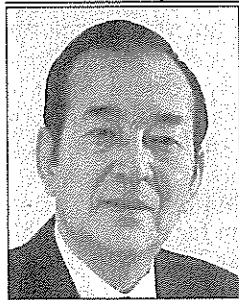


Opinion & Analysis

Summit had elements of game and show

History shows there are politicians at all times and places who are shrewd enough to present a trivial thing in a high-flown way to make it look big or, even in the event of a political fiasco, to rhetorically spout words making it seem to be a meaningful and important development. Even so, it was astonishing to learn that both U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un adamantly called their Feb. 27-28 Hanoi summit “a success” despite leaving for home empty-handed.



INSIGHTS
into the
WORLD

By Masayuki Yamauchi

If the sternly law-abiding populace of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta — or perhaps Shang Yang, the Chinese statesman of the state of Qin who pursued rigid and uniform law administration — were alive now, they might whip Trump and Kim for telling intolerable lies no matter if the two leaders had done so for some conniving reason that was compelling from their own standpoints.

Trump told a post-summit press conference in Hanoi that Kim wanted economic sanctions to be lifted “in their entirety” in exchange for dismantling North Korea’s major nuclear facility in Yongbyon. Instead of nodding with approval, the U.S. president demanded “more than that” to be listed for inspection and demolition. He did not publicly name any of the additional sites, except for acknowledging that it was a “second [uranium] enrichment facility.” He was apparently referring to the one in Boonkang.

Some Japanese and U.S. media commented that the “failure” of what they described as “naive” summit diplomacy could be attributed to the lack of working-level preparations that should have been complete in every detail. It must have been a “failure” as far as what the two leaders did — they left the summit earlier than planned without an agreement. Nevertheless, I wonder if it is wise to simply label the Trump-Kim summit as the product of naivety.

Leaders’ qualities matter

Summits may break down, depending on leaders’ characteristics, their governments’ attributes, or both. For example, prior to the 2000 Camp David summit, the relevant Israeli, Palestinian and U.S. officials made exhaustive pre-

Many people ridicule Trump for longing for fame and glory. It can be said that the purpose of the show-like aspect of his summit diplomacy approach is his pursuit of glory — which is something that is destined to eventually fade from people’s memory.

For his part, Kim unyieldingly seeks to be assured of the continuation of the hereditary system of rule of the North by the Kim dynasty. But his avarice for “regime guarantee” cannot be achieved without taking part in a show of summit diplomacy. Trump must have wanted the Hanoi summit with Kim to be a spectacular top-level political show to declare that the state of war with North Korea was over. The U.S. president must have imagined a scene in which he would be able to convince the world that his political game had just resulted in realizing peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Additionally, Trump must have wanted the world to know that his achievement was far more praiseworthy than his predecessor’s “nuclear-free world” speech given in Prague in April 2009, which helped Barack Obama win the Nobel Peace Prize for the year six months later. If the Hanoi show produced by Trump had successfully helped him be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for 2019, he would have been in a better position for reelection to the White House in November 2020.

According to 16th-century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, a person who criticizes someone else for his or her thirst for honor and renown tends to take pride, in writing or orally, in being disdainful of the honor he or she has received. Regardless of whether people praise or flatly oppose Trump, they should know that vanity is anchored so deeply in the heart of man. Moreover, when people say yes to a Nobel Peace Prize for Obama and no to one for Trump, their arguments simply reflect their partisan sentiments.

The Hanoi summit was obviously overshadowed by what almost simultaneously happened on Capitol Hill in Washington. In the U.S. homeland, the Democratic Party, which won a House of Representatives majority in November’s midterm elections, continued to refuse to finance Trump’s signature campaign pledge to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. The president also had to face unabated disparagement over the so-called Trump-Russia story day after day. Therefore, Trump might have chosen to stage the top-level political show with Kim in Hanoi hoping to distract U.S. voters’ attention from the domestic affairs surrounding him. However, the Democrats were crafty enough to utilize Trump’s show as a high-profile show

every single issue ahead of the summit, they might have ended up being purged for depriving Kim of the chance to earn fame in the event.

