

Doi Moi and the February 2019 Trump-Kim Summit in Hanoi

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The last Trump-Kim summit in June 2018 in Singapore has been praised for its central role in bringing the prospect of lasting peace to the Peninsula, but also received criticism for the lack of definitive results with respect to denuclearisation, which had been addressed only vaguely in the agreement. Final, fully verified denuclearisation (FFVD) has not been included in the summit's declaration and today, both parties appear to have differing views on what exactly the obligations are for each party, and in what order. Critics of the Singapore summit also pointed out that President Trump had given Pyongyang prestige and legitimacy without making any verifiable progress on denuclearisation, which had been the precondition for a summit under prior administrations. This situation is only exacerbated by the assessment of US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats that the DPRK is unlikely to completely give up its nuclear weapons, since the regime perceives them as central to its own survival. Against this backdrop, it is paramount that Trump and Kim define concrete steps and clear reciprocal measures towards denuclearisation, such as lifting of sanctions.

Enter Hanoi. The choice of the Vietnamese capital may appear exotic at first glance; other potential venues included Hawaii, Macao, Switzerland, Bangkok, or Singapore again. However, Hanoi is not such an unlikely choice at a closer look. Vietnam is non-aligned and maintains stable diplomatic relations with both Pyongyang and Washington.

For Washington, Vietnam is a symbol of reconciliation, prosperity, and shared interests. The US and Vietnam have fought a decade-long excruciating

Over recent months, speculations about the venue for the next Trump-Kim summit were ubiquitous. On February 6th, President Trump announced during the State of the Union Address that the summit would take place on February 27-28 in Vietnam and, on February 9th, he confirmed Hanoi as the venue via Twitter. The other candidate in Vietnam was the coastal city Da Nang. The advantages of Vietnam are that the country has stable diplomatic relations with both Washington and Pyongyang and that it can be reached by Kim's own airplane. In addition, media commentary emphasises the symbolic value of Hanoi and Vietnam for North Korea's future. Vietnam, a former adversary of the US, has become a partner with shared interests in the South China Sea. In the mid-1980s, Vietnam underwent drastic yet successful economic reforms, called Doi Moi, which can be seen as an alternative to the Chinese model of reform and opening. Vietnam's key lesson for North Korea is that reforms, economic development, and integration into international organisations represented a path for Vietnam to fundamentally improve relations with neighbouring countries and the United States.

war, comparable in scale and stakes to the Korean War. By 1995, twenty years after the fall of Saigon and Vietnam's unification, Washington and Hanoi re-established diplomatic relations and have since then built ever closer economic and political ties. Last year, the US aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson anchored off the coast of Da Nang, sending a signal of friendship and shared interests vis-à-vis China's role in the South China Sea. The message from Washington to Pyongyang is; former enemies can become friends.

Another symbolism, intrinsic to Vietnam as a summit venue, is the model of Vietnam's economic development. In the 1980s, the socialist country embarked on a successful path of renovation, called Doi Moi. It has since then substantially developed its economy, attracted FDI, modernised industries and expanded export markets. The US openly endorses Doi Moi-fashioned development as a model for North Korea. During a visit to Hanoi in July, State Secretary Mike Pompeo explicitly voiced this vision for North Korea, saying that President Trump believes that the miracle of Vietnam can be a miracle in North Korea as well. In addition, Doi Moi as the official model for North Korea would imply a shift away from the Chinese model of reform and opening, called Gaige Kaifang. Up until 2013, Chinese leaders from the Hu and Xi administrations advocated reforms fashioned after their own model, thereby giving Beijing a paramount role in North Korea's path towards a future as a modernised, market-oriented, communist state. The assassination of Jang Song-thaek, who was well connected with elites in Beijing and was seen as the steering man of North Korea's future economic development, was interpreted as a shift away from China in the early years of Kim Jong-un's rule.

For Pyongyang, Hanoi has two obvious benefits. First are optics; similar to Singapore, Kim Jong-un does not need to worry about large groups of the local population protesting against his country's human rights violations. Second, Hanoi is said to be within the reach of North Korea's own aircrafts, meaning Kim would not need to make a stopover or rely on China for air transportation this time. It is noteworthy that DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho made an official visit to Hanoi last December, where he met with his counterpart Pham Binh Minh and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc. During his stay, Ri visited a technology park near Hanoi and met with experts from various industries, indicating Pyongyang's interest in Doi Moi. The communist regime in Hanoi was able to conduct reforms while retaining a strong grip on power, which is essential for the leadership in Pyongyang.

Doi Moi and Vietnam's path indeed offers some lessons for North Korea. Until the mid-1980s, Vietnam's economy was dominated by traditional agriculture and based on central planning and collective ownership. Similar to other communist, centrally planned economies of the 20th century, poor management of the economy had led to shortages of food and consumption goods, high budget deficit, inflation, trade imbalance and overall deteriorating living standards. As a response, the Vietnamese Communist Party initiated comprehensive renovation policies in 1986, a decade after the end of the war and unification of the country under Hanoi. The Doi Moi renovation comprised the creation of a market economy, opening up to foreign trade, and many far-reaching social, financial and administrative reforms. Doi Moi extended well into the next decade when Vietnam signed a cooperation treaty with the EEC in 1992, and assumed membership of regional and international organisations, such as ASEAN in 1995 and APEC three years later.

Vietnam's socialisation into regional and international organisations and the emphasis on economic development and prosperity over ideology enabled a normalisation of relations with former adversaries Cambodia and China, and eventually the United States. This is potentially the most significant lesson that North Korea can learn from Vietnam. Participation in international and regional organisations and a focus on economic cooperation and prosperity can be a way to resolve decades-old conflicts and facilitate improved relations with neighbouring countries and the international community as a whole.

The most urgent question for Trump and Kim is not which symbolism of the past we may use to look at the summit, but what symbolism this meeting may create for coming generations. If the two parties manage to agree on the next verifiable steps towards denuclearisation, a reciprocal lifting of sanctions, and an opportunity for Pyongyang to join international organisations, Hanoi may become the symbol for the end of the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula.

About the author



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