Summit Diplomacy in Asia

Tested Formulas, Fresh Challenges

The potential of summit diplomacy to break deadlocks in seemingly intractable problems in international relations was on full display earlier this year, with summits between the leaders of South Korea and North Korea, and the historic summit in June between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, reversing, for now, what seemed to be a collision course between Washington and Pyongyang. The hard work, however, lies ahead.

ESSAYS BY
Introduction 8
Richard Feinberg & Stephan Haggard 10
Bridget L. Coggins 18
Jeffrey Lewis 24
Kuyoun Chung 30
Chae-Jin Lee 36
Toshihide Sōeya 42
**After Singapore, Can Sizzle Be Replaced With Steak?**

By Bridget L. Coggins

The unprecedented and unorthodox Singapore summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un held promise for a breakthrough in the US-North Korea conflict. But the same interaction of exceptional personalities that made it possible has also served to limit post-summit engagement and preclude quick, tangible US security gains.

Fortunately, the two leaders are unlikely to return to their pre-summit crisis postures, thus lowering the stakes for the anticipated second summit, writes Bridget L. Coggins. But the lack of follow-through on the first raises doubts about the wider utility of the enterprise.

WHAT CAN face-to-face diplomacy between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un achieve? It is wisest not to expect a revolutionary change in Trump’s approach and instead for him to play to his strengths: ceremony and personal relationships. On substance, the South Korean-led process should be allowed to take the lead going forward; President Moon Jae-in’s approach has been more in line with diplomatic orthodoxy and is therefore most likely to receive broad international support. Further, unlike the Trump-Kim bilateral, the North-South process has already achieved meaningful gains. If Moon’s approach is given more latitude, the United States must compromise on its demand for “denuclearization first.” But with greater allied co-operation through the newly established US-South Korea working-level group, progress on both countries’ security priorities can be made.

**SUMMIT ORTHODOXY**

According to the received wisdom, a successful summit is one in which every detail is planned in advance and there are few surprises. To paraphrase Goldgeier and Saunders, “good foreign policy is boring.” The stakes are high when leaders take time to publicly meet face to face, with their reputations on the line, and control minimizes risk. In any country with an influential bureaucracy, the preparatory actions behind the scenes offer the relevant agencies an opportunity to weigh in on style and substance. Typically, this generates agreements that are precise and moderate rather than broad and bold. But once the parameters have been vetted, widespread legitimacy has been built around the summit outcomes.

There is room for true leadership during a summit, however, offering individual personalities and ideas a chance to interact in real time. In the room, individuals can make agreements bigger than those anticipated; they may bargain and win additional unforeseen concessions; and they may cultivate or exploit personal relationships.

This is particularly the case when they have strong institutional authority. Kim, a hereditary dictator whose status is regarded as god-like within the North Korean system, is at the high end of the global distribution of authority. Trump is not a dictator, but his party’s hold on both the House of Representatives and Senate — at least until the House returns to Democratic control in January — served to empower him institutionally.

Leaders may also matter more in novel, crisis situations. Though North Korea watchers bemoan the “Groundhog Day” quality of the on-again-off-again negotiations on the peninsula, North Korean nuclear and missile development advanced at a rapid pace last year, as did escalatory rhetoric from both sides. The circumstances unsettled the countries’ enduring stalemate and — however unintentionally — made a personal reconciliation and summit possible, unthinkable only months before.

Unfortunately, knowing that conditions are right for Kim and Trump to make history does not provide guidance on the direction of their influence. Was the Singapore summit a portent of things to come for US-North Korea relations and wider Korean peace, or is it backsliding and a volatile end to the status quo more likely?

**THE TRUMP APPROACH**

President Barack Obama cautioned President-elect Trump that North Korea would be one of 2017’s most pressing, complicated foreign-policy challenges. He probably hoped that communicating the gravity of the situation would encourage his successor to redouble US efforts, dedicating more attention and resources to the problem.

That didn’t happen. Instead, many key diplomatic posts remained (and remain) vacant, and those that were filled were often staffed by interim personnel and former members of the Obama administration. Trump has also repeatedly questioned the value of the South Korean alliance and troop levels there. And he has argued that trade relations disproportionately favored South Korea. These were hardly signs that he understood the complex, interdependent history of the North Korean weapons program and the US-South Korean relationship.

Not only were new personnel not dedicated to Korea early on, Trump also upended the summit orthodoxy outlined above. The president is interested in big, splashy events and personal politics, and he did seize the opportunity for a summit in a timely fashion. But he has been unwilling — or unable — to convene the robust, reliable, working-level efforts that are necessary to secure commitments from North Korea. Few individuals were included in the summit preparation and the president’s own remarks suggest that he dedicated little time to understanding the problem or stakes before this. Even the senior negotiating team was pulled together mere weeks in advance of Singapore.

**THE SINGAPORE AGREEMENT**

Going into the summit, which only days before had been rescheduled after it was canceled on a whim, few knew what to expect. Little had been decided in advance and much would depend on the decisions Trump and Kim made in the moment. Regardless of political affiliation, the foreign-policy establishment was apprehensive.
When the summit did come, neither were skeptics’ worst fears borne out that Trump would give everything away in exchange for nothing, but nor were optimists’ hopes for a firm, substantive commitment and plan to unilaterally denuclearize in the near term. To achieve that, it would have had to be an incredibly efficient meeting, since the entire event lasted only about four hours, including an ill-advised 38 minutes between the two leaders and their translators alone.