Kim’s aides making preparations for their leader’s summits, including the ones with Trump in Singapore and Hanoi, are thought to always face a high risk of being purged for ruining the glory and leadership mythology of the top leader in the event of a failed summit. North Korea is a country whose foundation became monolithic and solidified after the dictatorial regime of founder Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of Kim Jong Un, invoked a self-style “Juche” (self-reliance) communist revolution and effectively legitimized hereditary succession. Under such circumstances, officials are pressed to do a perfect job, even though knowing their task is always fraught with danger if they should incorrectly gauge the nuanced level of the leader’s expectations. Those who misread the situation would be inevitably sent to concentration camps or purged.

Prior to his train ride to Vietnam to meet Trump, Kim Jong Un is thought to have been eager to talk the U.S. leader into promising that he would agree to a full removal of sanctions and endorse economic assistance from South Korea. Kim was serious about obtaining Trump’s pledge as the North Korean leader needs to save his country from

economic suffocation caused by years of various international sanctions against it. In the short term, he needs to earn as much hard-currency money as he can to keep the country’s elite and their families well off so as to keep them loyal to him. In this context, securing “a victory” on the game side of the Hanoi summit — a tete-a-tete with Trump — would be of far greater importance for Kim than the show side of the summit. He might have hoped he would be able to get all the glory as the

winner of the game for as long as 1,000 years.

Merits of failure

However, Kim — and Trump — subsequently had to leave Hanoi empty-handed. Nonetheless, it is myopic to conclude that their summit simply ended in failure. Some people have positively reacted to the “failure” of the summit. They had been afraid of seeing Trump losing in the game by agreeing with Kim in a show of minimum compromise from the North — the demolition of the Yongbyon nuclear facility alone — to the extent that he would have promised to lift a significant portion of the sanctions. In their eyes, Trump made a far better decision as he chose to end his show with Kim in a show rather than proceed with his game with Kim

most with both Trump and Kim would be to maintain the initiative in their summits or retain the role of being the “boss” in them. On Trump’s part, he would be able to enhance his image as a powerful leader at home by telling the U.S. electorate in his reelection campaign that he had snubbed the North Korean dictator’s unreasonable demand.

Kim, for his part, would be able to use the failed summit as propaganda leverage to cement his position anew as his country’s “highest authority” over his army and ruling party — the Workers’ Party of Korea — by boasting that he brought the show side of the summit to a surprising end instead of agreeing to accept meager fruits on the game side.

Moon: the biggest loser.

When we look the Hanoi summit objectively, one thing is clear: Kim made it known to the world that he has no will to denuclearize his country. As such, the United States remains nowhere close to removing any of the anti-North Korean sanctions, seemingly at least for now. The biggest loser in the Hanoi debacle is South Korean President Moon Jae-in. While supporting the North’s denuclearization, he has prioritized an effort toward reunification with North Korea on the one hand and sharpened his anti-Japan stance on the other hand. Now that the second U.S.-North Korea summit has broken down, Moon is likely to be compelled to modify his policies vis-a-vis the North and Japan.

The outcome of the Hanoi summit has also shocked China. Washington and Beijing appear to be likely to hold a summit between Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in April at the earliest, seeking to settle the ongoing U.S.-China trade war. Trump is now expected to face Xi as a more formidable negotiator than the Chinese may think. The Hanoi summit showed how audacious the U.S. president was — he abruptly finished a game by demanding that the person, whom he kept extolling during the show side of the event, completely demolish his country’s nuclear facilities. Xi must have learned a new lesson from the Hanoi event about Trump’s deal-making skills.

Following the Hanoi summit, it is obvious that Japan needs to reformulate its Northeast Asia strategy. Fortunately, Japan was able to avert the worst-case scenario of being forced to extend economic assistance as part of Washington’s possible agreement to lift the anti-North Korean sanctions without considering Japan’s national interests.

But it must be noted that the Hanoi summit has given rise to the possibility that a U.S. declaration of a formal end to the Korean War, with an eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, may no longer be a daydream. Now, Japan should seriously shape a near-future strategy to cope with a possibly new geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia in which it may have to confront either North Korea or a reunified Korea.

