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.

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Talking at the Top:
Past, Present and Future
Summit Diplomacy in Asia
By Richard Feinberg
& Stephan Haggard

In the realm of diplomacy, the most noteworthy developments of 2018 would have to include the summits between North Korea and South Korea and between the US and North Korea. Their importance stemmed as much from their sheer improbability as from the hopes that were invested in them afterward.

But as Richard Feinberg and Stephan Haggard explain, these heads-of-state meetings are only part of a broader history of summit diplomacy in Asia, encompassing both security and economic agendas and multilateral as well as bilateral formats. They argue that the record of that history, and the prospects for the future, are mixed.

AS THE METAPHOR suggests, summitry sits at the pinnacle of international politics; indeed, the term was first introduced by none other than Winston Churchill. Defined most broadly as face-to-face meetings of heads of state, summits have on occasion proven to be defining historical moments: Neville Chamberlain at Munich, John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, Richard Nixon in China. The very meeting places of some summits have achieved enduring resonance: Yalta, Potsdam, Reykjavik, Camp David.

Yet not all of these well-known summits produced enduring outcomes, and the proliferation of meetings — even at a high level — may even degrade their value. Some agreements struck at bilateral summits quickly faded, and more regular multilateral summits have been plagued with problems of attendance and focus, as was demonstrated by the APEC summit this fall. The charge lingers that summits have become little more than “talking shops” and may even prove distracting or counterproductive.

As the introduction to this issue开门见山地 suggests, Asia has recently seen a spate of summits. The most dramatic are one-off irregular bilateral meetings that seek solutions to enduring geopolitical tensions and historical animosities. Clearly the summits around the Korean Peninsula have been the most significant in this regard, at these do not exhaust the meetings at which the Korean Peninsula was at or near the top of the agenda. President Donald Trump has also held significant bilateral meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping (Mar-a-Lago April 2017) and — if meetings on the sidelines of other conferences are included — no later than seven one-on-one meetings with Japanese Prime Minister Shin’ichi Abe.

In parallel fashion, China-Russia bilateral summits in July 2017 and September 2018 suggested that the two countries were becoming aligned on their approach to the North Korean nuclear issue. Most recently, the Abe-Xi summit was the first visit of a Japanese prime minister to Beijing since 2011 and marked a notable thaw in the relationship between Asia’s two most significant powers.

Seeking an Enduring Formula
Not all summits are bilateral, one-off or irregular — including economic cooperation — is arguably more big if summit of the principles are regularly scheduled and even institutionalized.

Ironically, because the Trump administration has cast doubt on US commitments to multilateral institutions, summitry may take on new significance. Economic summitry in Asia has long provided a window into competing models of how the region might be organized, with important implications not only for leadership but also for patterns of economic integration. As early as 1997, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad floated the idea of an East Asia Economic Caucus that would have stood in sharp distinction to the Trans-Pacific Economic Cooperation (TPP) forum created in 1993. In 1995, seizing the opportunity opened by the US chairmanship of an APEC ministerial, President Bill Clinton elevated the conclave to a Leaders Meeting. For a relatively brief moment, APEC summits and ministerial meetings promised a focal point for the formation of a free-trade agreement (FTA) that would span Northeast and Southeast Asia, including Australia and New Zealand, North America and even select South American countries.

Surprisingly we are seeing a significant revival of this exact same debate over economic architecture, but with a critical twist. In contrast to the limited support that Mahathir’s proposal could muster at the time, China’s expanding economic role in the region reflects a growing ability to shape the institutional and economic landscape in ways that were unthinkable even a decade ago. The China-Japan-South Korea summit, founded in 2008, has exhibited some irregularity but is still very much alive and has spawned negotiations for an FTA that would bring together countries accounting for about 20 percent of world gross domestic product. The Chiang Mai Initiative (2010), a multilateral currency swap arrangement, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) trade agreement are direct outgrowths of the so-called ASEAN+3 summit process, as are the cluster of free-trade agreements between ASEAN and China, South Korea and Japan. In addition to these more regular multilateral arrangements, several organizations with a more existential mandate have developed into institutionalized ad hoc summits with China and to a lesser extent Russia at the core. These include most notably the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), created in 1996, which has held no fewer than 18 heads-of-state summits and the Belt and Road Forum, which grew out of an ambitious Chinese infrastructure initiative and had an impressive first summit in May 2017 in Beijing.

In contrast to these conceptions, the US joined, then later led, negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement; although not including a leaders summit, the geostrategic implications of this trans-Pacific alternative were clear to all concerned. Although the US subse-
quently abandoned the TPP, the Trump administration has floated a vague successor in the articulation of an “Indo-Pacific” strategy that would reach from Northeast Asia to the subcontinent, albeit without a clear institutional architecture.

THROUGH THE AGES: PREPARATION, NEGOTIATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

The articles on Asian summits in this issue of Global Asia have a dual objective. In consideration of both the Korean Peninsula summits and economic summits, we are interested in what this recent spate of summity has and hasn’t accomplished. But the focus is also more narrowly on what summity per se can accomplish. What are the gains and drawbacks from face-to-face meetings of leaders? Is there something about meetings at this level that permit breakthroughs and enduring progress? And if so, under what conditions, precisely? As will be seen, summity may be less about multilateral negotiations and bilateral agreements than other functions: developing networks; affirming certain norms and values; conducting exploratory diplomacy; and providing signals of leadership, including for a domestic audience.

