



The Trump Risk and US-North Korea Nuclear Talks

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President Trump is in trouble. He is now officially under an impeachment inquiry from the Democrat-led House. We cannot yet predict the final verdict of these impeachment proceedings. However, we can reasonably anticipate that the political situation in the US will become more volatile, polarized, and uncertain in the coming year. What impact then will domestic politics in the US have upon the ongoing US-North Korea nuclear talks?

We can imagine various scenarios—such as a “big deal,” an interim deal, and a “no deal.” The political future of Trump will influence these different scenarios, as he has been the main driver of US government engagement with North Korea. If he were not such an “unconventional” president, those summit meetings with Kim Jong Un lacking any working-level agreements might not have happened at all. He has often boasted of his good relationship with Kim Jong Un until quite recently. Nevertheless, his personalized diplomacy has fundamental weaknesses when it comes to resolving the complex issues endemic to the North Korean nuclear and missile crisis. If his presidency plunges into deeper political challenges, the prospect of making a deal with North Korea will also dim. Moreover, a sustainable agreement with North Korea may not happen at all in the coming year due to the growing political polarization in the US.

Deepening Political Polarization

One of the most important reasons for this negative outlook lies in the fact that political polarization will worsen in domestic US politics. Political polarization in the US is at an all-time high. According to [a Gallup poll](#), the approval rating of Trump’s job performance among

Republicans has been somewhat on the rise recently, exceeding 90 percent. In contrast, his approval rating among Democrats has continued to decline, reaching below five percent. Indeed, [over the past two decades](#), Republicans have shifted toward the right, and Democrats to the left. As a result, the middle ground has shrunk within both parties while antipathy toward the opposing party has grown. With this rise in partisan antipathy and ideological consistency, the political environment has become increasingly polarized.

Trump was elected by appealing to the anger and frustration of white people while targeting the most socially and politically vulnerable group: illegal immigrants. His presidency has aggravated the already worsening politically polarizing social environment. As a result, American society has become further divided along racial and religious lines, and Trump has built a cult-like following among his Republican constituents. Political polarization has reached a dangerous level. [Trump tweeted](#) that if he were impeached, there might be a second civil war. Such a threat is not entirely dismissible, considering the strongly mounting support for him among Republicans after the announcement of the impeachment inquiry.

This increasing political polarization has also made political compromise more difficult in Washington, which will be further aggravated by the impeachment proceedings and the coming presidential election campaigns. Republicans will rally around Trump, and Democrats will mobilize by rallying supporters around the anti-Trump flag. Until the presidential election ends in November 2020, politics in the US will remain in an anti-Trump vs. pro-Trump spiral. It is unlikely that Democrats will support any deals between Trump and Kim Jong Un considering the increasing tension in Congress. They will work to prevent Trump from taking credit for anything. Even those moderate Democrats who supported Trump's engagement policy with North Korea are likely to withdraw their support during the impeachment and the coming election campaign. In short, the chances of obtaining bipartisan support for any deals with North Korea, which is an essential part of making any big deal with North Korea sustainable, are meager.

Risk Avoidance Under Mounting Uncertainty

In addition to the growing political polarization, we can reasonably anticipate that the political atmosphere in Washington will become more uncertain in the coming year. This ever-increasing uncertainty will in turn have huge impacts on the behavior of major political actors. We can expect that when political gain is uncertain, (1) actors are likely to avoid risk, and (2) better-organized actors will gain more than those who are unorganized. If this theoretical view is correct,

we can expect that Trump will not risk his presidency by taking bold measures to compensate North Korea in return for a partial freezing of North Korea's nuclear facilities. Of course, he is an "unconventional" president, so he may take bold, unconventional measures to make a big deal with North Korea. But we should note that he is under an impeachment investigation because he attempted to manipulate a foreign government for his personal political gain in the upcoming presidential election. Any deals with rewards to North Korea may not be helpful to him in terms of escaping from his current political troubles. Rather, they would endanger his presidency further.

Meanwhile, as Trump's political future becomes increasingly uncertain, security and intelligence agencies will take over the initiative in leading the nuclear talks with North Korea. Trump has been the main driving force behind the ongoing engagement policy with North Korea. If he cannot follow through in ongoing talks with North Korea, these security and intelligence agencies will push their own agenda more explicitly in negotiating with the regime. They may attempt to sabotage the ongoing talks if the aim of the dialogue is limited to a small deal—such as the "freeze for freeze" in which North Korea freezes only the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. Instead, they would prefer to maintain the status quo while going back to the nuclear deterrence strategy, which worked well during the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

A Big Deal Scenario

One of the most unlikely outcomes of the ongoing nuclear talks is the so-called "big deal" or "grand bargain" scenario. This was attempted at [the Hanoi Summit in February 2019](#). However, the Summit ended with no deal. In the big deal scenario, North Korea agrees to "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement" (CVID) or "final, fully verified denuclearization" (FFVD) and in return, the US government provides comprehensive measures to guarantee the security of the North Korean system and regime. This is an all-or-nothing approach, primarily based on the chemistry between the two leaders.

