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#### **COMMENTARY**

**3** OPEN ACCESS



# The Singapore Summit and Northeast Asian Security

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The Singapore summit meeting between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un committed the DPRK to complete denuclearization. In return, the United States pledged to satisfy key elements of the DPRK's longstanding aim: an end to US enmity. Denuclearization is unlikely without political and economic normalization, a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War, regional security arrangements, and, ultimately, a US-DPRK alliance long sought by Pyongyang. If implemented, those actions could have profound consequences for the balance of power in Northeast Asia. Such a radical shift could raise concern in Japan, South Korea, China and Russia. To ease their concern, a multilateral solution might be preferable. A nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) could potentially serve as an alternative form of security partnership. A NWFZ could offer an effective substitute for outright alliance by providing the DPRK, once it is certified as nuclear weapons-free, with a guarantee that the United States will not make it the subject of nuclear threat or attack and will defend it against attacks by another nuclear weapons state or ally of such a state.

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The Singapore summit meeting between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un could prefigure a seismic shift in the geopolitics of Northeast Asia.

One would never know it from news coverage that mischaracterized the summit as a mere photo op or a mistake. Observers' flawed conclusions rested on faulty assumptions about Kim's aims and Trump's initial moves to satisfy them.

Contrary to speculation that Kim seeks an end to the US alliance with South Korea, US removal of its nuclear umbrella, the withdrawal of US forces from the peninsula, a Marshall plan of aid for his economy, or mere written security assurances, what Kim really wants Washington to do is to end US enmity and reconcile with its Pyongyang. If so, such a shift could have profound effects on Northeast Asia security.

An end to US enmity has been the Kims' aim for 30 years. Throughout the Cold War, Kim Jong Un's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, had played China off against the Soviet Union to maintain his freedom of manoeuvre. In 1988, anticipating the Soviet Union's

collapse, he reached out to reconcile with the United States, South Korea and Japan in order to avoid over-dependence on a China he distrusted. The Kims' aim has become more essential as China's power has grown.

From Pyongyang's vantage point, that aim was the basis of the 1994 Agreed Framework in which Washington pledged to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations", or, in plain English, to end enmity. It was also the essence of the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement, which committed Washington and Pyongyang to "respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies", as well as to "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula". For Washington, the point of these agreements was the abandonment of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs. Both agreements collapsed, however, when Washington did little to implement its commitment to reconcile and Pyongyang reneged on denuclearization.

Although Pyongyang had reached out to previous presidents, without success, Trump was not only willing to meet with Kim, but also to sign a joint statement with him for the first time in US-DPRK history. That joint statement committed Pyongyang to "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula", without spelling out specifics. At least as important, the two leaders pledged to "establish new US-DPRK relations" and "build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula".<sup>1</sup>

What better way for Trump to indicate a readiness to end enmity and reconcile than to sit down with Kim, to say, as he has, that he is prepared to negotiate an end to the Korean War and to normalize relations – something his predecessors never did – and to suspend joint major military exercises with South Korea?

### Not an Impulsive Act

Trump's willingness to engage was not as impulsive or ill-considered as critics contend. During the 2016 campaign, candidate Trump repeatedly talked about negotiating with North Korea, a signal not missed in Pyongyang. Within days of his inauguration, Trump signed off on delivery of a token amount of flood relief, the first humanitarian aid to North Korea in 5 years. In February 2017, he authorized inviting Choe Son Hui, director-general of the American division in the North Korea Foreign Ministry, to meet in New York with Joseph Yun, the US ambassador in charge of negotiating with North Korea – only to cancel the meeting over the assassination of Kim's half-brother in Kuala Lumpur. Yet within weeks, Yun began talks in the "New York channel" and later met Choe in Oslo and Pyongyang. Intelligence channels were also activated. That fall, Yun was authorized to drop preconditions for negotiations.