Meetings between leaders date back as far as written records allow. Recall the Biblical visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon, presenting him with sumptuous gifts and “testing him with hard questions,” or the fateful encounter between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra. The legends surrounding these ancient summits are a reminder of the personal dimension: the tactical gifts of the actors, their charms as well as their foibles and the ability of face-to-face meetings to generate personal trust.

But more sustained analyses of summits, including a recent study of 20th-century summits by David Reynolds, suggest that they need to be approached as distinctive institutions that involve three stages: preparation, negotiation and implementation. What are the gains and drawbacks from face-to-face meetings of leaders? Is there something about meetings at this level that permit breakthroughs and enduring progress? And if so, under what conditions, precisely?
and subsequent implementation. Moreover, they need to be approached through a political lens. Leaders are highly successful political animals, acutely aware of how summits will be read by competitors and mass publics.

Among the first-order questions in the preparation stage is whether negotiations should be held between leaders at all, or whether they are better conducted at the working or ministerial level. Prior to a summit, diplomatic envoys can test the waters, pursue confidence-building measures and reach preliminary agreements that set the stage for the eventual summit between leaders. A classic example of such preparatory negotiations were the secret talks undertaken by Henry Kissinger prior to President Richard Nixon’s historic 1972 trip to Beijing, talks that determined the scope of subsequent accords.

Based upon such exploratory meetings, so-called sherpas can recommend whether the agenda should be narrowly circumscribed to a handful of issues and “low-hanging fruit,” or whether leaders might tackle a wider range of issues and entirely redefine a bilateral relationship through more complex linkages of issues. The latter involves the more risky, high-wire strategy of reaching broad agreements that could subsequently clean up.

Most experts in negotiations will advise the more cautious strategy, but some leaders, confident in their own negotiating skills, may opt for the bolder strategy and aim high; Trump’s approach to the Singapore summit clearly fell into the second category. Bureaucrats are characteristically nervous about summits, because once in a room together the leaders may go off script. While these moments of unscripted freedom allow for creativity and breakthroughs, they are also potential minefields, with dangers ranging from misunderstandings and public-relations disasters to agreements that prove totally unworkable.

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EVERYBODY ‘WINS’

In mapping a negotiating strategy, successful summits appear to rest on the crafting of outcomes that allow both leaders to claim “victory.” Summit agreements that produce two winners are more likely to stick, and for the simple reason that leaders must subsequently muster sufficient domestic political support to proceed with implementation. The US Senate is notorious for failing to ratify agreements reached by presidents at international summits, from President Woodrow Wilson’s failure to gain Senate approval of US membership in the League of Nations to more recent Senate resistance to joining international accords to cap climate change.

Implementation is the stage in the summit process most often neglected. Once the spotlights have dimmed, leaders generally turn to other matters. Mass media and, even more so, social media have notoriously short attention spans and will move on to the next crisis or scandal. Success hinges on leaders anointing and empowering senior advisers to negotiate details and assure their implementation. Formal bi-national working groups can provide an ad hoc institutional framework for follow through. A consensus calendar for step-by-step implementation, and the resolution of outstanding matters left dangling at a summit, can help to propel progress.

Internally, each leader can establish his or her own periodic reporting requirements, so that bureaucrats are aware that their CEO is monitoring performance. Progress toward implementation can also be monitored by publicly agreed reporting requirements and audits. In some cases, leaders may agree to empower third-party monitors, including expert agencies of the United Nations. UN agencies may enjoy advantages of expertise and financial resources as well as international legitimacy; an example is the role that the International Atomic Energy Agency may ultimately play in any North Korean deal, as Jeffrey Lewis points out in his contribution (see page 24).

Finally, an agreement to a follow-up summit, with a firm date, can be an instrument to signal the political importance of meeting deadlines established in the implementation timetable. Although a sequence of summits orchestrated around one or a few issues generally is of limited time duration, it is possible that successful initial summits can evolve over time. In Europe, post-Second World War German-French accords widened into what today is the European Union. In the Western Hemisphere, the 1993 trade accord among the US, Mexico and Canada widened into the process now known as the Summit of the Americas, and ASEAN and its dialogue partners now convene as the East Asia Summit.

KOREAN EXCEPTIONS

As can be seen, the summity around the Korean Peninsula — both North-South and between the US and North Korea — violated a number of these precepts. While North-South summits appeared to have adequate preparation, the timeline to prepare for the June 2018 Singapore summit was acknowledged at the outset to be short. The decision to convene in Singapore was not preceded by careful preparatory meetings among sherpas, and the US and North Korean governments subsequently disagreed on whether trust-building concessions had been made or not. From media reports, Trump relied more on confidence in his own deal-making skills than on careful study of the intricacies of the North Korean nuclear program. We have less information on the preparations of the North Koreans, but the fact that they were able to insert favorable language into the Singapore summit document suggests a strong focus on setting the subsequent agenda.

