

Pursuing Peace

Summits and personal diplomacy transform dynamics on Korean peninsula

David Scott



Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un share a lighthearted moment during their historic meeting at the Singapore summit.

REGIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN and around the Korean peninsula have dramatically changed in the first half of 2018. Back in September 2017, following its sixth nuclear test, North Korea seemed totally isolated, including from China, with explicit talk of military intervention by the United States reaching a high pitch. Personal insults between leaders Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump compounded this toxic atmosphere. Yet the first six months of 2018 transformed the situation, leading to unexpected summits between North Korea and South Korea, between North Korea and China,

and between North Korea and the United States.

In his New Year Address, Kim Jong Un suggested “we should improve the frozen inter-Korean relations” and welcomed the Winter Games due to be held in South Korea in 2018. Discussions moved rapidly between Korean officials, with 9 January bringing the announcement that a unified “Korean” team would be fielded at the Winter Olympics.

North Korean participation was modest: 10 ice skaters, skiers and hockey players. The symbolism and imagery was striking, however. North Korean athletes received a warm welcome to participate under

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a common Korean identity, with South and North Korean participants marching under a single, albeit unnamed, banner depicting the Korean peninsula rather than one or the other respective national flag. The North Korean cheerleading team, which the media dubbed the “army of beauties” also caught the public’s attention. As the unified Korean team marched into the Olympic Stadium, footage of Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korea’s leader, seemingly spontaneously warmly shaking hands with South Korea’s leader Moon Jae In became one of the defining moments of the games, not least because it also showed US Vice President Mike Pence, with a reserved countenance, sitting nearby.

The visit to North Korea by National Security Director Chung Eui Yong and his 5 March meeting there with Kim Jong Un cleared the path for the first summit meeting between the North and South Korean leaders on 27 April. The symbolism was clear when Kim Jong Un and Moon Jae In shook hands across the armistice line drawn in the middle of the road, with both leaders hand in hand stepping over

the line into each other’s country. This quickly became another well-circulated image. The Panmunjom Declaration agreed to by the two leaders included pledges to establish a joint liaison office, to encourage cooperation, exchanges, and contacts, to completely cease all hostile acts against each other, and to work toward a nuclear-free Korean peninsula.

Propaganda barrages alongside the demilitarized zone were to be stopped as of 1 May, unity celebrations were planned for 15 June, a joint team was agreed upon for the 2018 Asian Games, and President Moon agreed to visit the North Korean capital in the autumn.

Regular meetings between the two leaderships was also agreed to and quickly acted upon, with a second meeting held between Kim and Moon on 26 May, on the North Korean side of the village, where Moon was greeted by a formal honor guard. Discussions remained friendly, with both leaders reaffirming the Panmunjom Declaration, and welcoming the forthcoming US-North Korea summit that by then had been set for 12 June.

By the end of 2017, a glacial period in Chinese-North Korean relations had become apparent. Official contact had virtually collapsed, and Chinese criticism of North Korean nuclear testing had been matched by reluctant but tangible rising economic sanctions put in place by Beijing under Western pressure. Needless to say, there had been no meetings between Xi and Kim.

However, China reacted quickly to the thawing of relations witnessed at the Winter Olympics in early March. With no prior warning, it emerged that Kim Jong Un visited China from 25-28 March.



A North Korean ballistic missile on the streets of Pyongyang during North Korea Victory Day 2013.



South Korean and American fighter pilots step to their jets for takeoff during the Buddy Wing program on March 11 at Kunsan Air Base, South Korea.

Kim's appearance in Beijing had the trappings of a state visit, complete with an honor guard and banquet at Beijing's Great Hall of the People. China was clearly not comfortable with the idea of Kim meeting with Moon and Trump before ever having met with Xi.

From China's point of view, it risked being left out in the cold, while for North Korea this represented a crucial moment in establishing some sort of common position with Beijing before entering into discussions with the United States. It was clear in the 28 March official summary by Xinhua that both leaders felt that it was a matter of "strategic choice and strategic communications for the two countries to strengthen coordination."

By coordination, Xinhua meant the coordination of positions in the forthcoming North Korea-US talks. Again, images were readily available: Kim and wife Ri Sol Ju side by side with Xi and his wife, Peng Liyuan; Kim and Xi inspecting the ceremonial guard; and warm smiles around the banquet table. An invitation for Xi to visit North Korea in 2018 was made and accepted, which would represent the first such trip by a Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping's visit

back in 1982.

The pace of discussions accelerated as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited North Korea on 3 May. This was then followed less than a week later by a second visit—again without any warning, and only confirmed afterwards—which took place in northern China between Kim and Xi, on the coast at Dalian from 7-8 May. The image for the world media was deliberate; smiling neighbors casually strolling together along the beach, but with coordination of tactics vis-à-vis the United States prominent in both leaders' mind.

