

China Sees Some Light in the Failure of the Hanoi Summit

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The failure of the Hanoi summit, from Beijing's point of view, could yet turn out to be a success.

North Korea's most important relationship is with China. The most important relationship for China is with the United States. In January a train carrying North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un stopped in Beijing on a chilly morning. China's president Xi Jinping held talks with Kim to prep him for the Trump summit.

The exact details of the talks are of course shrouded in secrecy but it is not hard to imagine their general thrust. Xi probably instructed Kim to play hardball. Great, if you get what you want, fine, but in all probability even Trump, the dealmaker-in-chief, will not grant you the complete lifting of sanctions, would be a fair summing up of Xi's argument. Trump retreating from Hanoi with empty pockets will make him even more prone to striking a trade deal with China, Beijing believes, to show the art of the deal is still alive. In the meantime China and Russia will invest in North Korea and the US will still be engaged. Not a bad outcome.

The Hanoi talks were meant to trade some form of sanctions relief by the US for a freeze or dismantling of nuclear facilities in North Korea. This is broadly what China and Russia want and is the foundation stone of any potential deal. Perhaps there was a deal in the offing and either Trump or Kim pushed for more. Perhaps the two sides had misread what the other was willing to do. Certainly the setting of the talks were seen through a different perspective in Asia than in the West.

In his State of the Union address last month Trump took credit for saving millions of lives by averting a "major war" on the Korean peninsula.

Holding talks with a country that until recently you seemed to be close to war with, in a country where you suffered your greatest military defeat seemed perplexing to many in Asia and hardly a good omen.

The Hanoi talks were not a complete failure. An agreement was struck to continue lower-level discussions to build on the momentum since the Singapore summit in June. China, and Russia too, will see this as an opening for further trade.

Trump's short-term approach, his gushing praise of strongmen, the strident criticism of Europe, the undermining of NATO and his obsession with image at the expense of substance is being used against him in the international arena.

This month sees the start of China's two sessions, the meetings of the parliament and

advisory body. There will be little public debate and the applause and clapping will be more choreographed than spontaneous. But behind the scenes will be fierce discussions concerning all aspects of Chinese life.

But what matters to Beijing most is a trade deal with the US that it can sell as a success to the Chinese people.

Events in Hanoi have probably enhanced the possibility of this happening. Just two weeks ago, anyone suggesting that would have been considered naïve. The US needs China to help with North Korea and import more made-in-America products. China needs the US to buy more of its goods. Events in Hanoi, from Beijing's perspective, ensure that this dynamic remains relevant and will provide the basis of a new trade deal. The Hanoi summit a failure? Not from Beijing's point of view.

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