Trump told Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that during the

Following the Hanoi summit, it is obvious that Japan needs to reformulate its Northeast Asia strategy

If the sternly law-abiding populace of the ancient Greek city-state of Sparta — or perhaps Shang Yang, the Chinese statesman of the state of Qin who pursued rigid and uniform law administration — were alive now, they might whip Trump and Kim for telling intolerable lies no matter if the two leaders had done so for some conniving reason that was compelling from their own standpoints.

Trump told a post-summit press conference in Hanoi that Kim wanted economic sanctions to be lifted “in their entirety” in exchange for dismantling North Korea’s major nuclear facility in Yongbyon. Instead of nodding with approval, the U.S. president demanded “more than that” to be listed for inspection and demolition. He did not publicly name any of the additional sites, except for acknowledging that it was a “second [uranium] enrichment facility.” He was apparently referring to the one in Boonkang.

Some Japanese and U.S. media commented that the “failure” of what they described as “naive” summit diplomacy could be attributed to the lack of working-level preparations that should have been complete in every detail. It must have been a “failure” as far as what the two leaders did — they left the summit earlier than planned without an agreement. Nevertheless, I wonder if it is wise to simply label the Trump-Kim summit as the product of naivety.

Leaders’ qualities matter

Summits may break down, depending on leaders’ characteristics, their governments’ attributes, or both. For example, prior to the 2000 Camp David summit, the relevant Israeli, Palestinian and U.S. officials made exhaustive preparations for their respective leaders to take up at the U.S. presidential retreat for seeking a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It ended without an agreement. Indeed, there are occasions in which some issues — the status of the Old City of Jerusalem in the 2000 summit and the dismantlement of North Korean nuclear facilities in the Hanoi summit, for example — that are too sensitive to be dealt with beforehand at the working level. Such issues require one-on-one negotiations between leaders.

Summit diplomacy provides a game-like scene in which leaders go head to head, aiming to accomplish their respective political goals. It also has a show-like process for leaders to appeal for public support at home and abroad ahead of each upcoming summit by showing off how decisive, influential, smart and thoughtful they are.

What were the personal motives and the political incentives for Trump and Kim to meet in Hanoi in late February? Trump undoubtedly was driven to hold the first and second summits with Kim by his ambition to be awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for working to formally end the Korean War.

...the North Korean leader needs to save his country from economic suffocation caused by years of various international sanctions against it. In the short term, he needs to earn as much hard-currency money as he can to keep the country’s elite and their families well off so as to keep them loyal to him. In this context, securing “a victory” on the game side of the Hanoi summit — a tete-a-tete with Trump — would be of far greater importance for Kim than the show side of the summit. He might have hoped he would be able to get all the glory as the winner of the game for as long as 1,000 years.

According to 16th-century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne, a person who criticizes someone else for his or her thirst for honor and renown tends to take pride, in writing or orally, in being disdainful of the honor he or she has received. Regardless of whether people praise or flatly oppose Trump, they should know that vanity is anchored so deeply in the heart of man. Moreover, when people say yes to a Nobel Peace Prize for Obama and no to one for Trump, their arguments simply reflect their partisan sentiments.

The Hanoi summit was obviously overshadowed by what almost simultaneously happened on Capitol Hill in Washington. In the U.S. homeland, the Democratic Party, which won a House of Representatives majority in November’s midterm elections, continued to refuse to finance Trump’s signature campaign pledge to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. The president also had to face unabated disparagement over the so-called Trump-Russia story day after day. Therefore, Trump might have chosen to stage the top-level political show with Kim in Hanoi hoping to distract U.S. voters’ attention from the domestic affairs surrounding him. However, the Democrats were crafty enough to utilize Trump’s absence as a high-profile show occasion of their own, countervailing the Republican president’s public-relations mastery. To that end, his former lawyer, Michael Cohen, was subpoenaed to Congress to deliver blockbuster testimony on Feb. 27.

