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Wither Hanoi Summit!

Hanoi, the Vietnamese capital is witnessing a two-day summit on 27-28 February between US President Donald Trump North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. This is the second summit being held after a gap of eight months after the historic first summit held in Singapore where both the leaders had pledged to work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. On the eve of his departure for Hanoi, President Trump said that he believed he saw ‘eye to eye’ with North Korean leader and that they had developed very ‘good relationship.’ Describing outcome of the Singapore summit as a ‘vaguely worded agreement’ that has produced few results, some US Democratic senators and security officials have warned Trump against cutting a deal that would do little to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. In the post-Singapore summit period, the Trump administration has reportedly pressed the North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons programme, which combined with its missile capabilities, pose a threat to the United States, before it can expect any concessions. Concurrently, President Trump is also said to have signaled a possible softening, saying he would love to be able to remove sanctions if there is meaningful progress on denuclearization.

Undoubtedly, reports appearing in the media indicated North Korean leader having initially agreed to the ‘denuclearization’ of the Korean peninsula; nonetheless, it soon became clear that Washington and Pyongyang had very diverse interpretations of what had transpired at Singapore summit. The North Korean steps in carrying out demolition work at a nuclear test site and a missile test facility was not regarded as substantial steps towards disarmament by the US. Media reports make it discernible a softening of US stance on relaxing some sanctions even before Pyongyang dismantled its nuclear weapons programme to pave way for the success of the Hanoi summit. These public shifts in the US stance is attributed to the spadework undertaken by the diplomats of both countries with a view to facilitate progress towards an agreement in preliminary talks at the ensuing Hanoi summit. In a television interview on February 24, the US Secretary of State, while pointing out that sanctions against North Korea encompassed multiple activities, said: “Remember these sanctions cover a broad array of activities... The core economic sanctions, the sanctions that prevent countries from conducting trade, creating wealth for North Korea, those sanctions are definitely going to remain in place... There are other things we could do – exchanges of people, lots of other ways that North Korea is sanctioned today that if we get a substantial step and move forward, we could certainly provide an outlet which would demonstrate our commitment to the process as well.”

Media reports emanating from diplomatic sources put North Korea in a strong bargaining position to start with in the wake of having suspended nuclear and missile tests, and partially dismantled two test sites and these put the onus on the US to make the first concession in Hanoi and relax sanctions. However, one expert has opined that since most US sanctions on North Korea are mandated by Congress, it could be hard for the Trump administration to lift and concurrently, it would also be hard to convince US allies on the Security Council that the goal of UN sanctions had been met. However, Washington could attempt to persuade the UN to make humanitarian exceptions to the sanctions, perhaps loosening constraints on economic cooperation between South and North Korea. Some experts opine that among the more modest steps North Korea could offer in Hanoi to admitting inspectors to North Korean nuclear sites, its readiness to begin dismantling main nuclear complex, at Yongbyon, possibly including its plutonium-producing reactor, and a uranium enrichment plant. This could prove instrumental in placing some sort of limits on the nuclear programmes of North Korea.

However, some critics have raised pertinent questions: Will the dismantling process be truly irreversible? How much and what exactly will North Korea demand in return? Will Washington make some big concessions on economic sanctions? Answers to these and other related questions will be forthcoming in the aftermath of the Hanoi summit. One expert has opined that the North Korean game plan is to ensnare the US in a ‘long-winded negotiations, while enforcement of sanctions becomes lax or non-existent because “for North Korea this is a matter of life or death. For the US, it is more like a hobby.”

— BK