The Road Ahead to Denuclearize the Korean Peninsula

Mel Gurtov
Was Trump’s true Singapore summit agenda to cool North Korea tensions to gain space to launch a harsher policy on Iran?

Philip Zelikow
An exclusive focus on denuclearization is fraught with difficulties, so how should Korean Peninsula peace efforts be pursued?

Rajaram Panda
After the summits, the reality. The road ahead, if it ever leads to denuclearization and a peace regime, will be a long and hard one.
US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's summit meeting on North Korea's nuclear weapons and his administration's reversal of the multilateral nuclear deal with Iran negotiated under former President Barack Obama are being treated as separate matters. In this article, I suggest that the two events are related. Trump cares far more about bringing Iran to heel than creating a lasting nuclear deal with North Korea. But he may well be using the appearance of engaging North Korea to buy time for pressuring Iran. Critics on both the right and left have condemned Trump's vacuous agreement with Kim Jong Un, either for giving away too much or for not accomplishing anything of substance. The critics make good points, but the connection with Trump's Iran policy has yet to be brought out.

SINGAPORE CHARADE

“Peace and prosperity,” “lasting and stable peace,” “peace regime,” “denuclearization,” “new US-DPRK relations” — these fine words and phrases dominate the joint statement by Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un issued following their June 12 summit meeting in Singapore. Yet, it’s difficult to describe in a concrete way what they actually agreed to do. The joint statement is all helpfulness, similar to the tone but without the substance of the Pyongyang Declaration between Kim Jong Un and South Korea's President Moon Jae-in. The Trump-Kim statement has nothing solid to say about denuclearization, a Korean peace regime, normalization of US-North Korea relations, economic or military incentives, verification of promises and schedules for implementation.

The actual conversation between Trump and Kim lasted less than 30 minutes and took place in secret, with only interpreters present. This is where the trouble begins: We don't know if any real agreement was reached, and without the details, contrary claims are bound to emerge about who promised what. Shortly after the summit, North Korean state media said Trump promised to ease sanctions and had accepted denuclearization “step by step,” whereas Trump insisted that sanctions will continue and never said he had agreed to a step-by-step procedure. That debate continues unresolved. Trump said US military exercises will be suspended — Ulchi Freedom Guardian, scheduled for August, has already been cancelled — but surely, many kinds of small-scale joint exercises with South Korea’s military will go on. And what about Kim's promise of denuclearization? Does it apply to US nuclear-capable ships and planes in East Asia that comprise extended deterrence? Does it stop research and development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles? Will “denuclearization” mean anything beyond a hoped-for goal?

The joint statement is thus far good for critics of Trump, myself included. Yet I have to acknowledge that for all the weaknesses not only of the statement but also of Trump’s entire approach to dealing with North Korea — the sanctions, the threats, the boasts, the ignoring of experts, the false claims about previous administrations’ policies, the insensitivity to South Korean and Japanese interests — in the end we are better off having had the summit than not. Surely, no one wants to return to trading threats and insults, with the use of force that in the extreme could include nuclear weapons. Still, the summit was more a photo-op than a peace building project. Some observers believe, with good reason, that Kim Jong Un outfoxed Trump — elevating North Korea’s international standing, obtaining a suspension of US military exercises and gaining sanctions relief from China and, surreptitiously, from Russia, in exchange for a repetition of a previous North Korean promises to denuclearize. At some point, Trump will have the monumental job of convincing Americans, including many in his party, that the Singapore summit solved the problem of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and that his “terrific relationship” with Kim is paying off, not just on the nuclear issue but also with regard to North-South relations, North Korea’s missiles and cyber war capabilities and repression of human rights. Otherwise, his gamble will have failed and he will look like a fool for having tried. As he acknowledged after the summit, “I think he’s [Kim] going to do these things. I may be wrong. Kim, I mean, I may stand before you in six months and say, ‘Hey, I was wrong.’ I don’t know that I’ll ever admit that, but I’ll find some kind of an excuse.” Of course he will.

POST-SUMMIT QUESTIONS

Meantime, and predictably, both sides at the Singapore summit have claimed victory. Kim Jong Un, having shared the stage with Trump, can say that North Korea is now recognized de facto as a nuclear-weapons state, with its arsenal of perhaps 60 weapons intact. Trump can claim, as he tweeted on June 13, that “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea,” although he notified Congress less than two weeks later, in justifying the continuation of economic sanctions, that North Korea’s “actions and policies of the Government of North Korea continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat” to the US. Both men can claim to be great negotiators and just great guys — as Trump actually did say of Kim.

