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US-KOREA RELATIONS

SINGAPORE SLING TO STALEMATE

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In contrast to last summer's hot rhetoric and spiking tensions, the United States and North Korea moved to a June thaw with the dramatic Singapore summit. After some heavy lifting from South Korea, Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un produced a vague commitment to denuclearization. By summer's end there was little progress as North Korea and the US appeared at odds on next steps, with North Korea insisting on a peace regime and the US insisting on visible steps toward denuclearization. South Korea has emerged as the mediator. The US finally saw a new ambassador in Seoul with the appointment of Harry Harris. USFK Commander Gen. Vincent Brooks agreed with ROK defense plans for reducing posts along the DMZ, while joint US-ROK military exercises remained on hold, although Defense Secretary James Mattis hinted at their resumption next year. President Moon's poll numbers declined, as concerns over slow progress and fissures with the US grew.

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June 12 takeaways

Proponents of the Trump-Kim summit argue that a process now exists that may ultimately produce fundamental change on the peninsula. The South Korean public approved of the perceived initial progress in strong numbers, and half of Americans polled supported President Trump's handling of North Korea. Trump and Secretary of State Pompeo have since argued for time and patience. The Singapore agreement centered on four areas: new relations, a new peace regime, denuclearization, and the return of US war remains. By the end of August, only the latter saw progress, which supporters argue is both symbolic of a new process and substantive in bringing solace to descendants of those who perished.

Critics argue that Trump was too focused on the theater of the meeting and gave way too quickly on halting joint military exercises. They point to the lack of progress on the other essential areas, especially the issue of denuclearization.



Figure 1 US President Donald Trump and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un shake hands after signing documents during a summit at the Capella Hotel on the resort island of Sentosa, Singapore June 12, 2018. Photo: Reuters

What is clear is that the takeaways were perceived differently by Washington and Pyongyang. The US argues that the commitment, in Pompeo's word, is to "complete denuclearization." South Korea too has argued that North Korea has assured it of the essential nature of this drive. But it is clear the North Korean priority is different and focused on establishing a peace regime. Specifically, Pyongyang wants an end-of-war declaration prior to further movement on denuclearization. It has argued that the self-imposed test moratorium and destruction of its nuclear test site and its missile test facility were enough to

demonstrate a firm commitment. This essential difference in definition and priorities (as well as the lingering question of whether North Korea would ever give up its nuclear capability) leaves the US, ROK, and DPRK at the current impasse.

Carrying the torch

The eyes of the world were on Singapore in June – as warranted given seven decades of distrust between Washington and Pyongyang. President Trump broke from tradition in meeting North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, bedeviling critics and those accustomed to more steady processes that work from the bottom up with increasingly senior-level meetings leading to agreements that culminate in a meeting of the heads-of-state for closure.

But the real focus, and one that ultimately bodes well for the US-Korea alliance, should be on the efforts of South Korea's Moon Jae-in. With patience and quietude, the South Korean president and his team – the latter of which conveyed the initial proposal for a summit to the White House – persisted in pushing forward the Trump-Kim summit. Moon built on his commitments to improve the situation with North Korea and to build on the success of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, pushing both Trump and Kim toward self-interests. Kim, facing down strict and unified sanctions and seemingly moving beyond nuclear development to economic sustainability, saw the summit as a way to bring the DPRK (and himself) onto the global stage. Trump envisioned his role as the president who finally sat down with the enemy, making himself not only transactional but (in his view) a transitional president. That it provided entertainment, a score in advance of the contested US midterm elections, and created a legacy were also important factors.

Moon saw the advantage (some might say the vanity) in both Kim's and Trump's leanings, as well as the essential nature of achieving a summit for his own political viability. His approval ratings plunged from the 80s to the 50s in the period from the April 27 inter-Korean summit to the end of the summer. The ROK played the steady rudder to the listing ships of its northern neighbor and its great ally. Trump canceled the summit at one point, only to have Moon coordinate a meeting with Kim in a day (a second summit and one in what the ROK has described as a new approach with frequent meetings of the leaders of the South and North).

A day after canceling, Trump spoke of negotiations to reinstate the meeting.

These dynamics make South Korea's new role different from that of prior decades, even during the rounds of initial sunshine. Seoul's centrality in the process provides a buffer to potential blunder, and to date, it has shown an adroitness in managing the personalities and parts of the processes around Trump and Kim.

