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Mark Fitzpatrick

Judged by any metric, the bare-bones agreement reached between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un on 12 June fell short. It did not define 'denuclearisation', it did not provide for meaningful deadlines to meet the goals announced, and it did not address any of the other challenges that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) poses to the world, to the region and to its own people.

In American vernacular, the Singapore Summit was a 'nothing burger'. The short, four-point joint statement said nothing about missiles, chemical and biological weapons, human-rights abuses, abductions or other issues of concern. Even the commitment to 'denuclearisation' was cast in terms of 'working towards' that goal.¹ Without timelines or milestones, this commitment was akin to the aspirational disarmament promise of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, something President Barack Obama famously said might not happen in his lifetime.²

By talking directly with Kim, Trump did achieve something unprecedented, but it was all in Kim's favour. Successive North Korean leaders have long aspired to meet American counterparts. Until now, that honour had been held in reserve as leverage for inducing significant compromises. In 2000, the North Korean leadership pleaded for president Bill Clinton to visit, but would not agree in advance to details on curbing its missile programme. Although Obama had entered office expressing a willingness to

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talk with enemies, he insisted on not rewarding provocations.³ Trump, by contrast, did not insist on anything tangible in exchange for meeting with Kim Jong-un.

North Korea's meagre concessions

The 396-word joint statement offered far less than was reached in previous agreements with North Korea. To be fair, it was supposed to mark only the beginning of a negotiation process. It thus should be compared not with final agreements reached with North Korea (such as the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks), but with statements from similar high-level meetings. But even compared with such statements – usefully summarised by arms-control expert Joshua Pollack⁴ – the joint statement was very thin gruel.

In the January 1992 joint declaration of South and North Korea on the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula, the two sides committed to ‘not test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons’, and not to possess nuclear-reprocessing or uranium-enrichment facilities.⁵ The first bilateral joint statement by North Korea and the US in June 1993 was only 239 words, but it included reference to verification in the form of a commitment to the ‘application of fullscope safeguards’.⁶ A US–DPRK joint communiqué issued at the end of a visit to the White House by leader Kim Jong-il’s special envoy, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, in October 2000 addressed missiles, not the nuclear programme, but included a DPRK commitment not to launch long-range missiles of any kind while talks continued.⁷ Although North Korea has held to such a moratorium for the past six and a half months, the Singapore Joint Statement omitted reference to it. The 2012 ‘Leap Day Deal’ included a moratorium commitment as well as verification of an enrichment moratorium by international inspectors.⁸

The Singapore Summit’s joint result also pales against the four-page ‘Joint Plan of Action’ reached in Geneva on 24 November 2013, which specified limits on Iran’s nuclear activity and the means for enhanced International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring, as well as goals for a comprehensive agreement, with a six-month deadline for negotiations (which was subsequently extended twice). That statement, of course, led to the 159-page

multiparty Iran nuclear deal, reached after two years of slogging negotiations, from which Trump unilaterally withdrew on 8 May. In contrast to the Singapore statement, the Geneva accord exceeded expectations in terms of specificity and concessions by the other side.⁹ For Trump to boast of a 'comprehensive' agreement with North Korea after having condemned and withdrawn from the much more balanced Iran deal is grossly hypocritical.

Other than working toward denuclearisation, Kim's only other commitment was to recover the remains of missing US troops from the Korean War. Trump lauded this as a victory, but, again, it is nothing new. A bilateral undertaking had been in place from 1990 to 2005, recovering 229 sets of remains, before secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld unilaterally ended the cooperative process. Resuming the recovery of remains, the costs for which have been borne by the US, is more of a concession by the US than one on North Korea's part.

In his post-summit press conference, Trump claimed that Kim had agreed to destroy a 'major missile engine testing site', which was subsequently identified as the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground.¹⁰ Whether this would be done under any type of international verification is unclear. When North Korea collapsed the tunnels at its Punggye-ri nuclear test site on 24 May, it invited foreign journalists to observe the destruction. No outside experts were invited, however. Without verification of the sort that should have been provided by the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization, unilateral destruction of nuclear and missile facilities destroys important forensic data and can turn out to be a propaganda stunt. On the basis of the small yield of the explosives used at the test site, US officials judged that the tunnels probably survived and could be reused.¹¹

Kim's one other pre-summit concession was to release three American citizens who had been imprisoned on the dubious grounds of engaging in 'hostile acts'. Trump heralded this concession as something Obama had failed to achieve, even though two of the three Americans had been detained on Trump's watch.¹² North Korea's pernicious practice of jailing US citizens to serve as bait included at least ten who were released on Obama's watch, without any compromises on Washington's part other than the dispatch to Pyongyang of current or former senior officials to pick up the prisoners.

