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The Singapore Summit and Regional Peace

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US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had a summit in Singapore on June 12th. As expected, there was much hype and plugging about how it resolved the North Korean nuclear issue and how it opened a new era of peace and stability in the region and the Korean Peninsula in particular. They signed an agreement, whereby President Trump pledged to provide security guarantee to North Korea while Chairman Kim reaffirmed his commitment to a complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Although it all sounded good and promising, in fact, there were no specifics (in terms of agenda, time-line, process, commitment to negotiate, etc) to achieve those good things—that is, denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula. There was no common understanding of what was meant by the term “denuclearization.”

President Trump declared on the day after the Singapore meeting, there is “no longer a nuclear threat from North Korea.” But we still do not know what such a bold assessment, President Trump’s evaluation, was based on. The press conferences given afterwards by those involved in the meeting including President Trump and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo do not shed much light on the substance of the summit, even as they claim and present only rosy picture about the issues and prospects.

We are not getting much detail about either the Singapore meeting or subsequent high-level meetings, for example, between Pompeo and Kim Yung-chul, the North Korean point man and negotiator. They say this was a first step, but we do not know what the next following steps are. Pompeo says their meetings are “promising.” We certainly do not see signs of concrete steps

or performances by either side that are needed for true denuclearization of North Korea.

But both Kim Jong-un (the North Korean regime) and President Trump (the United States) have a good reason to exaggerate the significance of the “agreement” and blow up the “achievement” of the summit.

It helps Trump to ease and divert his political difficulties at home and claim credit for progress on the North Korean nuclear issue on the one hand and Kim to seek the international acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear status quo and relaxation of international sanctions against North Korea on the other. President Moon Jae-in’s South Korean government would be only happy to emphasize what it pictures as the “peace momentum” and his contribution fostering such an atmosphere. It would be happy to see the North Korean nuclear status become less of a troubling issue that can cause military confrontation in and around the Korean Peninsula.

Beijing would be happy to see North Korea become more amenable to tackle the nuclear issue and to its persuasion that North Korea behave in a more acceptable way to the international community. It would also welcome the realization of what it was proposing as “double suspension” of North Korea’s nuclear and missile activities and U.S. military exercises with South Korea.

As far as South Korea (defined in terms of experts and political public, not necessarily the government which hopes to have a closer and cooperative relationship with the North, or the opinion polls which tend to reflect very shallow views) is concerned, I would generally classify the Korean views into

two categories. The first category of views is shared by those people who toe the government line that the Trump-Kim summit was the greatest breakthrough for peace on the Korean Peninsula, that it was the result of Kim Jong-un's and "strategic decision" to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue and concentrate on economic rehabilitation, and that it represented the fruit of the Moon Jae-in government's able and strenuous effort to bring peace to the Korean Peninsula.

They argue that the Singapore meeting opens up the likelihood of North and South Korea getting along well, become friendly, expand cooperation and exchanges, economic and otherwise, and of cooperating to build peace and peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. They say that critics of the U.S.-North Korean meeting are all getting it wrong. Actually, the best argument they can come up with the summit meeting is that "there were no losers at the Singapore summit." At least they don't have the temerity to say that, there are only "winners."

The views shared by people of the other category, mainly of critics, argue the following:

1. There was no agenda, timeline, methodology, or even agreed-upon definition of "denuclearization," complete or otherwise, related to the removal of nuclear weapons threat by North Korea. The lack of timeline was confirmed in the subsequent testimony of Michael Pompeo, the U.S. Secretary of State who attended the summit meeting.
2. There was no provision for either reporting on what North Korea has, how denuclearization or even freezing of nuclear activities would be either monitored or verified.

3. President Ronald Reagan's famous dictum, "trust but verify," was not followed as there was an excess of trust and remarkable lack of verification.
4. The summit meeting, including the signed agreement, was a "great success" only by unilateral assertion by President Trump, as it was quite deficient in substance or detail.
5. Excessive and unsubstantiated optimism is likely to result in unfulfilled expectations that will make eventual disappointment inevitable. It will only end up in weakening or relaxing the pressure—i.e., international sanctions regime, that will force North Korea to take steps to denuclearize or at least bring it to a negotiating table.
6. In his Press conference given after the summit meeting, President Trump said the following, which is quite telling. He said, he trusted the North Korean leader to live up to Kim's words in terms of the "comprehensive" agreement those two signed at the summit in Singapore.