As of September, however, the nuclear issue and the process for bringing about normal relations between the US and North Korea remained...
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This was astounding because the statement came amidst US intelligence reports that North Korea continues to work on nuclear and missile improvements, including a new long-range missile and production of more fissile material.

THE IRAN CONNECTION

Prior to the Trump-Kim summit, the conventional wisdom was that overturning the Iran deal would make dealing with North Korea much harder for Trump. Iran actually warned the North Koreans not to trust Trump. But as the summit approached, I came to a different conclusion: Trump would want to put the North Korea situation on the back burner for a while in order to prepare for more forcibly confronting Iran. The North Koreans may even have sensed that, and took advantage by pushing for a final statement bereft of details.

What might have been Trump’s calculation? For his own political and personal reasons, protecting Israel and Saudi Arabia is much more important to him and his far-right supporters than protecting South Korea and Japan. As he sees it — judging from remarks during and since his presidential campaign — the South Koreans and the Japanese are in a position to do a great deal more for their own security. They should be paying more for US military protection, and South Korea should be preparing for the exit of US troops. Japan and South Korea should also be buying more American weapons and rectifying their trade surpluses with the US. (Until they do, Japan will not be exempted from the US sanctions on Iran that affect oil imports. South Korea and the US reached a new trade agreement in March that was quite favorable to US auto and steel makers.) Should North Korea begin denuclearizing, Trump insists that South, Japan, and other countries will contribute all the aid necessary for North Korea’s economic development. If South Korea and Japan were to decide to go nuclear themselves, that might be just fine with Trump; it would enable him to end the US commitment to extended deterrence.

Weakening, if not jettisoning, traditional US alliances has become a central element of Trump’s foreign policy. He made his priorities clear when, within one week, he turned his back on the G-7 group and personally assailed Canada’s prime minister (supposedly in order not to appear weak at the Singapore Summit) while making promises to Kim Jong Un that left the South Koreans and the Japanese out on a limb.

Encouraging Japan to develop a “normal” military role in East Asia and leaving South Korea to find a new comfort zone with North Korea would free Trump to focus on his much higher priority, namely, providing whatever the Israelis and Saudis want to isolate and destabilize Iran.

Starting well before Trump’s election and continuing to the present, the Israelis targeted him as their ticket to combating Iran. Obama’s bitter relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu, his criticisms of Saudi Arabia and his determination to conclude a nuclear deal with Tehran gave the Israelis reason to hope that they might ally with the Saudis as well as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in confronting Iran. Personal ties between Israeli officials and Trump’s team, and money from the UAE and Qatar that apparently was funneled into Trump’s campaign, facilitated infiltrating and influencing a very inexperienced new administration. By the time Trump took office, policies favorable to Israel and its Arab friends were top priorities.

This can be seen in Trump’s decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem and declaring acceptance of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital; withdrawal of the US from the UN Human Rights Council to protest alleged bias toward Israel; US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and support of its intensified bombing in Yemen; Trump’s failure to advance any serious peace plan that would accommodate Palestinian concerns; his siding with Saudi Arabia in its dispute with Qatar; the

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5 Pressed by a reporter on the “really bad things” Kim has done, Trump was dismissive: “Yeah, but so have a lot of other people done really bad things. I could go through a lot of nations where a lot of bad things were done.” www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/3/jonathan-trump-kim-jong-un-fox-news-human-rights.
6 Trump claims he raised with Kim the issue of human rights in North Korea, but we’ll never know. The special rapporteur, Tomás Ojea Quintana, noted that once again “human rights is seen as an inconvenience at a delicate moment.” He also reported that North Korea had “refused to engage” with him on human rights. UN Human Rights, July 10, 2018, www.unhchr.ch/EN/NewsEvent/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23350&Lang=EN.
7 On this background, see Adam Entous, “The Enemy of My Enemy,” The New Yorker, June 18, 2018.
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**The US Threat to Iran**

On May 21, Pompeo addressed Iran policy in the comfort of the right-wing Heritage Foundation. One could hear the cheers all the way from Tel Aviv and Riyadh. Far from offering a reasonable alternative strategy for dealing with Iran's nuclear capability, however, Pompeo threatened regime change and made impossible demands on Iran that could lead to war. Following is an analysis of the key points of his speech.

**The Threat:** Very much in the spirit of “maximum pressure” on North Korea, Pompeo declared: “The Iranian regime should know that this is just the beginning. After our sanctions come into full force, it will be battling to keep its economy alive. Iran will be forced to make a choice — either fight to keep its economy of life support at home or keep squandering precious wealth on fights abroad. It will not have the resources to do both.” What Pompeo did not explain is how, in the words of the European Union’s foreign affairs specialist, “walking away from the JCPOA [the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the official name of the nuclear deal] has made or will make the region safer from the threat of nuclear proliferation or how it puts us in a better position to influence Iran’s conduct in areas outside the scope of JCPOA. There is no alternative to the JCPOA.”

