



Mind the Gap: The Singapore Summit and U.S. Alliances

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The spectacle of the Singapore Summit, the first-ever meeting between a North Korean leader and a sitting U.S. president, naturally captured the world's attention. The compelling images of the encounter between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump should not, however, obscure two essential realities.

First, this meeting is not, as the White House would claim, primarily the product of U.S. policies and actions. Rather this has been largely Korean-driven, led by the progressive government of South Korean president Moon Jae-in, who is pursuing a policy of engagement with the Communist North. At every step, Moon and his government have been the bridge between Pyongyang and Washington, shaping their diplomacy, even if U.S. officials were often skeptical of the motives.

Second, the personal diplomacy displayed at the summit was highly unusual. President Trump clearly relishes that approach, believing that the power of his personality can overcome the limits and failures of past negotiations with North Korea. The initial outcome of the Singapore meeting suggests, however, that the president may vastly overestimate his ability to shape events with a handshake or a smile.

The Road to Singapore

The Singapore Summit grew out of the opening forged by Moon, going back to the ambitious plan for North-South engagement he laid out shortly after taking office last year. In a speech in Berlin in July 2017, Moon argued that “my country must sit in the driver's seat and lead Korean Peninsula-related issues based on cooperation with our neighbors.”¹ But Kim did not respond to the bid for renewed engagement until January. After a rush of missile and nuclear tests had strengthened the North's bargaining position, Kim pivoted, offering an olive branch to the South, including support for a peaceful Winter Olympics.

The visit of a senior North Korean delegation to the Olympic Games, led by Kim's sister, was aimed at both setting up a North-South summit and opening the door to the United States. The initial South Korean attempt to mediate talks at the Olympics with Vice

¹ Moon Jae-in (speech at Korber Foundation, Berlin, July 7, 2017), available at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170707000032>.

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President Mike Pence failed. But South Korean negotiators succeeded the next month after traveling to Pyongyang. They set up the North-South summit and brought an offer to Washington for a Kim-Trump meeting, sweetened by the announcement of a freeze on missile and nuclear tests and acquiescence to planned U.S.–South Korean joint military exercises.

Moon knew that his efforts to significantly improve relations with the North, picking up the threads of the progressive government that had held power a decade before, could only succeed if he could draw the Trump administration into the process. Based on his experience as chief of staff of the previous progressive government, Moon knew he needed U.S. involvement so as not to be accused of undermining the alliance for the sake of dreams of Korean reunification. But even Moon and his aides were surprised by President Trump’s acceptance of the offer to hold a summit.

The Singapore Summit

President Trump’s decision to agree to a summit with Kim flipped the normal process of diplomacy on its head. The president set in motion a process of front-loading the summit, reaching a broad agreement, and then going from there. The idea is to “string it out—do another summit and sign some other documents and, at the same time, get some actions on other fronts,” says Kathleen Stephens, former U.S. ambassador to South Korea during the Obama administration and a participant in previous talks with North Korea. It is an approach that goes “completely against the wisdom of North Korea diplomacy for the last several decades but also against the wisdom of diplomacy period. But they are willing to take that risk,” Stephens told me.

Conventional diplomacy dictates that a meeting with the president is “a highly precious event and you can use it for leverage,” says Stephens. Summits by definition have to be a success, and usually they are preceded by low-level diplomacy that may leave only a few major issues to be resolved at the gathering itself.

The Singapore Summit, however, was not a standard heads-of-state summit but a meeting with the leader of a country with which the United States does not yet have normal relations. It is more comparable to the process that led to the visit of President Barack Obama to Cuba or President Bill Clinton to Vietnam. But in those cases, the summits were preceded by long periods of lowering sanctions, building confidence, and establishing embassies.

The Singapore gathering went against all those customs. The initial contacts that did take place were mostly carried out through intelligence channels, and early preparations began when Mike Pompeo was CIA director, with senior intelligence officials as the conduit. Even after Pompeo moved to the State Department, CIA officials continued as the main points of contact with Pyongyang. Only in the final days before the June 12 meeting did a team, led by former U.S. ambassador to South Korea Sung Kim and including officials from the Defense Department and National Security Council, hold talks with North Korean counterparts in Panmunjom. The teams moved to Singapore to continue efforts—up until hours before the summit—to reach agreement on the text of the joint statement that the two leaders would issue.

Those talks suffered under a twin burden. The North Koreans refused to discuss a detailed plan for denuclearization, apparently confident that the president was locked into the summit, particularly after he quickly reversed his threat of cancellation. More important, according to published reports and my own sources, U.S. negotiators were undercut by a White House unwilling to derail the summit plan.²

The joint statement issued upon the conclusion of the Singapore talks reflected both the role of South Korea and the flipped diplomatic process.³ The statement was surprisingly brief and lacking in detailed plans.

² For further discussion, see Daniel Sneider, “Abe’s Desperate Trip to Washington,” *Tokyo Business Today*, June 7, 2018, <https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/224097>.

³ “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,” June 12, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/12/politics/read-full-text-of-trump-kim-signed-statement/index.html>.

Tellingly, its language tracked precisely that of the North-South Panmunjom Declaration reached in late April. It called for “efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula” and framed the North Korean commitment to denuclearization as one of “reaffirming” the Panmunjom Declaration.

