

Opinions

Welcome to Trump's version of 'strategic patience' with North Korea

By Josh Rogin

Two months after the failed U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi, all eyes are on Kim Jong Un, who must make the next move. The Trump administration is holding firm to its all-or-nothing bid for a grand bargain with Pyongyang. The smart play, right now, is a form of strategic patience, to give Kim one last chance to make the right decision.

The term “[strategic patience](#)” is loaded because that’s how the Trump team derisively refers to the Obama administration’s North Korea policy — no real negotiations and no intentional escalation. During his administration’s final months, President Barack Obama largely abandoned that approach and piled on sanctions in response to Kim’s increased nuclear and missile testing. But President Trump’s criticism of Obama’s strategic patience was that it allowed the problem to fester.

Now, almost a year into the Trump administration’s diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang, strategic patience is back, albeit in modified form. In Hanoi, Trump passed Kim a paper outlining the “big deal” — total denuclearization in exchange for economic normalization. Kim wanted the “small deal” of symbolic, limited denuclearization in exchange for broad sanctions relief. Trump walked and now we’re at a stalemate.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono was in Washington last week for meetings with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and acting defense secretary Patrick Shanahan. Kono told me during an interview that he was reassured Trump and Pompeo wouldn’t settle for the small deal, even though it seems to be what the South Korean government [is pushing](#).

“I think the choice is, big deal or nothing. . . . Either Kim Jong Un takes it or leaves it,” Kono said. “The ball is in Kim Jong Un’s court. So we just have to wait for him to make the right decision.”

That’s the message Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will likely deliver to Trump when he visits Washington Friday. For Japan, Trump’s willingness to walk out on the Hanoi summit was a relief. A small deal would not address Tokyo’s national concerns, such as short-range missiles and [the fate of Japanese abductees](#) still missing in North Korea.

The United States and its allies must not negotiate against themselves, or allow North Korea to drive wedges between them, said Kono. Kim’s single-mindedness on getting sanctions relief indicates they are biting, he said, so our focus must stay on keeping the pressure high.

“We are hoping to keep united,” he said, adding that if Kim wants to improve his country’s economic situation, he will have to eventually come around. I asked Kono how long we should wait for Kim to make that choice. “As long as it takes,” he said.

Earlier this month, Pompeo largely concurred with that view during a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, though he said he wanted to “[leave a little room](#)” for small incentives if North Korea demonstrates real progress. During [a CBS interview Wednesday](#), Pompeo emphasized the fundamental choice Kim faces and called on the North Korean leader to prove he had, in fact, made the choice to denuclearize.

Meanwhile, there’s no bilateral dialogue right now and nothing on the schedule. “I hope that we get several more chances to have serious conversations,” Pompeo said.

There are signs Kim is thinking it over. He traveled to Vladivostok, Russia, this week to confer with Russian President Vladimir Putin and [shore up his international support](#). Kim Yong Chol, the hard-liner customarily in charge of Pyongyang’s negotiating team, [was left off the trip](#) with no explanation and [may be gone](#) for good.

U.S. officials told me that Kim Jong Un’s promotion of foreign ministry official Choe Son Hui could be a positive sign that the chairman is seeking new advice or planning to adjust his strategy. North Korean officials are also busy insulting Trump’s advisers, including Pompeo (“[immature](#)”) and national security adviser John Bolton (“[dim-sighted](#)”).

If the North Koreans think they can appeal directly to Trump by going over his advisers’ heads, they haven’t learned the lessons of Hanoi. If Russia thinks there’s a possibility of broadening the diplomacy to something resembling [the Six-Party Talks](#), they don’t understand Trump.

Kono said that as long as everyone abides by the resolutions put in place by the U.N. Security Council, there will be no significant sanctions relief for North Korea until it gives up its nuclear and missile programs completely.

“We do not want to make the mistake of the Six-Party Talks, so we are not going to give anything piece by piece,” he said.

In a way, Trump’s version of strategic patience is better than Obama’s. There is no nuclear or missile testing going on and there, at least, is a diplomatic process to be returned to.

But if and when it becomes clear that Kim has decided not to give up his nuclear and missile programs for good, our patience must end and we must pivot to ramping up our deterrence, containment and pressure. Trump’s strategic patience with North Korea will eventually run out.

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