Trump has boasted about his good relationship with Kim Jong Un while claiming that a grand bargain is possible between the two. However, his emphasis on personal diplomacy is shaky. The concept of denuclearization is fuzzy and controversial in terms of whether it focuses more on the process or the end state. Without a long period of trust-building between the two governments, not only at the high level but also at the working level, agreement on a road map for denuclearization remains elusive and almost impossible to achieve. Moreover, in the US political context, without bipartisan support, no big deal can successfully go through Congress under the

current "divided government" wherein the executive and the legislative branches are at odds with each other.

Furthermore, North Korea's request for a security guarantee is very ambiguous. It is not clear at all what a security guarantee really means. North Korea has sent mixed messages on whether it means the full diplomatic normalization between the two countries or the "complete and irreversible withdrawal of the hostile policy" towards the regime. But it is also ambiguous with regard to what the phrase "hostile policy" really means, particularly on whether or not it includes the withdrawal of US forces stationed in South Korea. In fact, it appears that North Korea has emulated CVID by trying to use terms which are as ambiguous as possible as a negotiation tactic. By doing so, the regime can expand the scope of what it considers hostile policy, depending on the progress or regress of negotiations. Indeed, a real strategic interest of North Korea may lie in prolonging the talks with the United States while buying more time to complete its nuclear and missile programs.

Currently, the big deal scenario appears to already be dead. Trump fired John Bolton ahead of the recent working-level nuclear talks in Stockholm on October 5, 2019. Bolton had advocated for applying the Libyan model of denuclearization to North Korea and reportedly mentioned it during the Hanoi Summit meeting. Bolton's firing was interpreted as a signal from Trump to North Korea that he would not follow the Libyan model. According to news reports, during the Stockholm talks, the US government proposed lifting economic sanctions against North Korea's textile and coal exports for 36 months in exchange for the verifiable closure of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and freezing of uranium enrichment. If these reports are correct, this proposal indicates the shift in the Trump administration's approach to North Korea's denuclearization from CVID to a synchronized, gradual, and staged approach. Considering that the Trump administration has repeatedly rejected the "freeze for freeze" proposals from China and North Korea, this shift marks a significant change.

Trump may still be tempted to make a big deal as a way of escaping from his current political predicament. However, doing so may be a very risky choice as it will invite more political opposition from Democrats. We should note that the current impeachment inquiry and the investigation by special counsel Mueller began due to his attempt to use foreign influence for his personal gain in elections. It is possible that a similar charge might be applied to any attempts to make rush concessional deals with North Korea. Of course, as an "unconventional" president, Trump may take bold measures—such as agreeing to full diplomatic normalization, along with a

peace treaty—to finalize a big deal with North Korea. But, such bold measures will invite more political resistance from Democrats and may further endanger his political future. Without bipartisan support in Congress, such a deal would not last long.

An Interim Deal Scenario

A more realistic scenario is a small deal or an interim deal. Trump has boasted that he induced North Korea to stop its nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests in late 2017, claiming credit for the moratorium. Indeed, he has oversold this credit to his political supporters to distinguish himself from former President Obama and others. But if North Korea resumes testing, it will damage his political credit and may have a significant negative impact on his election campaign in the coming year. In this context, his primary concern may be preventing North Korea from resuming tests or making further provocations.

The US government seems to have put forth a "freeze for freeze" proposal in the Stockholm talks. It is yet to be seen [whether the talks will resume soon](#), but one of the critical remaining issues is to align the conditions of the "freeze for freeze." This process is likely to invite strong resistance from the US military and intelligence communities. The US government has already confirmed the existence of nuclear development facilities such as Kangson and others in addition to Yongbyon. If there is no agreement on the road map for dismantling all of these facilities and the end state of denuclearization, security and intelligence agencies in the US may protest internally over concerns that a partial nuclear deal will only give North Korea more time to develop its nuclear and missile capabilities, including reentry technology for ICBMs as well as submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) capabilities. North Korea has also continued to operate its uranium enrichment program.

More importantly, even if North Korea accepts the freeze of the Yongbyon facilities, it will take some time, probably at least a couple of years, to verify and destroy all of the nuclear facilities there. Of course, this estimate assumes that international inspectors would be granted full access to all of those facilities. From North Korea's point of view, a partial freeze can be a great source of enhancing its leverage in the ensuing negotiations while buying more time to improve its nuclear and missile capabilities. In fact, coordinating matching conditions for lifting sanctions will be a long process. Considering all of these problems, it is unlikely that the military and intelligence communities in the US would support a partial freeze in return for lifting some sanctions or substantial rewards for North Korea.

Conclusion

It is always tricky to predict the future. There are lots of hidden factors and issues that need to be taken into account in predicting the prospects for the ongoing US-North Korea nuclear talks. We do not know how North Korea or China will (re)act in the coming months. However, from the perspective of US domestic politics, no deal appears to be the most likely outcome by the end of this year. At the very least, it is unlikely that any sustainable agreements can be reached between the US and North Korea. Of course, this is only one of many possible scenarios, but we should be better prepared for a no deal scenario. We may also need to be better prepared for North Korea's resumption of nuclear and ICBM and SLBM tests in the coming year.

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