The United States had backed off from the idea of issuing a bilateral “end of the war declaration” with Kim, which was to be ratified by China. The North Koreans had sought this declaration as a key gesture from the United States of its readiness to improve relations, according to a senior U.S. official involved in the high-level contacts with Kim and with his intelligence chief, Kim Yong-chol, who visited the White House. President Trump was prepared to go ahead with this symbolic move, even though in previous negotiations this step had always been reserved to follow a nuclear deal. South Korea, however, objected to being excluded from this process, intent instead on a four-way peace agreement that might be signed on the anniversary of the armistice on July 27.⁴ The president may have felt the pressure from Seoul. In his press conference, he acknowledged this was an issue, but said he would like to have both South Korea and China involved.

In his hour-long press conference at the end of the talks, President Trump went well beyond the text of the joint statement, telling reporters that he would halt joint military exercises in South Korea. Using language more typical of the Workers’ Party of Korea daily, he referred to the exercises as “war games” that were “provocative,” as well as costly. The announcement caught South Korea by surprise, as well as Japan, and reportedly also the U.S. Forces Korea command.⁵

President Trump portrayed this as a gesture offered by the United States to reassure Kim, and he even

indicated his desire to “at some point” be able to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea. In the North Korean account of the meeting, however, published by the Korean Central News Agency, this was actually characterized as a request from Kim to “make a bold decision on halting irritating and hostile military actions against each other.” According to that account, President Trump responded with the commitment to halt the joint exercises, “which the DPRK side regards as provocation,” and also to “lift sanctions against it.” In response, Kim told him that they would take “additional good-will measures” at a next stage.⁶

Implications for the Alliances with South Korea and Japan

The halting of military exercises (which China has long advocated) sparked alarm in Seoul and Tokyo, where some see the move as a significant step toward reducing the U.S. security commitment to both allies. “It looks like the alliance is on the road to dismantlement,” commented former South Korean chief presidential adviser on foreign affairs Chun Young-woo.⁷ South Korean conservatives have long opposed any reduction in the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula, fearing it would undermine the U.S. security guarantee and eventually lead to the withdrawal of the U.S. military presence, which acts as a “tripwire” to trigger a larger U.S. response to a possible North Korean attack. Conservative administrations had backtracked on plans forged by the previous progressive administration of President Roh Moo-hyun to end the Combined Forces Command, which places South Korean forces under U.S. command in the event of war.

⁴ Seong Yeon-cheol and Noh Ji-won, “Declaring End of Korean War to Be Done by South and North Korea and U.S., Blue House Says,” *Hankyoreh*, May 3, 2018, http://english.hani.co.kr/english_edition/e_northkorea/847793.html.

⁵ Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon and Seoul Surprised by Trump Pledge to Halt Military Exercises,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/world/asia/trump-military-exercises-north-south-korea.html>.

⁶ “The Latest: Trump Thanks Kim for Taking ‘Bold Step,’” Associated Press, June 12, 2018, <https://apnews.com/88031aa89d3b47d6bfd1c3d8ef96be27>.

⁷ “Pundits Lament Poor Results of U.S.–N. Korea Summit,” *Chosun Ilbo*, June 13, 2018, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/06/13/2018061300703.html.

South Korean progressives, on the other hand, including close advisers to President Moon, may not be so alarmed. They have long sought a diminution of the U.S. military role, including the joint exercises. Progressive policymakers advocate a more autonomous defense role for South Korea, including, for example, the creation of a missile defense system that functions separately from the U.S. missile defense structure. They have seen joint exercises at times as a barrier to engagement with the North—as they did in seeking the postponement of a planned exercise until after the Olympic Games. But they are careful not to express those views for fear of alarming a South Korean public that still strongly supports the alliance and the U.S. presence as a guarantee of stability on the peninsula.

The Singapore Summit, with its unconventional approach and its roots in Korean diplomacy, will immediately open the way for more rapid moves on the North-South engagement front between Moon and Kim. While the United States settles into protracted negotiations with the North, the two Koreas are poised to accelerate joint economic projects and humanitarian cooperation, as well as military-level contacts.

Japanese officials have echoed the concerns of South Korean conservatives, though in more careful language. “The drills and the U.S. military stationed in South Korea play a vital role in East Asia’s security,” Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera told reporters. “I hope to share this recognition between Japan and the U.S., or among Japan, the U.S. and South Korea.”⁸ The security of Japan has always been linked to the Korean Peninsula, and U.S. forces based in Japan would play a significant role in any defense of South Korea. U.S. security policymakers have thus long encouraged trilateral security cooperation between the three countries. If the United States were to diminish its forces, or move to withdraw them from South Korea, the Japanese government would feel increasingly isolated, rattled by a fear of U.S. abandonment.

The United States may focus its attention on the follow-on negotiations with Kim. But it would be wise to pay as much attention to managing the alliances with South Korea and Japan so as to limit the damage already done by the unconventional diplomacy displayed in Singapore. ~

⁸ “Japan’s Defense Minister Says U.S.–South Korea Military Drills ‘Vital,’” *Straits Times*, June 13, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japans-defence-minister-itsunori-onodera-says-us-south-korea-military-drills-vital>.

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