Kim Jong Un had long signalled his interest in negotiating as well. Even his *byungjin* strategic line, promulgated on 31 May 2013, had a key condition implying that the North could stop testing nuclear weapons and missiles and generating fissile material. It

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit, 12 June 2018. https://www.whitehouse.gov/brief ings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/.

spoke of "carrying out economic construction and building nuclear armed forces simultaneously under the prevailing situation", or, as North Korean diplomats explained it, as long as the "hostile policy" persisted. In its decision of 8 May 2016, the Seventh Korean Workers' Party Congress characterized byungjin as "simultaneously pushing forward economic construction and the building of a nuclear force and boosting a self-defensive nuclear force both in quality and quantity as long as the imperialists persist in their nuclear threat and arbitrary practices". The conditionality of byungjin implies that North Korea might eventually limit its missile and nuclear weapons production. A statement of 16 June 2013, by the National Defense Commission called for "high-level talks between the DPRK and the US authorities to ... establish peace and security in the region". That statement also showed a willingness to accommodate the key US demand: "The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the behest of our leader" and "must be carried out ... without fail". In informal contacts, North Korean officials underscored their leader's wishes and asked for help in arranging high-level talks with South Korea. On 6 July 2016, even as its nuclear and missile testing continued, a North Korean government spokesman issued a statement characterizing denuclearization as sanctified by Kim's father and grandfather: "The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is [at] the behest of the Great Leader [Kim Il Sung] and the Fatherly General [Kim Jong Il] and the steadfast will of our party, army and people".5

Kim kept hinting at a stopping point for tests. In "guiding" the launch of the Hwasong-12 intermediate-range missile on 16 September 2017, he was quoting as saying: "We should clearly show the great-power chauvinists how our state attained the goal of completing its nuclear force despite their limitless sanctions and blockade", underlining the need to finalize the work with "the mobilization of all state efforts as it nearly reached the terminal". That statement raised the possibility of suspending tests once the terminal was reached.

After the second successful test-launch of the Hwasong-14 ICBM, Kim declared that "the test-fire reconfirmed the reliability of [the] ICBM system, demonstrated the capability of making a surprise launch of an ICBM in any region and place any time, and clearly proved that the whole US mainland is in the firing range of the DPRK missiles". After the successful launch of the Hwasong-15 ICBM on 29 November 2017, Kim was more categorical: He said that the day "was a significant day when the historic cause of completing the state nuclear force, the cause of building a rocket power was realized".  $^{'}$  In his New Year"s speech on 1 January 2018, he hinted that testing was now accomplished, but that full-scale production would continue:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>KCNA, "Report on Plenary Meeting of WPK Central Committee", 31 March 2013. www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201303/ news31/20130331-24ee.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>KCNA, "Decision of Seventh Congress of WPK Adopted", 8 May 2016. www.kcna.co.jp/item/2016/201605/news08/ 20160508-14ee.html. Emphasis added by the author.

<sup>4</sup>KCNA, "DPRK Proposes Official Talks with U.S.", 16 June 2013. www.kcna.co.jp/item/2013/201306/news16/20130616-12ee.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup>KCNA, "DPRK Government Denounces U.S., S. Korea"s Sophism about "Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula", 6 July 2016. www.kcna.co.jp/item/2016/201607/news06/20160706-41ee.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>KCNA, "Kim Jong Un Guides Hwasong-12 Launching Drill Again", 16 September 2017. www.kcna.co.jp/item/2017/ 201709/news16/20170916-01ee.html. Emphasis added by the author.

KCNA, "Kim Jong Un Guides Test-Fire of ICBM Hwasong-15", 29 November 2017. www.kcna.co.jp/item/2017/201711/ news29/20171129-14ee.html. Emphasis added by the author.

The nuclear weapons research sector and the rocket industry should *mass-produce nuclear* warheads and ballistic missiles, the power and reliability of which have already been proved to the full, to give a spur to the efforts for deploying them for action.

Nothing more has been said about mass production since. While "the nuclear button is on my office desk all the time", and that his missiles could target all of America, he nonetheless proposed that North Korea attend the PyeongChang Olympics to "ease the acute military tension" and "create a peaceful environment on the Korean Peninsula".8

A day after Kim"s New Year's Day speech 1 year earlier, President-elect Donald Trump tweeted, "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the United States", adding, "It won"t happen". By stopping nuclear and missile testing just short of having a proven thermonuclear weapon and an ICBM with a re-entry vehicle capable of delivering it to all of the United States, Kim Jong Un has made it possible for Trump to get his wish.

## **Implications for Regional Security**

The reciprocal commitments in the Singapore joint statement, the DPRK commitment to "complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula" and the US commitment to reconcile and "build a lasting and stable peace regime" in Korea, could have potentially profound implications for the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

Skeptics wonder if either side means what it says. Nobody knows. The only way to find out is sustained negotiations, keeping one's commitments, and testing whether the other side does. Dismantling production facilities, disarming, and verifying it will take several years. So will convincing steps towards reconciliation.