America's real concessions

In exchange for these paltry North Korean concessions – a vague commitment to work toward denuclearisation, a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests not pledged in writing, incomplete destruction of the nuclear test site and return of hostages – Trump gave Kim seven substantially more precious prizes.

The first was to confer legitimacy on an odious, outcast regime. Trump accorded world-class status to the despot Kim, giving him exactly what he wanted by treating North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. Successful diplomacy often requires holding one's nose while engaging with murderous thugs, but there was no need for Trump to lavish praise on Kim, improbably calling him 'very talented', 'trustworthy' and 'loved by his people'. Who knew North Korean brainwashing could be so easy?

A second concession was to relieve the economic pressure on North Korea. Before the summit, Trump had said he no longer wanted to use the term 'maximum pressure' to describe US policy.¹³ Already, however, the global economic pressure that the US had led against Pyongyang had begun to crumble as China, in particular, saw the US–DPRK rapprochement as reason to relax implementation of UN sanctions that had begun to seriously bite.¹⁴

The strongest source of leverage over North Korea – the threat of a military strike – was also removed as a result of the rapprochement. Threatening to give Kim a 'bloody nose' was a misguided tactic that could have escalated to nuclear war, so taking it off the table is not a bad outcome. At the same time, doing so has to be counted as a major concession from the Trump administration's standpoint. Beyond that, Trump explicitly committed in the Joint Statement to provide security guarantees to North Korea. The US has offered security assurances before – in 1993, 2005 and 2012 – though what the new one means is unclear.

Trump's last three concessions were made unilaterally in his post-summit press conference. Blindsiding South Korean President Moon Jae-in and even his own secretary of defense, Trump announced that combined US–South Korea military exercises would be suspended while negotiations proceeded.¹⁵ Such a suspension makes sense, and has precedent in the

cancellation of the *Team Spirit* major exercise in 1992 and 1994–96. To do so without informing his ally is unforgivable, however, as was Trump's employment of DPRK propaganda to call them 'war games' and 'very provocative'. Kim would have been briefed about Trump's habit of echoing the last person he speaks with, but he must have been surprised to score such an easy goal.

Compounding the error in alliance management, Trump said he wanted to bring home US forces from the Korean Peninsula. A partial drawdown in the US troop presence would be a reasonable quid pro quo for a significant reduction of the North Korean military threat in a final deal. To offer it unilaterally up front, however, was to give away America's strongest card.

Finally, Trump undermined the international campaign to expose and stop North Korea's appalling human-rights abuses. Referring to the 'rough situation over there' concerning human rights, he granted North Korea moral equivalency by saying 'it is rough in a lot of places, not just there'. Let us hope that he is correct that the 100,000 or so prisoners in North Korea's gulag will be the 'great winners' of the Singapore Summit, as Trump claimed. But there was no explanation of how this could happen, only an implied expectation that North Korea would undergo political transformation as the result of a nuclear accord. It was not long ago that Trump repeatedly castigated Obama for holding out a comparable – though less outlandish – hope with respect to the Iran nuclear deal.

Better than nothing

Disappointingly thin though it is, the Singapore Summit outcome is certainly better than the alternative of escalating tensions and provocations that afflicted the Korean Peninsula earlier in the Trump administration. Trump and Kim have reduced the threat of war that each was responsible for heightening last year. Work on a peace treaty and the process of denuclearisation must now begin in earnest.

One ray of hope is to be found in the 42-minute video that North Korea released to its public celebrating Kim's successful summit in Singapore.¹⁶ Narrated with thunderous adoration by Ri Chun-hee, the 'pink-dress' newscaster famed for announcing North Korea's missile and nuclear tests,¹⁷

the video showed Kim receiving massive attention from Singaporean crowds and brotherly affection from the superpower. On the one hand, this reinforced Kim's self-image as an object of adoration. On the other hand, Trump's friendly demeanour and the photos of US and DPRK flags side by side tended to negate North Korea's image of the Yankee devil. The video may be evidence of a real shift in North Korea's posture. Unlike George Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in which Oceania changes its enemy from Eurasia to Eastasia and reverses its alliances overnight, Kim cannot simply erase 70 years of anti-American hatred. Yet autocracies do have an easier time at shifting gears.

North Korea- and Iran-watcher Barbara Slavin remarked at a 14 June discussion meeting at the IISS–Americas office that the montage of the Singapore Summit displayed in the video also sends a message to the North Korean public that 'there is a better life to be had', and that Kim is trying to give it to them by leveraging his nuclear assets. 'It's a remarkable shift for a country that has emphasized self-sacrifice', Slavin said.¹⁸ Like many other veteran arms-control practitioners and analysts, I have long held that no amount of economic benefit would induce North Korea to give up its nuclear arsenal. Trump may be right in principle to test this theory. In practice, however, he is subverting American alliances, values and bargaining power.

Notes

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