The role is not without challenges. As torchbearers, Seoul has been out front and may be vulnerable to stumbles on untread paths. Political splits in Seoul among supporters and skeptics may be a drag on momentum. The new realities mean that there will have to be some give-and-take at strategic and tactical levels when it comes to strategic management.

Joint exercises and drawdowns

At no point in the period was this need for flexibility more clear than in the announced cancelation of joint exercises between ROK and US forces. Some saw the move as a nod to Moon's efforts at lowering tensions and drawing North Korea into the fold. Others were startled and thought Trump was giving something for nothing by announcing the cessation unilaterally in Singapore. The angst was magnified when the US president borrowed North Korean words and characterized the joint exercises as "war games" and reminded his audience that they were expensive. By the end of August, Defense Secretary Mattis announced that this path was not open-ended as a good faith gesture, and that there has been no cancelation of exercises that were planned for next year.

Another challenge to US-ROK coordination is the pacing of movements to lessen tensions along the DMZ. Seoul's progress earlier in the year in establishing military hotlines and around the April 27 Moon-Kim summit in establishing direct lines between leaders led to ROK efforts toward further tension reduction. The first step after the inter-Korean summit was a shutdown of loudspeakers used for propaganda; by August the two sides had agreed on plans for a decrease in guardposts and personnel along the DMZ.

The difficulty for Gen. Brooks and US forces was aligning with Blue House efforts, measures that he admitted might create security

vulnerabilities. Therein lies a fundamental challenge for the alliance. As with the cancellation of joint exercises, both the US and the ROK need to make adaptations to security (and political) relationships. It will be increasingly important for political communication to be as open as possible, for complications over security relations and economic inclinations – be they bilateral or by way of the timing and back-off or rigor of sanctions – will demand patience.

Secretary of State Pompeo has argued for patience in the negotiation process with North Korea, and understandably since only a short time has passed since the summit. Experts argue that denuclearization will be a complex and lengthy process, if achieved.

Patience and flexibility should be the new guiding principles in the US-ROK relationship writ large. In Gen. Brooks and Ambassador Harris, the US has steady rudders at the senior leadership level on the ground, to match those of Defense Secretary Mattis and Secretary of State Pompeo. Some argue over discord and disparities in US proclivities and processes; others point to relatively good coordination and instincts among those making Korea policy in Washington. The concern is that the US need project greater steadiness to its ally, lest the torchbearer find himself in the rain, and the situation moves backward toward the heated rhetoric and tensions of last year. Some, like former Defense Secretary Perry, argue for hope in the process; but, he points out, that process will not be easy.

CHRONOLOGY OF US-KOREA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2018

May 1, 2018: South and North begin dismantlement of border speakers in accord with April 27 inter-Korean leaders summit; ROK President Moon Jae-in asks UN for verification of DPRK nuclear site shutdown.

May 2, 2018: ROK says it wants US troops to stay regardless of any treaty with the DPRK.

May 2, 2018: US intelligence detects DPRK actions at its nuclear test site.

May 3, 2018: White House says US prisoner release would be a goodwill move by the DPRK.

May 3, 2018: US National Security Advisor John Bolton meets ROK National Security Adviser Chung Eui-yong in Washington, DC.

May 4, 2018: *New York Times* reports that President Trump has ordered the Pentagon to consider reducing US troops in ROK.

May 6, 2018: DPRK denies US sanctions pressure is behind its denuclearization pledge.

May 7, 2018: *Wall Street Journal* reports that US troops represent “potential bargaining chip.”

May 8, 2018: Kim Jong UN meets Chinese President Xi Jinping.

May 9, 2018: Three US detainees freed by DPRK, head home, thank Trump.

May 10, 2018: President Trump announces he will meet DPRK leader Kim Jong UN in Singapore on June 12.

May 11, 2018: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets ROK Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha and suggests DPRK future “brimming with prosperity,” though he cautions denuclearization will require “robust” oversight.

May 12, 2018: DPRK details plans to dismantle nuclear test site.

May 13, 2018: Secretary Pompeo says US ready to lift sanctions if DPRK dismantles its nuclear weapons program.

May 15, 2018: Satellite images show buildings removed from DPRK nuclear test site.