The first order of business is to induce North Korea to suspend production of fissile material and possibly suspend production and deployment of intermediate- and intercontinental-range missiles. Remote monitoring may prove of some use, but delaying suspension to negotiate detailed verification would allow time for more plutonium and highly enriched uranium to be produced and more missiles to be fielded in the interim. In return, Washington could issue a declaration with Seoul and Pyongyang committing to end the Korean War; sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act, imposed before the nuclear issue arose, could be relaxed for yet a third time; and energy assistance that was unilaterally halted by South Korea in 2008 could also be resumed.

Verification would begin with declarations by Pyongyang of all its fissile material, nuclear weapons and intermediate- and long-range missiles, along with all its production sites. It could then be pursued along the lines of a joint document from October 2008, in which North Korea agreed to allow "full access" to "experts of the six parties" with the IAEA "to provide consultancy and assistance" for "safeguards appropriate to non-nuclear-weapons states". It included records, "personal notebooks" and "interviews with technical personnel", "forensic measurements of nuclear materials and equipment" and "environmental samples and samples of nuclear waste" at the three declared sites at Yongbyon – the reactor, the reprocessing plant and the fuel fabrication plant. This might suffice to ascertain how much plutonium North Korea had produced,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>KCNA, "Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address", 1 January 2018. https://kcnawatch.co/newstream/284839/kim-jong-un-makes-new-year-address/. Emphasis added by the author.



and, if not, Pyongyang also agreed to allow "access, based on mutual consent, to undeclared sites". This will require further steps to end enmity, including the start of a peace process in Korea, steps towards diplomatic recognition, energy aid and reciprocal inspections in South Korea.

### **Continued North Korean Nuclear Arming**

One possibility is that negotiations will fail – with serious consequences for regional security. North Korean arming has already increased friction among neighbours. The initial US response has been to reassure its allies by rotating forces into the region, including nuclear-capable bombers, and deploying sea- and land-based missile defenses and associated radars to South Korea and Japan. The missile defenses, however ineffective, have antagonized China and Russia. The radars, China knows, could be linked to US-based missile defenses and necessitate a tightening of US alliances despite historical frictions between South Korea and Japan. Beijing reacted by beefing up its nuclear forces and punishing South Korean firms doing business with China. Russia is modernizing its aging nuclear forces, including a new nuclear-armed cruise missile that could be deployed in Asia.

An unbounded North Korean nuclear program could have a much more severe impact on regional geopolitics. Already some influential voices are urging South Korea and Japan to acquire nuclear weapons of their own, which could undermine their alliances with the United States and trigger a nuclear buildup by China and Russia.

These consequences have spurred US efforts to seek a negotiated resolution of the North Korean nuclear challenge.

## **Alliance or Security Partnership**

The chances of persuading North Korea to go beyond another temporary suspension to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs are slim without progress by Washington and Seoul towards political and economic normalization, a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War, and regional security arrangements, and ultimately a US-DPRK alliance long sought by Pyongyang. In a June 7 interview with NHK, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hinted at a willingness to do just that: "We want to achieve a fundamentally different strategic relationship between our two countries". <sup>10</sup>

What better way for North Korea to be secure against its powerful near neighbour than to ally with a distant United States? DPRK diplomats have long spoken of an alliance with Washington in informal contacts with Americans. North Korean military representatives even hinted at that possibility in the early 1990s in military-to-military talks at Panmunjom. And Kim Yong Sun broached the subject with Undersecretary of State Arnold Kanter at the first high-level talks between the two nations in January 1992.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup>US Department of State, "Verification Discussion Paper", undated. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/kesslerdoc\_092608.pdf.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>US Department of State, Secretary State Mike Pompeo, Interview with Yui Hideki of NHK, 7 June 2018. https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/06/283080.htm.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup>Personal communications with US participants.

An alliance would certainly address the DPRK's desire for security and a hedge against Chinese overreach and Japanese resurgence. It would unambiguously spell an end to what Pyongyang calls US "hostile policy". Holding out the prospect of an alliance would constitute the most compelling inducement for Pyongyang to undertake truly "complete denuclearization".

A reversal of alliances by North Korea, especially if US troops remain as guarantor on the peninsula, would shift the tectonic plates of regional security. To head off possible objections in South Korea, North Koreans have said that the United States can have two allies in Korea at the same time. Conservatives in South Korea are not likely to regard that prospect with equanimity. Nor is Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, who has resisted negotiations by anyone with North Korea. Opposition in Seoul and Tokyo may prove difficult for the administration to overcome, given the lack of enthusiasm in Congress, which would have to approve such an arrangement. Such a realignment is also likely to arouse suspicion, if not outright antagonism in China, which will not enhance security for anyone in the region. Xi Jinping's repeated meetings with Kim Jong Un likely underscored China's concerns about such a radical shift. Russia is also likely to resent being left out of any solution. Given the downside risks, is there a better way to accommodate the concerns of other regional players and enhance the security of all?