Terror of perfection

If working-level preparations for the U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi had been perfect, it would have been an embarrassment for Kim — who spent about 60 hours traveling by train to appear in the Vietnamese capital. In this scenario, he would have simply attended a signing ceremony with little time for an impressive show of leadership in negotiating a historic deal with Trump. To avoid such a humiliating situation for Kim, North Korean officials involved in summit preparations understandably left some crucial points open for the dictator’s “bold” decisions.

As Roman historian Livy wrote in his “History of Rome,” the last person to appear in a vital diplomatic or war scene tends to be thought to decide on everything. If North Korea’s officials had been so diligent that they had settled

Following the Hanoi summit, it is obvious that Japan needs to reformulate its Northeast Asia strategy

Merits of failure

However, Kim — and Trump — subsequently had to leave Hanoi empty-handed. Nonetheless, it is myopic to conclude that their summit simply ended in failure. Some people have positively reacted to the “failure” of the summit. They had been afraid of seeing Trump losing in the game by agreeing with Kim in a show of minimum compromise from the North — the demolition of the Yongbyon nuclear facility, alone — to the extent that he would have promised to lift a significant portion of the sanctions. In their eyes, Trump made a far better decision as he chose to end his show with Kim in rupture rather than proceed with his game with Kim to sign a bad agreement.

On the other hand, it is possible to interpret the real meaning of the “failed” summit as follows. North Korea has no intention at all to denuclearize itself and its priority is to buy time and gain as much as possible through direct contacts with the White House. It can be said that Kim might have demanded across-the-board removal of the sanctions while knowing that the proposal would go nowhere as it would be impossible even for Trump to accept on the spot.

According to this post-summit analysis, the United States and North Korea would have come to a conclusion that a genuine political game over a Washington-Pyongyang agreement on the denuclearization of the North would take place only at the next summit — the third of its kind. Instead, both sides would have tacitly agreed to let the high-stakes Hanoi summit become nothing more than a mere rendezvous show involving Trump and Kim.

What merits would the two leaders have seen in the decision to leave Hanoi empty-handed? What would matter

ward reunification with North Korea on the one hand and sharpened his anti-Japan stance on the other hand. Now that the second U.S.-North Korea summit has broken down, Moon is likely to be compelled to modify his policies vis-a-vis the North and Japan.

The outcome of the Hanoi summit has also shocked China. Washington and Beijing appear to be likely to hold a summit between Trump and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in April at the earliest, seeking to settle the ongoing U.S.-China trade war. Trump is now expected to face Xi as a more formidable negotiator than the Chinese may think. The Hanoi summit showed how audacious the U.S. president was — he abruptly finished a game by demanding that the person, whom he kept extolling during the show side of the event, completely demolish his country’s nuclear facilities. Xi must have learned a new lesson from the Hanoi event about Trump’s deal-making skills.

Following the Hanoi summit, it is obvious that Japan needs to reformulate its Northeast Asia strategy. Fortunately, Japan was able to avert the worst-case scenario of being forced to extend economic assistance as part of Washington’s possible agreement to lift the anti-North Korean sanctions without considering Japan’s national interests.

But it must be noted that the Hanoi summit has given rise to the possibility that a U.S. declaration of a formal end to the Korean War, with an eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea, may no longer be a daydream. Now, Japan should seriously shape a near-future strategy to cope with a possibly new geopolitical situation in Northeast Asia in which it may have to confront either North Korea or a reunified Korea.

Trump told Prime Minister Shinzo Abe that during the summit, he raised the issue of the abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korea twice — in the one-on-one meeting and during the dinner. For his part, Abe said, “In order to resolve this [abduction] issue, I believe that I, myself, have to meet face-to-face with Chairman Kim Jong Un next.” Indeed, Abe and his administration must do everything possible to fulfill the hopes of the families of Japanese nationals abducted by the North and of the Japanese public as a whole.

Yamauchi is a professor at Musashino University and a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, where he previously headed the University of Tokyo Center for Middle Eastern Studies (UTCMES). He was a member of the government panel of experts that, from October 2016 to April 2017, was tasked with discussing measures to reduce the Emperor’s burden of official duties. Currently, he also serves as the chair of the panel of advisors to the National Security Council.
