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Assessing the Singapore Summit—Two Years Later

On 12 June 2018, President Donald J. Trump and Kim Jong-Un met in Singapore for the first-ever meeting of a sitting US president with the leader of North Korea. The two men, to much fanfare, shook hands in front of a row of six American and six North Korean flags. The now iconic image of the Trump-Kim handshake heralded the possibility of a better future between the two nations. At the conclusion of the summit, Trump and Kim cast aside 70 years of mutual enmity between their two nations, jointly pledging "a new future" of peaceful relations and the "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."[1] President Trump hailed the summit as a triumph. "Everybody can now feel much safer than the day I took office," he declared on Twitter. "There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea."[2]

Two years later, that optimism is gone. A second Kim-Trump summit, held in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2019, ended abruptly without even a handshake, much less an agreement on how to move forward on denuclearization or progress on sanctions relief.[3] A few months later, the two leaders met once more—this time in the heavily fortified demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas—and agreed to restart negotiations.[4] But that meeting has since proved little more than a photo op. Working-level talks between the US and North Korea have stagnated. The last round of talks, held in October 2019 in Stockholm, Sweden, ended after only eight hours of discussion. The two sides were deadlocked over how much the US would lift sanctions in exchange for Kim's dismantling his main nuclear complex.[5] Since then, both countries have stepped back from diplomacy: the US imposed new sanctions while North Korea resumed short-range ballistic missile tests, continued to enrich uranium, and expanded the size of its nuclear arsenal.[6]

The last embers of optimism burned out on the second anniversary of the Singapore Summit. "Even a slim ray of optimism for peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula had faded away into a dark nightmare," said North Korea's foreign minister, Ri Son-gwon.[7] Having long threatened to "find a new way" if diplomacy with the US failed, Pyongyang has returned to its old playbook: ramping up tensions, exploiting loopholes in agreements, and buying time to advance its nuclear and missile arsenals in a dangerous game of brinksmanship.[8] For all the rhapsodizing about his re-

lationship with Kim—the praise of "beautiful letters" and the public musings that "we fell in love"—President Trump's efforts failed.[9] He made a series of concessions, including the unilateral cancellation of annual military exercises between the US and South Korea, but got very little in return.[10] Washington finds itself back where it started, but with North Korea now more nuclear capable and less isolated and its leader more self-assured.

The US can still learn a great deal from the events of the past two years. The diplomatic outreach to North Korea has exposed the limitations of personal diplomacy and the urgent need for the US to recalibrate its strategic objectives from denuclearization to limitations on the size and sophistication of the North's nuclear and missile arsenals. A comprehensive freeze is the best outcome at this point, but it will be harder to achieve after the string of failed diplomatic maneuvers. Washington and Pyongyang walked away from those talks convinced that "maximum pressure" works against the other. With the US and North Korea set to play a dangerous game of brinksmanship, the risks of miscalculation, inadvertent escalation, and war are now greater.

President Trump's personal diplomacy with Chairman Kim has done much to discredit the great man (or great woman) theory of history. During the 2016 presidential campaign, he extolled his "deal-making" skills, asking Americans to place their trust solely in him. Claiming that "I alone can fix" the foreign policy problems, he vowed to end the "international humiliation" and restore American prestige abroad.[11] Solving some of the toughest global challenges was simply a matter of striking deals with other world leaders. What mattered were the statesmen, not the structural forces shaping international politics or realpolitik calculations. Touting his experience negotiating business deals, the president claimed to know how to cultivate the kind of personal relationships that would resolve foreign policy disputes on terms more favorable to the US and elevate America's global standing in the process.[12] That personalized approach to diplomacy has been on full display in his dealings with the North Korean leader. Since the start of diplomatic outreach to Pyongyang in 2018, Trump has touted his personal relationship with Kim, stating, "I have a good chemistry with him." The president claimed the relationship was responsible for a reduction in the North Korean threat to the US and its allies. "Look at the horrible threats that were made," Trump argued. "No more threats . . . No missiles."[13] The president also credited his strong personal rapport with Kim for averting a war on the Korean Peninsula. He asserted, "Many good conversations with North Korea—it is going well. . . . If not for me, we would now be at War with North Korea!"[14]

But those claims do not stand up to scrutiny. For one, President Trump seems to forget that he was the one who ramped up tensions with Pyongyang, famously calling Kim "Rocket Man" and threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea in an address to the United Nations General Assembly. What personal diplomacy accomplished was a reprieve from the tit-for-tat insults and mutual threats of preemptive strikes and nuclear war. Beyond that, the "bromance" produced meager results. North Korea returned remains of 55 US service members killed during the war, but 450 sets of remains—many of them later found not to be Americans—have been sent back in previous administrations.[15] Pyongyang reportedly still has the remains of hundreds more US service members in its storage facilities, kept as bargaining chips in future negotiations.[16] The North released three American detainees from its custody, but it has made similar gestures in the past, including 11 Americans freed during the Obama administration.[17]

Nor can the president take credit for Kim's moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests. On 21 April 2018, Kim declared that his country would cease intercontinental ballistic missile and nuclear tests in the lead-up to the Singapore Summit. Kim's stated reason was entirely strategic, not personal: the North had "finished its mission." He added, "We no longer need any nuclear test or test launches of intermediate and intercontinental range ballistic missiles."[18] In other words, the North Korean leader was now confident enough in his nuclear and long-range missile arsenals so as to make future testing of limited value. In coercion parlance, it constituted a "cheap signal."[19] Kim has incurred few costs with his self-imposed testing pause, rendering it of little use in assessing whether his commitment to a diplomatic solution was credible or a bluff.