One possibility is a comprehensive security approach that would necessarily involve all the regional players in parallel negotiations at an appropriate time and assure that their security concerns are addressed.

What would a comprehensive settlement look like? As set out in a Nautilus Institute paper (Halperin et al., 2018), it has six inter-locking essential elements:

- (1) Begin a three-party peace process to replace the Korean Armistice with a peace declaration, committing to negotiate a peace treaty or to establish what the September 2005 Joint Statement refers to as a "peace regime".
- (2) Declare non-hostility and move to normalize relations.
- (3) Gradually relax sanctions over time.
- (4) Provide humanitarian assistance to the DPRK and economic and energy aid, especially aid which benefits the whole region by completing many types of energy, telecom, logistics, transport, mobility, trading, financial networks that link the land-bridge from Eurasia to the ROK and Japan via North Korea.
- (5) Set up a Six Party Northeast Asia Security Council.
- (6) Establish a nuclear weapons-free zone (NWFZ) in which to re-establish DPRK's non-nuclear commitment in a legally binding manner that provides a framework to dismantle its nuclear facilities and weapons and to manage the nuclear threat in the region in a manner that treats all parties, including North Korea, on an equal basis.

The first five elements have long embodied the end of enmity for the DPRK, all of which were agreed in the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement but never carried out. If, as suspected, the lack of progress in implementing these steps jeopardized progress towards denuclearization in the past, it is difficult to imagine that denuclearization will make much headway now without parallel efforts to satisfy its objectives.

The sixth element could provide an alternative to a US-DPRK alliance. The other five parties could establish and implement a legally binding NWFZ for eventual acceptance and entry by the DPRK in lockstep with specific actions to eliminate its nuclear weapons. North Koreans have expressed interest from time to time in such an arrangement (Halperin et al., 2018). A NWFZ agreement has important advantages over a bilateral alliance and denuclearization deal. First, while both are legally binding, to the extent that a NWFZ brings in other parties it would strengthen the legal and political bonds and thereby help enhance the DPRK's perception of the durability of any proposed deal. Second, it may also be more enduring because it affects how the nuclear weapons states use nuclear threats against all the nonnuclear weapons states party to the treaty, and thereby against each other. Third, it could entail security commitments beyond those in the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Finally, a NWFZ can serve as an effective substitute for a security alliance by providing the DPRK, once it is certified as nuclear weapons-free, with a guarantee that the United States will not make it the subject of nuclear threat or attack and will defend it against attacks by another nuclear weapons state or ally of such a state.

While the two Koreas have been reluctant to sign treaties with one another because that might affect their competing claims to sovereignty over the entire peninsula, a NWFZ treaty is a standard UN multilateral convention that both Koreas have had no problem signing in the past. Moreover, the other four parties may be skeptical as to the durability of a Korea-only denuclearization agreement and prefer the multilateral rather than unilateral guarantees provided by the Nuclear Weapons States to under the Non-Proliferation Treaty. A UN NWFZ with the two Koreas as founding non-nuclear weapons states would be made open to signature at the outset or later by other non-nuclear weapons states in the region such as Japan or Mongolia.

In this approach, the US-DPRK relationship would change from enemies to security partners, that is, the DPRK would be neither an enemy nor an ally, but somewhere inbetween (Halperin et al., 2018). A security partner is a state that is not a full-fledged ally and may in some instances still have serious security conflicts with the United States or its allies, as is the case with US ties to Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. And such a partnership might yield more leverage than we have had in the past for dealing with other issues, such as human rights.

Under such conditions, a security partnership involving US forces and the Korean People's Army of the DPRK would not end of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command, with wartime US operational control of ROK forces. Deterrence would remain in play until military tensions ease to point where war is no longer a plausible option for either Korea, which may take decades. In short, a security partnership with the KPA is compatible with US extended deterrence to its allies.

In past overtures, Americans have ignored or rebuffed North Korean suggestions that it might become an American ally. It is now timely to address the underlying concerns revealed by these overtures and to explore if there is an alternative relationship that would mitigate the consequences of a radical geopolitical realignment, improve everyone's security in the region, and facilitate the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

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