judgement which enables a substantial deal with the US to be realized in Hanoi. In other words, DPRK had no intention to write a rough draft or scenario to make a real progress in advance of the second summit.

On his way back to Washington DC from Pyongyang in mid-February, Biegun sent one important signal to Asian allies. He told Seoul and Tokyo “President is prepared to walk away” in Hanoi, according to one trustful senior-diplomatic source. His preparatory trip to the North for three days could not make any tangible progress.

⁶ Ibid.

Biegun flew to Hanoi with empty hands in late February, and a pre-press briefing by the US delegation in Hanoi was held six days before the summit meeting. This briefing reflected a hard reality Biegun had faced in Pyongyang. Through telephone line, two US briefers emphasized three major goals to journalists in Washington DC, including me.

The first goal was to reach “a common definition of denuclearization.” Secondly, the briefers said the US wants to set a “freeze” on WMD and missile programs of the North. The final goal was to make “a progress on a road-map” for denuclearization⁷.

After carefully listening to the briefing in roughly around 20 minutes, I felt appalled and became pessimistic, because entire content of the briefing was so poor and abstract. Then, a big question mark conjured up on my mind: “How can Trump, a layman of nuclear issues, and Kim get to a common definition of denuclearization in such a short period of time, without any bureaucratic prior mutual-understanding about it even in a rough style?”

This specific concern might hit the mark on the result in Hanoi. After one and half day summit meeting, Trump admitted in the press conference that he and Kim could not find a common definition of denuclearization. “He has a certain vision and it’s not exactly our vision, but it’s a lot closer than it was a year ago,” he said just before leaving Hanoi on February 28⁸.

4. What went wrong in Hanoi?

So, what went wrong in Hanoi? What is a main reason why Trump and Kim could not bring about a breakthrough? It is such a complicated matter to be clarified from many dimensions through gradual revelation process of what happened behind the scene. But, my simple answer at this point is a miscalculation on both sides.

During the meeting, Kim said to Trump that he would give up the Yongbyong nuclear site in return for major sanction-relief. Kim seemed to assume that the Yongbyong, a core facility of his treasury nuclear program, should be worthy enough to make a major deal with Trump. According to one DPRK source, Trump himself was inclined to show readiness to lift some sanctions under a “snap-back” condition.

However, several important factors prevented Trump from doing so. Major one of them is

⁷ A teleconference briefing by senior US officials from Hanoi, on February 21, 2019.

⁸ “Remarks by President Trump in Press Conference Hanoi, Vietnam,” February 28, 2019, the WH homepage, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-press-conference-hanoi-vietnam/> (accessed on May 15, 2029).

that “Kim behaved like no second enrichment facility existing⁹.” Trump presented one piece of paper to Kim on the second day of the summit in order to demonstrate the US strong will to get rid of all of nuclear warheads, nuclear materials, and nuclear related facilities including all enrichment facilities. But, Kim did not respond to it directly in a positive manner, creating a negative impression among the US players.

Kim also made a significant mistake on handling a Yongbyong card, which would enable US hard-liners like John Bolton, Trump’s National Security Advisor, to persuade Trump to walk away without any agreement. Several diplomatic sources revealed to me that Kim’s message conveyed to Trump was ambiguous on whether Kim would give up all facilities in Yongbyong--totally more than 300-- or just core facilities like the 5-MW Reactor, the reprocessing plant and the enrichment facility. Trump and his top aides in Hanoi gradually became dubious about real intention of Kim without persuasive clarification from Kim himself on this point.

“At the last moment, (Deputy Foreign Minister) Choe Son Hui clarified on this specific point with Chairman Kim and rushed to the US delegation for telling them Kim would give up “all” of the facilities in Yongbyong. But, when Choe tried to tell them, Trump had left (the negotiation table) already,¹⁰” one diplomatic source revealed.

Finally, Trump’s extra push on NK’s biological and chemical program might have been some overdue burden for Kim. The issue is out of scope of the Singapore agreement, so Kim would be more dubious about genuineness of the US intention for changing the bilateral relation of both nations in a dramatic manner.

This factor is probably an additional element to undermine trust-building atmosphere which is indispensable for a jumping start of denuclearization process. In this sense, it was a miscalculation made by Trump who really wanted a bigger deal for compensating serious political-damage on him caused by the US Special Prosecutor’s investigation.

⁹ An interview with a well-placed diplomatic source intimate with the contents of the Hanoi summit, March 15, 2019.

¹⁰ An interview with a diplomatic source, April 2, 2019.