President Donald Trump conceded that he could end up being wrong about North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's pledge to denuclearize — but also said he'd probably never admit it and would most likely find "some kind of an excuse" if it came to that. It is not only telling, but also sounds quite characteristic of Mr. Trump.

Regardless of the trustworthiness of his remarks, they are certainly far from being reassuring.

One positive consequence of the summit might be that we will get some respite, at least for the time being, from the threat of nuclear and missile testing and "fire and fury" as Mr. Trump had threatened earlier. The reason is that both

Trump and Kim Jong-un would want to keep alive the impression if not illusion that they have indeed started a process of peace-making. President Trump wants to take credit for removing the “war scare” that he himself instigated to foster.

I am personally uncomfortable with all those superlatives that were used to describe the Singapore summit, such as “establishing a terrific relationship between the leaders,” “there’s a special bond between the leaders,” “it was a great agreement,” and so on. Whether such expressions are used for suspense, or because of the lack of substance, they are not very helpful to understand what really was achieved and what really is in the agreement.

So, how does the Singapore summit, both the product and the result, as well as the process itself, will affect the security of each of the Northeast Asian countries and peace prospects in Northeast Asia as a whole?

First, the way President Trump, and by extension the United States, conducted the meeting and the negotiation does not give much confidence to other countries, whether an ally or an adversary, that the United States will behave like a reliable and stable protagonist, to work with or compete with. Its policy tends to be inconsistent and incoherent. If there is a strategy or roadmap, its existence does not seem to be obvious to the trained eyes. The U.S. president seems to make important decisions without necessary and close consultations with either its allies or even its own government departments in charge of the issues. Key members of the government express divergent views and policies. The Secretary of State finds Pyongyang-Washington meetings “productive.” The Defense Secretary says he sees no

such signs yet. Whether it is done deliberately and with a purpose, to confuse everyone else, or without a clear aim, the U.S.'s incoherent behavior affects negatively on its reliability and credibility. It is particularly problematic to its allies such as Japan and South Korea. They have to find a way to work together among themselves and with a key ally whose stability, sensibility and credibility can be in question.

Second, with regard to the mix of incentives and pressure (i.e., carrot and stick), as a way of inducing North Korea to denuclearize, the Singapore summit is bound to have the effect of weakening and relaxing the pressure component without strengthening the incentive elements. It also tends to make North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons a political fait accompli and weaken the international resolve to deal with the issue with focus and unity. For all the countries in Northeast Asia, including not only South Korea and Japan, but also China, the United States and even Russia, the maintenance and continued strengthening of nuclear and missile capability of North Korea will have a negative effect on their respective security and safety.

Third, the United States, should refrain from defining the North Korean nuclear problem principally as a U.S.-North Korean issue and engage in unilateralist behavior. It only helps Pyongyang, at a maximum, to seek to drive wedges between the other six-party talks countries including the United States, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia. At a minimum, it will be able to play one off against the others so that each of the Northeast Asian countries will be scrambling to define their respective roles and interests at the expense of working together for a common goal in a coordinated, coherent and cooperative way.

Unfortunately, the follow-up meetings between the United States and North Korea don't seem to be making much progress on denuclearization.

For some reason, President Trump places the blame for Pyongyang's recalcitrance on Beijing. But the main reason for Pyongyang's more assertive stance is attributable to the fact that Mr. Trump has given Pyongyang so much bargaining leverage by taking credit for the "great achievement" of the Singapore Summit. Trump has in effect placed himself at the mercy of Kim to prove whether his claim and boasting are justified. Then, there is Donald Trump's usual habit of looking for someone else to blame if something doesn't go right. A habit some call of "blame spraying."

It is not too late for the United States to change what appears to be a unilateralist approach in international relations. It needs to seek coordination and cooperation with other six-party countries. Such effort can include the revival of six-party talks which has been discontinued since 1995. But it will have to start with the U.S. rediscovering the use of multilateral coordination, supplemented by U.S.-North Korea negotiation. It is not enough to take credit for resolving the issue what has not been resolved. The United States and other countries still have to deal with the most urgent and serious problem in the region, which is the North Korean nuclear weapons.