**The Objective is Regime Change:** “The West often treats President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif as apart from the regime’s unwise, terrorist and malign behaviors. Yet, Rouhani and Zarif are your elected leaders. Are they not the most responsible for your economic struggles? Are these two not responsible for wasting Iranian lives through the Middle East? Is it worth the Iranian people considering?” To which Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif tweeted that the US position is “merely a regression to old habits: imprisoned by delusions & failed policies — dictated by corrupt Special Interests — it repeats the same wrong choices and will thus reap the same ill rewards. Iran, meanwhile, is working with partners for post-US JCPOA solutions.”

**The Oversell:** “We will ensure freedom of navigation on the waters in the region. We will work to prevent and counteract any Iranian malign cyber activity. We will track down Iranian operatives and their Hezbollah proxies operating around the world and crush them. Iran will never again have carte blanche to dominate the Middle East.” Really? “Dominate the Middle East?” Sounds like a version of the old yellow peril argument.

**The Impossible Demands:** Pompeo listed 12 demands (see the box opposite) and gave every indication that the list is “all or nothing.” There is no chance Iran will meet any of the demands, which are non-negotiable and amount to Iran ceding control of its national security policy to the US.
In any case, the list is a throwaway designed to rationalize deeper sanctions and a hoped-for disruption of Iran society. More recently, Pompeo mentioned three conditions for engaging Iran: They should “demonstrate a commitment to make fundamental changes in how they treat their own people, reduce their malign behavior,” and “enter into a nuclear agreement that actually prevents proliferation.” But these conditions are equally disincentives for negotiations. Thus, European allies are discussing ways to get around the US sanctions, and Iran’s decision on going nuclear is on hold, with hardliners around the ayatollah reportedly pressing him to go ahead.

CONCLUSION

Trump is correct to say that getting to denuclearization is a lengthy “process” — a word he used quite a bit after meeting with Kim Jong-chol, Kim Jong Un’s personal representative, ahead of the summit, on June 1. But the process itself should have preceded the summit, with diplomatic engagement paving the way to agreement on step-by-step de-escalation of tensions, time points for establishing diplomatic relations and verification of nuclear weapons reduction or removal. The absence of a process, the hastiness of a vague joint statement, and the subsequent exchanges of polite letters between Trump and Kim might suggest carelessness, a desire only for a photo-op and an ego-satisfying place in history — or that Trump really is convinced he has neutralized the North Korean threat and can safely turn to dealing with Iran.

Trump’s mention on July 30 of direct talks with Iran without preconditions was not only unexpected; it was contrary to Pompeo’s outline of three conditions. “Anytime they want,” Trump said, adding, “I don’t know that they’re ready yet. They’re having a hard time right now.” Indeed they are: protests against harsh economic conditions are taking place all over Iran, in contrast with sanctions on North Korea that cannot have the same effect. On Aug. 6, the US made life even more difficult for Iran’s middle class and major enterprises when it renewed sanctions and penalties against European and other companies that do business with it. John Bolton, speaking in Israel in August, vowed that sanctions would bring Iran’s oil exports to zero. He distinguished “maximum pressure” on Iran from a policy of regime change. To Tehran, that’s a distinction without a difference, and one more likely to lead to further mischief in neighboring countries than to acceding to US threats.

In a nutshell, Trump is all in when it comes to currying favor with Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman. With North Korea, Trump has limited leverage, evidenced by his blaming China for deciding on Aug. 24 to cancel Pompeo’s scheduled fourth visit to Pyongyang.Trump cited lack of “sufficient progress” in denuclearization, but sent Kim Jong-un good wishes. With Iran, on the other hand, Trump has Israel and Saudi Arabia as proxies for carrying out regime change. The North Korea nuclear issue is far from settled and ripe for misunderstanding, and the opportunity Obama created with the nuclear deal with Iran to find common ground on other Middle East issues has been squandered. These twin failures spell big trouble ahead, and the only thing stopping Trump from taking more decisive steps is his vulnerability as the special counsel’s investigation of ties to Russia continue.

Mel Gurtov is Professor Emeritus, Portland State University (Oregon); Senior Editor, Asian Perspective; author most recently of Engaging Adversaries: Peacemaking and Diplomacy in the Human Interest (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). He blogs at https://melgurtov.com.