

Kim–Trump summitry: Neither breakthrough nor breakdown

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CANBERRA— The [first summit in Singapore last June](#) gave Kim Jong-un legitimacy as the head of a de facto nuclear-armed state engaging with U.S. President Donald Trump as an equal. The [second summit in Hanoi](#) on February 27–28 has normalized that status but accomplished little else.

Trump had successfully managed expectations downwards since last year. Gone were the boasts about the nuclear threat from Pyongyang having ended. Instead Trump shifted the “transformational goal” of total denuclearization to the “[transactional goal](#)” of [limiting Kim’s nuclear capability](#). The U.S. walked back from the insistence on total, verified denuclearization as a precondition for improved ties and normalization. Instead it has embraced the principle of simultaneous and parallel steps toward denuclearization and peaceful relations.

The Hanoi summit offered neither a breakthrough nor a breakdown. [White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said](#) that although “No agreement was reached at this time,” the two leaders had “very good and constructive meetings” and “discussed various ways to advance denuclearization.” Trump said the impasse arose over Kim’s demand for a [lifting of sanctions in their entirety](#) in return for a promise to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear complex. North Korea’s Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho disputes this account, saying it only asked for [limited sanctions relief](#).

The [Kashmir crisis that flared up dangerously](#) with exquisite timing during the Hanoi summit underlines the logic of Trump’s moves on Korea. Abandoning a demonstrably failed policy over a quarter century, of insistence on a total and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, is no big sacrifice. Engaging with Kim personally to establish a working relationship that can dispel misperceptions, build confidence and trust, deepen inter-Korean relations and in other ways greatly reduce the risks of a war with catastrophic consequences: now that is a big deal.

For all his strategic illiteracy, Trump may have a surer intuitive grasp of this underlying big-picture reality than most of the devotees of the [Washington playbook](#) of increasingly militarized responses to foreign crises. Communications channels are now active between North and

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South Korea, and between North Korea and the U.S., at summit, high and working levels. This is no bad thing.

That said, Trump was right to walk away from the demand to lift all sanctions now in return for dismantling just one key nuclear facility. Perhaps Kim misjudged Trump's eagerness to make a deal, any deal, in order to claim a victory to offset the worsening domestic situation for the president, particularly with his former lawyer's testimony to Congress. Trump has not reached that point of desperation yet.