And while both the Singapore summit and the North Korea-South Korea summits had ele-
Air travel has had a profound effect on diplomacy, permitting more frequent, shorter and larger multilateral summit meetings. Yet, the same issues — preparation, negotiations and implementation — remain central to assessing whether such multilateral diplomacy has an enduring effect.

For some time, critics have aired doubts about multilateral diplomacy in Asia, comparing it unfavorably to the deep integration of the European project. Celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2017 as the premier trans-Pacific economic forum, APEC exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of such multilateral summitry. Both sides of the summit coin were on full display at the ill-fated 2018 APEC leaders’ meeting.

APEC functions at two levels. Staff or mid-level officials convene in working groups that meet several times a year in a preparation phase, and typically seek consensus around a series of goals or objectives and an associated work plan. The working groups are recognizable as negotiating sessions, where experts propose ideas and language, exchange multiple drafts and seek agreement on consensus language. The ministerial meetings seek final agreement on documents that have been pre-screened by their staffs.

At the leaders meeting, staff have previously negotiated a final communiqué. Rather than engaging in formal negotiations, the leaders sit in their circle and deliver rather tedious speeches, or at the chair’s behest, engage in more free-flowing discussion around a single salient issue of the day. While at APEC, the leaders also attend luncheons and dinners that allow for more informal give-and-take, as well as meet in scheduled bilateral sessions. Heads-of-state itineraries often add in additional travel in the region.

What do we make of this process? The preparation phase arguably contributes to the formation of a social network among participants and even common perspectives and values. This is particularly the case for smaller countries that may not have the capability to conduct diplomacy at this level on their own. Meeting regularly in preparation for the annual Leaders Meetings, working bodies assemble hundreds, even thousands, of officials from home ministries. The APEC goal of building a trans-Pacific community extends beyond governments to include business (APEC Business Advisory Council) and to a lesser degree civil society and academia (APEC Study Centers). In corridors and conference rooms, executives huddle to exchange tips and cut deals.

That this process can be overtaken by broader disagreements, however, was on full display at the 2018 APEC Leaders’ Summit in Papua New Guinea in November. Bland language on fighting protectionism led China to scuttle the final communiqué. The confrontational language of Vice President Mike Pence’s policy speech no doubt set the stage for failure, however, leaving participants from the region trapped between the dueling giants. It was the first time in 25 years that the summit failed to issue a joint statement.

**What is Getting Done, Really?**

Significant questions remain over whether the elaborate machinery of APEC — long on inter-governmental bodies and short on executive or dispute-settlement processes — has had much enduring effect. Over the years, APEC has expanded its scope from trade and investment to include a wide panoply of economic and social issues: APEC’s Committee on Trade and Investment (CTI) is buttressed by 12 working groups and four Industry Dialogues, while the Senior Officials’ Steering Committee on Economic and Technical Co-operation (Ecotech) encompasses an additional 16 working groups and one Task Group. The expansion of issue coverage satisfies many constituencies, but dilutes effort and focus and may be more effective at sharing information — a kind of loose co-ordination — than generating binding commitments. Moreover, APEC remains only very modestly institutionalized and lacking in a dispute-settlement mechanism. As we will see, similar questions might be raised about institutions such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organization or the Belt and Road Forum.

These observations suggest that the function of summitry may rest in part on the opportunities provided for bilateral meetings. The APEC leaders’ meetings create space for “on the margins” meetings that can range from simple “getting to know you” talks to advancing broader bilateral objectives. Evidence from the Belt and Road Forum presented by Jiang and Shi (see page 54) suggests this motive was paramount, and also that wider domestic political objectives — to showcase leadership and key bilateral relationships — may outweigh what we would typically consider multilateral commitments.

As suggested at the outset, the signals in play center in no small measure on how institutional relationships are going to be configured geographically. As China develops its own institutional diplomacy, the objective of building a similar diplomatic, social and economic network is likely an underappreciated objective of intra-Asian summitry. Will a trans-Pacific or China-centered institutional order prevail? Could the Trump administration unwittingly cede leadership? Or are we, more likely, in a world of overlapping and partly competitive institutions?

Multilateralism in Asia, including its summit component, remains a work in progress. Fundamentally, member states remain reluctant to pool sovereignty; consensus remains the preferred modus operandi. National ministers keep tight control of issue-specific negotiations and secretariats have been kept modest to stop them developing institutional autonomy. “Voluntarism” remains a catchphrase, ensuring that agreements are non-binding, without robust dispute-settlement mechanisms or sanctions for non-compliance.

Yet, as Gregory Chin argues forcefully (see page 64), these may be the wrong metrics. ASEAN-style diplomacy has arguably worked for the region: networks are being built, favored norms advanced, bilateral agreements reached and new institutional patterns established. The core question raised by the Trump administration’s nationalist approach — on full display in the summits of both 2017 and 2018 — is whether the US will remain inserted into these networks or effectively alienate the region by forcing countries into difficult choices they don’t want to make. And if the latter, could a China-centered institutional order gradually dominate the diplomatic landscape in the Asia-Pacific?

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