Despite heaping praise on Kim for being a "great leader" and "very smart guy," President Trump was not able to parlay his personal relationship with Kim into a diplomatic breakthrough.[20] On 4 May 2019, two months after the failed Hanoi Summit, North Korea fired a new type of solid-fuel, short-range ballistic missile and tested two separate multiple launch systems. Since then, North Korea has conducted some 20 short-range missile tests.[21] These tests did not break any promises made to the Trump administration since Singapore. However, the real significance lay in what they tell us about the limits of personal diplomacy. North Korea initiated missile tests in direct response to the US and South Korea's start of a combined military exercise, called Dong Maeng—a scaled-back exercise compared to the Foal Eagle and Key Resolve exercises carried out in previous years. Despite the reduced scope of Dong Maeng, North Korea perceived the exercise as threatening and a violation of the joint agree-

ment signed with the US. "They seriously rattled us," Kim admitted, and in his view, the exercise was evidence of Washington's "open hostile policy" toward Pyongyang. North Korea responded to the exercise with "corresponding acts"—missile tests calibrated to match the scope of allied drills.[22] In short, Kim's personal rapport with the president held little sway in North Korea's strategic calculations.

If President Trump thought he could translate his personal relationship with Kim into a comprehensive nuclear deal, he was sorely mistaken. The efforts did not even end low-level provocations, and North Korea stated as much. Foreign Ministry adviser Kim Kye Gwan admitted his country's leader has "good personal feelings about President Trump" but cautioned that "they are, in the true sense of the word, 'personal.'"[23] Warm personal feelings are not enough to resolve the nuclear standoff between the two countries.

Trump is not the first US president to forge close bonds with foreign leaders. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill attempted to foster a strong personal relationship during the Second World War, meeting in person nine times, sending each other gifts and birthday greetings, and exchanging personal letters.[24] To be sure, the camaraderie between Roosevelt and Churchill helped in maintaining alliance cohesion during the war, but it could not settle their differences. Each pursued his country's definition of its national interests, allies or not.[25] They would have likely identified with the sentiments of President Richard Nixon, who observed, "There is an intangible factor which does not affect the relations between nations. . . . When there is trust between men who are leaders of nations, there is a better chance to settle differences than when there is no trust."[26] Nixon harbored no great illusions about the shortcomings of personal diplomacy. "A smile or a handshake or an exchange of toasts or gifts or visits," he remarked, "will not by themselves have effect where there are great differences."[27]

That is the case with North Korea today. President Trump's trademark personal diplomacy did not fail because he and Kim did not like each other. Rather, Kim operated under the structural constraints and limitations imposed on his country's foreign policy by its place in the international system. In this realpolitik world, he could not do personal favors for the American president when bargaining over his country's nuclear program. Given the enormous strategic consequences, he simply could not accept a deal against his country's national interests, even if he might like the man seated across from him at the negotiating table.

In clarifying each country's notion of its national interests, strategic preferences, and bargaining positions, the diplomatic process has offered a valuable lesson.[28] If Washington learns anything from the past two years, it should be to give up the illusion it could ever provide Pyongyang with sufficient incentives to denuclearize. For the impoverished country, nuclear weapons—and a credible delivery capability—are the best means to ensure survival and deter a US attack. As Vipin Narang argues, North Korea has most likely adopted a nuclear strategy of asymmetric escalation—threatening to use short-range nuclear weapons early in a military conflict against the US to degrade a conventional attack while retaining long-range nuclear missiles to deter nuclear retaliation by Washington. Given its conventional inferiority, Pyongyang would likely use nuclear weapons first to damage US and allied military bases in South Korea, Japan, and Guam for a chance to slow or halt a US attack. [29] Thus, having a credible nuclear weapons capability is inextricably linked to North Korean survival.

Beyond that, nuclear weapons also advance other long-standing North Korean aims, such as weakening US alliances with Japan and South Korea, preserving its strategic independence from China, and acquiring international prestige and recognition.[30] After all, it was Kim's nuclear and missile weapons programs that led to direct negotiations with a sitting American president—a feat neither his father nor grandfather could claim.[31] It is not hard to see why the Kim regime would never surrender its nuclear capabilities. No deal could ever offer the regime sufficient security guarantees or adequate compensation for the loss of its nuclear standing.

In Singapore, Kim and Trump agreed to "work towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." However, *denuclearization* is a term of art, subject to each side's interpretation of its precise meaning. For Washington, it meant the North would eventually hand over its nuclear weapons and missile systems and allow international inspectors into the country to monitor compliance. Denuclearization was shorthand for "complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization" (CVID). To Pyongyang, it meant something else altogether. North Korea interpreted the phrase to mean the eventual end of the US military alliance with South Korea—including the US provision of a nuclear umbrella—and, more broadly, global nuclear disarmament.[32] The vague wording of the Singapore joint declaration allowed Trump and Kim to paper over those differences, as neither leader committed to taking concrete actions on denuclearization.

It was hardly surprising, then, that Washington and Pyongyang found themselves at odds when they attempted to turn that vague pledge into substantive steps toward denuclearization. North Korea has stuck stub-

bornly to the same negotiating position, which rejects nuclear reversal out of hand. Similarly, the Trump administration has doubled down on the goal of complete denuclearization. Following the collapse of the Hanoi Summit, a senior official in the Trump administration insisted that "nobody in the administration advocates a step-by-step approach." "In all cases," he added, "the expectation is a complete denuclearization of North Korea as a condition for all the other steps."[33] In response, North Korea accused the Trump administration of advancing a "unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization."[34]

On the second anniversary of the Singapore Summit, Pyongyang complained that Washington continues to make "nonsensical remarks that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is still a secure goal of the US" and suggested it would expand its nuclear weapons program in response.[35] Put simply, North Korea has repeatedly told the US that it is a nuclear power, and it has no intention of going back. Should Washington nevertheless persist with its ill-conceived pursuit of denuclearization, it will only meet with failure. Whereas the US goal of denuclearization once required discouraging the North Koreans from acquiring nuclear weapons, it now requires persuading them to reverse course and relinquish existing capabilities—a much greater task. What was once a situation of deterrence has turned into one of compellence. The latter is harder because Pyongyang would have to publicly give way to Washington's demands even though it would risk regime survival, loss of face, and damage to its international reputation.[36] The US thus needs to recalibrate its expectations about what it can hope to accomplish with diplomatic negotiations. It may *want* to denuclearize the country, but what does it *need* to live with a nuclear North Korea? It is a question that needs an urgent answer.

Each day that passes without an agreement is one that gives North Korea more time to expand its nuclear programs and evade international sanctions.[37] In the two years since the Singapore Summit, Pyongyang has amassed enough fuel for about 20 additional nuclear weapons.[38] Gen John E. Hyten, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently warned, "North Korea has been building new missiles, new capabilities, [and] new weapons as fast as anybody on the planet."[39] At the same time, North Korea has revitalized its relationship with China and Russia, both of which have weakened sanctions and aided Pyongyang's illicit commerce.[40] North Korea's strategic position is better now than it was when Kim and Trump first met in Singapore and continues to improve, thus increasing its leverage in future negotiations. Put simply, time favors North Korea, not the United States.

Accepting these strategic realities, the US urgently needs not only to recalibrate its negotiating position but also to shift its objective—from denuclearization to limiting the size and sophistication of North Korea's nuclear missile arsenals. In pursuing a comprehensive freeze, the US should prioritize no further development, production, or testing of miniaturized thermonuclear weapons, solid-fuel missiles, long-range ballistic missiles, and their launch platforms.[41] In addition, the US should aim to rein in the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology and know-how from North Korea to other countries—a pressing goal given its history of assisting Syria with its chemical weapons program and a suspected nuclear reactor that Israel destroyed in 2006.[42]

Importantly, a comprehensive freeze appears to fall within the realm of possibility. At the start of the year, Kim stated that "the scope and depth of bolstering our deterrent will be properly coordinated depending on the US future attitude" toward his country. This indicates that Kim might be willing to put future development of his nuclear and missile arsenals on the negotiating table, but not existing capabilities. Of course, Pyongyang will want sanctions relief in return. But trading sanctions relief for a comprehensive freeze is the best the US can expect to achieve. The big deal the Trump administration sought is certainly dead, but diplomacy still offers a pathway for constraining, even if not eliminating, the North's nuclear and missile capabilities.

Unfortunately, there is a real danger that such an agreement will not come to pass. Both Washington and Pyongyang seem to have walked away from the summits with the strengthened belief that "maximum pressure" is effective. To many in Washington, the fact that Kim prioritized sanctions relief in his talks with Trump reinforces that the maximum pressure campaign—the escalating series of sanctions and twitter threats—had worked to bring Kim to the negotiating table.[43] A Washington think tank with close ties to the Trump administration has called for a "maximum pressure 2.0" campaign against North Korea.[44] Likewise, the North Koreans seem to have taken away that provocation, demands, and intransigence are enough to soften the US negotiating position. North Korean missile tests serve to remind Washington that Pyongyang can quickly ramp up the pressure if diplomacy fails to deliver some tangible sanctions relief.[45] There is a real danger that both countries will not moderate but double down on their hardline policies, increasing the risk of war. SSQ

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