

## The Hope and Promise of the Singapore Summit

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June 18, 2018



I usually tell people that if you visited Earth from Mars, looked down at the Korean Peninsula and saw it's divided and technically in a state of war since 1950, you'd say, "This has got to end."

In other words, this kind of situation is simply unsustainable, despite that many practitioners of international relations seem to believe it's possible to manage conflicts in perpetuity.



*Mark P. Barry*

Last Tuesday's summit in Singapore between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is at least notable for one important thing: it potentially changed the trajectory -- hopefully for the better in the long run -- of events on the Korean peninsula. This is because no sitting American president had ever met a North Korean leader. Previous presidents generally would not even consider the idea; Bill Clinton was the exception, but in the waning weeks of his presidency, he chose to focus on Middle East peace rather than Korean peace.

Ironically, Jimmy Carter was the first former U.S. president to meet his North Korean counterpart, Kim Il Sung, in 1994. He wisely observed at the time that "we should not ever avoid direct talks, direct conversations, direct discussions and negotiations with the main person in a despised, misunderstood or condemned society who could actually resolve the issue." To his credit, Carter brokered an agreement, concluded months later, that froze the North's fledgling nuclear program -- which endured until the early years of the Bush 43 administration.

This simple truth -- of the need for top-to-top communication and relationship-building -- was easily grasped by President Trump because it had been a key lesson of his years of business experience. Kim Jong Un knew he had to take advantage of the opportunity to meet the U.S. president -- the one person who could make fundamental foreign policy decisions without the encumbrance of a bureaucracy with a long and deep institutional memory.

It matters less what were the motivations of Trump and Kim; in both cases they were a mixture of the strategic and the selfish. But history shows that key figures, sometimes with unsavory motives, nonetheless produce changes, however unintended, whose impact endures for decades or even centuries (e.g., Henry VIII's disagreement with the Pope over marriage annulment led him to initiate the English Reformation, separating the Church of England from papal authority).

At this point, that's the best way Unificationists can look at the Singapore Summit. Something very fundamental has changed in the dynamics between the U.S. and North Korea -- as well as between the two Koreas weeks earlier -- that potentially can be far-reaching in the years and decades to come. We

may know better later this year -- and we may not. But surely the Korean proverb, "A good beginning is halfway to the goal," applies to this situation.

When did the trajectory of events surrounding the Korean Peninsula really begin to change? President Moon Jae-in's election in May 2017 is probably that starting point, though it occurred after his predecessor's impeachment months earlier. Within weeks, President Moon ventured to Washington to meet President Trump. They created a close, cohesive relationship, and Moon was careful to defer and give credit to the American leader.

Meanwhile, the death of an American student imprisoned in North Korea, Otto Warmbier, who had been returned home in a coma, deeply affected the American public and spurred Trump to focus more on the Korean issue. Although three ethnic Korean U.S. hostages remained in North Korea (released only this May), the death of someone so young had a penetrating impact upon Americans.

By August last year, Trump uttered his famous phrase that North Korea would "be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen" if it continued launching long-range missiles and testing nuclear weapons. Trump's condemnation of North Korea peaked in his address before the United Nations in September, where he said: "If [the United States] is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime."

While Trump's rhetoric was certainly taken seriously in North Korea, it would have been foolhardy for the U.S. to use such inflammatory statements as a tool of foreign policy if it were not for the probable establishment, with South Korean intervention, of backchannel communication with the North as early as August 2017. While public presidential rhetoric, including Tweets, increasingly demonized North Korea, the back channel, with then-CIA director Mike Pompeo, served to clarify U.S. intentions and assure the North the U.S. sought a viable means of defusing tensions. Pompeo would eventually meet Kim Jong Un twice, in March and May this year.

In September, North Korea detonated its most powerful nuclear weapon to date, its last nuclear test. Then in November, it tested its longest-range missile ever, demonstrating the capability to strike the U.S. mainland if it could successfully marry a nuclear warhead to the missile. From a purely technological point of view, North Korea's pace of technical achievement in weapons was astonishing. Tensions rose to the highest levels ever between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the means of punishing North Korea, pursued both by the United States and the international community, was to increase economic sanctions against it. What had previously made sanctions against North Korea less effective than those targeted at Iran and Russia was that China had not been very cooperative in sanctions implementation. China would always keep a lifeline open to North Korea, making international sanctions for the North somewhat manageable. However, once the United States began to target several small Chinese banks that performed financial services for North Korean state entities, preventing the banks from utilizing the American financial system, China began to enforce sanctions against the North as never before. Sanctions were the only viable tool any American president could use outside of military force. Despite that North Korea is the grandmaster of sanctions evasion, China's accession to the UN sanctions regime against the DPRK was unprecedented.

Tensions had reached a crescendo by the end of 2017. Many wondered, "Would 2018 see the outbreak of war between the U.S. and North Korea?" President Moon endeavored to avoid this at all costs, because those who would suffer would be the South Korean people themselves. Even a so-called "bloody nose" strike upon the North would likely be met with a massive artillery barrage upon the Seoul metropolitan area. Hundreds of thousands of civilians could be killed.

Then, on January 1, 2018, in his New Year's address, Kim Jong Un stated that his country's nuclear program had achieved its objectives and demonstrated to the world its capabilities. Now was the time to shift focus to the nation's economy and well-being of its people. Observers wondered whether this was simply rhetoric or a strategic decision that would be implemented.

In February, the 2018 Winter Olympics were held in South Korea and Kim Jong Un sent his sister, Kim Yo Jong, along with its titular number two leader to the Opening Ceremony. It was unprecedented for a member of the Kim family to visit the South. At the Closing Ceremony, the North sent Kim's Jong Un's right-hand man, Kim Yong Chol, and in both instances extensive meetings were held with President Moon and his core staff.

Shortly after the Winter Olympics, South Korea announced it would hold a summit meeting with the North in late April. Then, most unexpectedly, South Korea's national security advisor and intelligence chief rushed to the White House, met with President Trump, and communicated that Kim Jong Un was willing to hold a summit meeting with the U.S. president as soon as possible. Trump did not hesitate or even consult with his staff; he immediately accepted the invitation and stated he thought the summit could be held in late May or early June.

In late March, Kim Jong Un made a surprise visit to Beijing and met Chinese president Xi Jinping. It was the first time for Kim to meet a foreign leader and his first trip out of the country while in power. Until this point, North Korea's relationship with China under Kim Jong Un had considerably degraded compared to the time of his late father. What was especially notable were photos of the Beijing summit released by the Chinese showing Kim dutifully taking notes as Xi addressed him. These pictures were not shown in North Korea, but to China demonstrated that North Korea was again behaving more like a modern-day tributary state.



*Chairman Kim Jong Un shakes hands over the Military Demarcation Line at Panmunjom with President Moon Jae-in on April 27, 2018 (Blue House photo).*

On April 27, the third inter-Korean summit took place on the South Korean side of the demilitarized zone. Carried live on South Korean television, the hours of meetings produced the Panmunjom Declaration, in most respects a summary of preceding inter-Korean documents dating back to 1972. The most memorable moment was the handshake across the Military Demarcation Line by the two Korean leaders, followed by Kim crossing into the South. Moon then asked Kim, "So, when do I get to visit North Korea?" Kim took his hand and said, "Right now," escorting Moon to the northern side of the concrete divide. Earlier summits both occurred in Pyongyang, in 2000 and 2007. The fact Kim was willing to come to the South, albeit in the highly secure Joint Security Area of Panmunjom, was a significant step. Moon also gave Kim a USB stick containing materials on a "New Economic Map of the Korean Peninsula." The two leaders agreed to hold future inter-Korean summits, pursue continuing dialogue and explore avenues of cooperation.

In early May, Kim Jong Un made a surprise trip -- by air rather than train -- to Dalian, China, to meet again with the Xi Jinping. Now that a summit with Trump was imminent, Kim apparently wanted Chinese assurances they

would have North Korea's back if the summit were unsuccessful. Moreover, Kim surely sought Chinese assurances that they would ease sanctions enforcement if the summit succeeded.

Late that month, however, Trump canceled the summit set for June 12 in Singapore because of threatening North Korean Foreign Ministry statements, with one directed at Vice President Mike Pence. In hindsight, statements by both Pence and new National Security Advisor John Bolton, evoking the "Libya model's" applicability to the DPRK, riled the North. That's because under President Bush 43, Libya gave up its nascent nuclear program, then under President Obama, the U.S. and its allies aided the overthrow of Libya's longtime dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. Such analogies by U.S. officials were a nonstarter for the North.

However, Trump's letter to Kim was crafted so as to leave many openings for the summit to take place after all. Within two days, President Moon secretly met with Chairman Kim on the northern side of the DMZ, leading to Moon communicating to Trump that North Korea was eager for the summit to be held. This led to intensive working-level discussions between senior State Department officials and their North Korean counterparts which took place in the DMZ, as well as logistical discussions in Singapore between White House staff and Kim's secretariat. Quickly, enough progress was made for Trump to declare the Singapore Summit was back on for June 12.

On June 10, Kim Jong Un arrived in Singapore -- not by his North Korean jet but using an Air China 747 normally reserved for China's premier. The plane flew almost entirely through Chinese airspace such that China could guarantee the North Korean leader's security throughout the flight. On the night of June 11, Kim went on a sightseeing excursion through Singapore, including the Marina Bay Sands Hotel (owned by Trump backer Sheldon Adelson) whose three towers are topped by its SkyPark almost 60 stories high. Television coverage of Kim's motorcade traveling about Singapore was unprecedented and made available to the North Korean people within hours. Singapore's leaders repeatedly expressed their hope that its economic, technological and societal achievements might offer an example for North Korea.

The summit formally began at 9 am on June 12 with a handshake between the two leaders of adversary



nations, followed by 40 minutes of private conversation that only included translators. An expanded working session followed with senior members of each side's national security team. A working lunch then took place with Singaporean specialties served. The short summit concluded at 1:50 pm with the leaders signing a Joint Statement that was unusually broad and brief, but probably the most that could be achieved on short notice and without extensive further negotiations. Kim then departed for Pyongyang, while Trump held an hour-long news conference to assess the summit experience and outcome.



*A movie-trailer style video President Trump showed to Kim Jong Un at the Singapore Summit, called "A Story of Opportunity for North Korea." (Click speaker icon to unmute)*

The reaction of most press, most members of Congress, and most Asian affairs and security experts was of dismay and disappointment. Many alleged Trump was played and "had" by Kim. But others were cautiously optimistic: the Joint Statement was simply an agreement in principle and the only realistic outcome given the road leading to the summit.

The follow-up between the two countries will be critical in coming weeks and months, and the burden for the American side rests on the shoulders of Mike Pompeo and the State Department. Although Trump announced the U.S. would halt its two annual joint military exercises with the South, it is not an irreversible step, but an important interim concession to the North. However, historical DPRK diplomatic behavior always expects simultaneous concessions, reciprocal steps, and provision of promised benefits in a timely manner. The U.S. will have to carefully abide by its stated commitments to the North or risk a breach of what trust it has built thus far.



*North Korean subway riders read the front page of the June 13, 2018 edition of the main newspaper, Rodong Shinmun, covering the Singapore Summit.*

President Trump said he is willing to travel to Pyongyang at the appropriate time and would invite Kim to the White House also when appropriate. It's even possible Kim could come to the United Nations in September at its annual assembly of world leaders in New York (with Russia and China perhaps asking the Secretary General to invite him), deliver a speech, and then go to Washington to meet Trump at the White House. Meanwhile, it's expected that Chinese president Xi will visit Pyongyang in coming weeks, and Russian president Putin has invited Kim to meet him in Vladivostok in September.

Meanwhile, the North Korean public is astonished at what Kim has just achieved; making peace with its age-old enemy, the United States, was previously unthinkable. It may be just the beginning of huge psychological dislocations for the North Korean people, if Kim leads the way to normalizing relations with the U.S. and South Korea. How will the average North Korean adapt to new realities and ways of seeing the world? There is surely a role for the Unification Movement to play in this regard.

Do events of the past several months indicate new dynamics surrounding the Korean Peninsula which can produce regular inter-Korean cooperation, peace and stability in the Northeast Asian region, and the eventual reunification of Korea as an independent state? It's too early to say, but events such as we've just experienced have not occurred since the end of the Korean War in 1953, a war which was a forcible attempt by North Korea, China and the USSR to reunify the peninsula under communism.

Under its third-generation leadership, North Korea finds it cannot continue muddling through as it had in the past. From his view, Kim Jong Un, only 34, can potentially look forward to decades more of leadership. Perhaps -- just perhaps -- he realizes that without becoming the Deng Xiaoping of North Korea -- transforming his country and unleashing its full potential -- his country's future is very bleak. Kim certainly seeks his personal survival and continuity of his leadership in the North. But in our world, success is defined by an open system, unleashing the talents of your population and participating in mutually beneficial trade with the world's nations. That's the way to stay on top and be a winner.

Moreover, blood is thicker than water. The two Koreas know that Chinese pressure and its efforts to assert regional hegemony cannot be resisted individually in the long-term, especially if the U.S. decides to distance itself from the Asian region. Each Korea knows it must seek an accommodation with the other, and that in the long run a united Korea will not only be able to resist Chinese pressure, but can become a global powerhouse on its own accord based on the proven capabilities of the Korean people. The 1945 division of the Korean peninsula was an accident of history, and not intended to be permanent, but it lasted over 70 years because of the rise of global communism. That unity is destined to be restored, and Korea's independence as a unitary nation, which it has not known in over a century, may come to pass sooner than we expect.

That surely was Rev. Sun Myung Moon's goal during his lifetime. The events of last week lay a foundation for new unexpected events to occur that may take the Korean peninsula closer to that goal of a unified Korea which many of us could see in the years ahead.

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Photo at top: North Korean leader Kim Jong un and President Donald Trump sit down for private discussions at their Singapore summit on June 12 (White House photo).