On 11 March, South Korea National Security Advisor Chung Eui Yong, fresh from his meeting with Kim Jong Un on 5 March, passed an invitation on to Trump to meet with the North Korean Leader. To widespread surprise, Trump accepted on the spot. The next few months had their own moments of drama. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo held secret talks in North Korea, including with Kim Yong Chol and Kim Jong Un in early April, with a second more public trip and discussions with both of them on 8-9 May. His return, with three previously detained US

citizens, was met with a warm response from Trump upon their arrival back in the United States on 10 May. “We want to thank Kim Jong Un, who really was excellent,” Trump said. It was then agreed that a summit would be held on 12 June in Singapore.

The road to the Trump-Kim summit was not straightforward. Harsh comments from North Korea—calling National Security Advisor John Bolton “repugnant” and Vice President Mike Pence a “political dummy.” The regime in North Korea was also angry over analogies with Libya being drawn (in effect, suggesting a regime change is in the cards), led to Trump issuing a letter on 24 May cancelling the summit: “based on the tremendous anger and open hostility displayed in your most recent statement, I feel it is inappropriate, at this time, to have this long-planned meeting.”

Preparations resume

Momentum resumed when North Korean envoy Kim Yong Chol visited the United States, bringing with him a friendly letter addressed to Trump, whereupon preparations resumed for the 12 June summit.

“We’re meeting with the chairman on 12 June and I think it’s probably going to be a very successful, ultimately a successful process,” Trump announced. Both sides accepted the principle of denuclearization, but appeared to have defined the term in different ways. For the United States, it was with specific regard to North Korea, but for North Korea, the term had wider scope and covered the entire Korean peninsula, incorporating even the US nuclear shield.

Expectations were being managed on the American side, as Trump made a point of saying they would not necessarily agree to anything, and it was more of a “get to know you” sort of initial meeting. A symbolic ending to the war was mooted as an achievable immediate object.

On 12 June, this quite unexpected summit between

North Korea and the United States finally took place. The US mantra, reiterated by Pompeo on 11 June, was that North Korean denuclearization must be “complete, verifiable, and irreversible.”

The imagery was certainly striking: two world leaders who had traded insults throughout 2017, now trading handshakes and smiles. Talks were direct, and face-to-face, with only translators present, before giving way to further discussions with advisers in attendance: Mike Pompeo and John Bolton on the US side; Kim Yo Jong and Kim Yong Chol on the North Korean side.

A formal four-point declaration was signed by both leaders. The rhetoric in it was certainly blazing, “an epochal event of great significance in overcoming decades of tensions and hostilities between the two countries and for the opening up of a new future.”

The heart of the document was an explicit trade-off whereby “President Trump committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK, and Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

Only time will tell whether North Korea actually moves forward on its side of the trade-off concerning denuclearization. It should be noted that Pompeo’s “complete, verifiable and irreversible” conditions, enunciated on 11 June, were translated in the Joint Statement on 12 June into just “complete,” with “verifiable” and “irreversible” noticeably absent.

In Trump’s own extended press meeting, his sense that he thought South Korea and Japan would “help them [North Korea] very greatly” finance the cost of denuclearization may have come as a surprise to South Korea and Japan. Japan may also have had misgivings about the agreement making no mention of Japanese abductees and seeming to deal only with long-range missiles that affect the United States but not the medium-range missiles that threaten Japan.

Trump's announcement that the United States would freeze joint military exercises with South Korea may have reassured the North, but it almost certainly worried elements in South Korea. This was exacerbated by Trump's characterization of these exercises as "provocations" to North Korea, and that he would "like to be able" to withdraw the 32,000 US troops currently based in South Korea. Japan, too, would feel the security implications of the removal of the US troops in South Korea, whereas China immediately welcomed the idea.

In effect, this pointed to a decoupling of the US shield for South Korea, and potentially for Japan in a US retreat from the Asian mainland. Any long-term weakening of the US presence on the Asian mainland would represent a significant strengthening of China's own long-term position in the region.

Of course, if North Korea goes down the denuclearization road, then South Korea, Japan and the United States will have benefited from the Kim-Trump summit; with North Korea able to look forward to economic reconstruction and regime survival.

North Korea comes out the clear winner, as the very holding of these summits have already generated unprecedented international legitimacy for the country, no longer a pariah state, as indicated in passing by Kim's amicable discussions with the Singapore government on 11 June. Kim Jong Un's two summits with China in March and April 2018 have also made it extremely unlikely that China would continue the sanctions that it had reluctantly agreed to in 2017.

A further fracturing on the sanctions front is represented by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit to North Korea on 31 March, which brought Putin's warmest regards to Kim, followed by a specific invitation on 4 June for Kim to meet Putin and attend the Eastern Economic Forum to be held in Vladivostok in September 2018. Consequently, even if Kim does not denuclearize, he can expect practical support from China and Russia. Regime survival is indicated in that scenario. Much of the US leverage has already gone. There lies the danger for Washington. The region waits, and either way, both North Korea and China smile. ■



Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of North Korea, receiving Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Pyongyang, May 31, 2018.