As the White House describes it, “President Trump committed to provide security guarantees to the DPRK, and Chairman Kim Jong Un reaffirmed his firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” Yet whatever concrete plans would be made were simply delegated to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and “a North Korean counterpart.”

In the US, many concluded that the president was “owned” by Kim, who got most of what North Korea had demanded due to Trump’s inexperience and lack of preparation. In contrast, the US got nothing. Another concern was an implicit sequence in ordering the list of priorities, such that a peace agreement, even including an American withdrawal from South Korea and normalization of relations, would be a prerequisite for North Korean denuclearization.

Whatever the merits of the summit, there could be no disagreement that the document that resulted was rushed, brief and required substantial additional working-level meetings and collaboration with technical experts to move toward implementation.

SELLING THE SIZZLE
A well-known advertising adage goes: “don’t sell the steak — sell the sizzle!” Trump quickly declared that there was “no longer” a nuclear threat. Kim’s public statements were not as ebullient:

3 www.newyorker.com/magazine/1938/04/16/the-sizzle
lent, but the summit was splashed in color over the first three pages (33 photos) of the Rodong Sinmun newspaper and included a clear change in tone and repeated Kim’s commitment to denuclearization. South Korean President Moon, undoubtedly relieved at the easing of the crisis and the apparent growing rapport between Trump and Kim, remarked: “We will write a new chapter of peace and co-operation.” As a result, over 50 percent of Americans “approved” of Trump’s handling of North Korea after Singapore, 40 percent crediting him personally.

The return of US servicemen’s remains from the Korean War began quickly. Fifty-five boxes of remains, currently undergoing a lengthy identification process, were returned to the US in July. Further, it appears that co-operation in identifying unrecovered remains will be under way soon.

The other US-North Korea commitments have moved in fits and starts, however. Even as the American approach has perplexed its own bureaucracy, the North Korean pattern is easily recognizable from past practice — at least when it comes to working-level interactions with the US. North Korea has failed to show up to meetings and canceled others at the last minute. The Kim regime has so far favored mostly superficial displays of nuclear concessions, unwilling to make substantial moves.

But the Trump administration too has been unwilling to give up much of substance in exchange for real progress. Even as little has been achieved, at least on the record, the administration has been remarkably unperturbed. In recent weeks, the president has commented that he is unconcerned about the timeline on denuclearization and leaves the tempo in Kim’s hands. He also seems personally unbothered by reports of the relaxation of the “maximum pressure” campaign, even as the Treasury Department continues to expand US sanctions and South Korea seeks exemptions that would permit a resumption of North-South exchanges.

The change in tone in the relationship between the two countries could be important, but more must follow. The problem in selling the sizzle is that it depends — critically — on there actually being a steak. The American public will eventually realize that the achievements of the Singapore agreement have been few and their substance equivocal.

WHAT NEXT?

It is difficult to say with any certainty whether the summit’s lackluster results are due to the flawed “summit-first” approach pursued by the Trump administration or in the myriad other interests, dynamics and personalities in play. The North Korean nuclear issue has been with us for decades. What is unavoidably clear is that the US has proven unable to further negotiate or follow through on the potentially pivotal security agreements generated in Singapore.

The second Trump-Kim summit, almost certain to happen at some point, will be more of what we saw during the first. It will be a big, mostly symbolic event. Luckily, the next meeting’s stakes will be lower. Trump and Kim know one another and get along. They both see the first summit as a personal success and have reason to want to replicate it. Finally, their countries have made few provocative moves to spoil it, and incidents that might have derailed talks in the past have found quiet solutions. Perhaps the US will open a liaison office in Pyongyang (Singapore Item 2) or even sign a peace declaration, with a list of issues to work on toward a peace treaty in conjunction with the UN (Singapore Item 2). This result should not be seen as a tragedy of lack of preparation; Trump was never going to engage deeply in the technical issues or oversee timelines for arms control with unambiguous verification at each step.

What is the alternative? Moon’s approach to the inter-Korean process has been consistent with the diplomatic orthodoxy that generally yields greater legitimacy and success. Portrayed as a cockeyed optimist or peace-at-any-price liberal by his domestic detractors, he is in fact an experienced negotiator and has no illusions about North Korea. His success was enabled by last year’s nuclear crisis, ultimately convincing Kim that dealing directly with South Korea is in his best interests. But more credit is due to his government’s detailed plans. He presented North Korea with a clear path to economic development, a reduction in tensions and increased co-operation between the two countries. Like the Trump-Kim summit, the publicity has been epic and kept Moon’s approval numbers high even as the South Korean economy has struggled. But with this sizzle, there is steak.

One option would be for the US to join its ally and make the process more trilateral. Given the Trump administration’s lack of preparation and expertise, and Trump’s capricious management style, US security interests will be better served nested within a comprehensive Korean peace. The South Korean process holds far greater promise for Washington to achieve its priorities, even if not the complete denuclearization without prior reductions in sanctions that it wants. Were the US to hitch its negotiations to Moon’s process and defer to South Korea’s leadership, it would require trade-offs and extending a level of trust to Moon that few in the US currently seem willing to offer. Because the foreign-policy establishment has been on the outside, suspicions are widespread that Moon is lying to Trump and misleading the US about the North-South bilateral. Those concerns are reasonable, given the circumstances, but unfounded.

Acknowledging the leaders’ strengths and their potential impact on the course of history, a Trump-Kim bilateral focused on flash and personal-cum-political reconciliation and an inter-Korean process — including and supported by the US — would add the substance of disarmament, demobilization and arms control to the North-South objectives of improved relations.

Bridget L. Coggins is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara.