GLOBAL 15.06.2018 | Mason Richey

The sizzling, fizzling Singapore summit swindle

How the 'ultimate deal maker' failed to extract any meaningful concessions from North Korea

The verdict's in: after weeks of media build up, the Singapore summit between US president Donald Trump and North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un was… underwhelming. This should not be a surprise, as Trump is at heart a swindler, a classic bait-and-switch artist obsessed with optics and ignorant of details. A joint statement by the two leaders includes woolly commitments to foster closer diplomatic ties, and to 'work towards' ridding the Korean Peninsula of nuclear weapons. However, it offers no indication as to how denuclearisation will be achieved.

The statement presents four points: (1) US-North Korean commitment to better relations leading to peace and prosperity, (2) US-North Korean efforts to create a 'peace regime' on the Korean peninsula, (3) re-affirmation of the 27 April Panmunjom Declaration, referencing obligations for North Korea to work toward denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, and (4) a clause on the repatriation of POW/MIA (prisoners of war/missing in action).

Rather than offering anything creative or new, the statement is basically a watered-down rehash of previous agreements from 2000 and 2005. The Panmunjom Declaration that preceded the summit had itself been vaguely worded, but its purpose was to create the diplomatic conditions for Trump and Kim to meet. Singapore was supposed to address the specifics.

They never came. In typical Trumpian fashion, we got all sizzle and no steak, a fizzled-out and farcical diplomatic dud. By merely restating the aims of Panmunjom, Trump and Kim not only failed to deliver on substance: they didn't even manage to kick the can down the road. The can is exactly where it was prior to the summit.

If the agreement has any practical value, it is merely in maintaining dialogue – in particular via US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. This

does temporarily eliminate the possibility of war – not something to sneeze at, although the war hype was largely due to Trump and his 'fire and fury,' so this amounts to thanking the arsonist for putting out your house fire. In any event, much of the détente atmosphere that the summit keeps alive could have been achieved without directly moving to a leader-level meeting. This would have kept the powder dry if such a meeting were deemed necessary in the future.

Trump made a huge error in failing to extract concessions for normalisation. The 'deal maker' ended up with no deal at all.

As published, the joint statement says almost nothing about issues that would have made the summit meaningful: a definition of denuclearisation, a timeline for action, a statement about North Korea's willingness to list its nuclear programme assets and sites, a statement on future arms-control verification in North Korea. It doesn't even broach the possibility of a 'freeze-for-freeze' on the two sides nuclear or missile programmes, or give any indication that North Korean might deposit some capabilities into third-party control.

The most important conclusion is ultimately this: the failure of Trump's senior-level sherpas to reach agreement with their North Korean counterparts on these substantive issues indicates that Pyongyang has no interest in the central concern of the US and international community: the maximum possible freeze, cap, or roll-back of North Korea's nuclear weapons and programme. Where we go from here is anyone's guess.

Mr Kim, ready for your close-up?

Regardless of the demerits of the joint declaration's substance, the summit was neither boring nor inconsequential. Con-artistry requires talent, showmanship, optics, the ability to sell sand in the desert and bread to the circus-goers. Trump, a specialist in spectacle, has these qualities in spades, and he deployed them to produce a theatricalbonhomie between himself and Kim that he has sold to his domestic constituents as a foreign policy win.

Even more consequential is the effect of the summit pageantry on Kim's reputation. North Korea's leader has returned to Pyongyang validated by his meeting with Trump as a near-peer equal, recognised as a leader controlling a functional nuclear arsenal, and legitimated both domestically and internationally for executing a strategy of defiance vis-à-vis the international rules-based order. Other dictators aspiring for nuclear weapons will have certainly taken note.

There is a cost to 'normalising' Kim, but perhaps one worth paying. His public appearance alongside the leader of the free world is distasteful more than disastrous. However, Trump made a huge error in failing to extract concessions for that normalisation. The 'deal maker' ended up with no deal at all.

Trump got his photo-op, Kim burnished his image, the circus moved on, and on matters of ultimate substance we are where we were before Singapore.

Moreover, Kim's rehabilitated image will now make it harder for Washington to return to coercive diplomacy vis-à-vis Pyongyang if the current diplomatic process fails when issues of substance can no longer be avoided.

Reality TV finale

The most significant moment of the Singapore summit happened after Kim's departure from the venue. Trump's press conference was a tour-de-force of ill-advised improvisation.

For a start, Trump referred to numerous concepts – including potential verification inspections – found nowhere in the summit joint statement, portending a differential understanding about an agreement that already barely deserves that moniker.

He then proceeded to denigrate South Korea as an alliance partner, describe US-South Korea joint military exercises as 'provocative' (the term North Korea prefers), and capitulate to Kim's apparent demand that the US and South Korea cease the exercises. It is not even clear that Trump gained any counterparty concessions for the latter, at best vaguely mentioning a North Korean promise to demolish a missile-engine testing facility.

Trump followed up by hinting he may reduce and withdraw the US military from the Korean peninsula. He floated both of these ideas without consulting South Korea or his own defence officials in advance. Reasonable people can disagree about the merits of Trump's proposals. However, the uncoordinated way he advanced them, and his failure to extract concrete progress from the North Koreans on denuclearisation, amounts to negotiation malpractice.

In the end, the world was suckered: Trump got his photo-op, Kim burnished his image, the circus moved on, and on matters of ultimate substance we are where we were before Singapore. Everything is still possible—both good and bad.



Mason Richey
Seoul

Mason Richey is associate professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), editor-in-chief of the *Journal of East Asian Affairs* and president of the Korea International Studies Association.