May 15, 2018: DPRK casts doubt on Trump summit, suspends talks with South; Trump says “we’ll see.”

May 16, 2018: DPRK says it doesn’t want US summit focused only on denuclearization.

May 17, 2018: DPRK says it won’t hold talks with “incompetent” ROK; Trump says “if we make a deal, I think Kim Jong Un is going to be very, very happy.”

May 18, 2018: DPRK “declines,” then later permits ROK media to attend nuclear test site closure.

May 18, 2018: President Trump nominates former Pacific Command commander Harry Harris as US ambassador to ROK.

May 21, 2018: *New York Times* reports Trump grappling with risks of Singapore summit; *Wall Street Journal* reports Moon fighting for Trump-Kim summit.

May 22, 2018: President Trump meets President Moon at White House; Trump says June summit with Kim should be called off, but suggests it may work out over period of time.

May 23, 2018: Trump blames China for summit problems; DPRK launches tirade against “stupid” US officials, calling Vice President Pence a “political dummy” and threatening to call off summit.

May 24, 2018: DPRK carries out demolition of nuclear test site; Trump cancels summit with Kim Jong Un, citing “hostility.”

May 25, 2018: Trump says US in “productive talks” to reinstate summit.

May 26, 2018: Moon and Kim hold surprise summit in Panmunjom.

May 27, 2018: US team in DPRK for talks on summit, says Trump; ROK says DPRK committed to Trump summit and complete denuclearization, and calls for more impromptu meetings.

May 29, 2018: Trump says DPRK's Kim Yong Chol heading to US for talks; White House says Trump is prepared for June summit.

May 31, 2018: Trumps says he expects letter from Kim Jong Un; US and DPRK working groups meet in Singapore, Secretary Pompeo meets Kim Yong Chol in New York City.

May 31, 2018: Kim Jong Un says DPRK's will for denuclearization is "unchanged."

June 1, 2018: Trump announces summit with Kim is back on, confirms June 12 date.

June 6, 2018: 38 North website reports DPRK is razing Ilha-ri, a key ballistic missile test site.

June 12, 2018: Trump-Kim summit held in Singapore. As summit begins, Trump says "we're going to have a great discussion, and I think tremendous success." Kim Jong Un says "there were fetters and wrong practices that at times covered out eyes and ears, but we overcame everything to come this far."

June 13, 2018: *Reuters/Ipsos* poll says half of Americans polled support Trump's handling of North Korea.

June 14, 2018; Secretary Pompeo says North Korea sanctions to remain until DPRK completes denuclearization, says US prepared to offer security guarantees.

June 15, 2018: Gallup poll shows 66 percent of ROK respondents approve of US-DPRK summit outcome.

June 17, 2018: Trump says his agreement with North Korea will be good for China; ROK Blue House says US forces in ROK not subject to US-DPRK talks; Trump says he gave Kim his direct number.

June 18, 2018; US and ROK agree to suspend joint military exercises scheduled for August.

June 20, 2018: ROK Foreign Minister Kang says DPRK sanctions to remain until denuclearization; Kim and Xi discuss "true peace" and denuclearization in Beijing.

June 21, 2018; Trump announces DPRK has returned remains of 200 US war dead and that "total denuclearization" has begun; Pompeo plans DPRK meeting at "earliest possible date."

June 22, 2018: Pentagon indefinitely suspends some US training exercises with the ROK.

June 25, 2018: Pompeo says he won't put a timeline on DPRK denuclearization.

June 27, 2018: Pompeo says DPRK understands US on "complete denuclearization."

June 28, 2017: Defense Secretary Mattis meets former ROK Defense Minister Song Young-moo and says US troop commitment in ROK is "ironclad."

June 28, 2018: 38 North website reports that satellite imagery shows infrastructure improvements at DPRK's Yongbyon nuclear plant.

June 30, 2018: US marks departure of military presence in Seoul with opening of new headquarters facilities at Camp Humphreys.

June 30, 2018: US intelligence reportedly believes DPRK making more bomb fuel despite talks.

July 2, 2018: *Wall Street Journal* reports Middlebury Institute imagery shows DPRK expanding key missile manufacturing plant

July 7, 2018: Secretary Pompeo meets Kim Yong Chol in Pyongyang to "clarify" and says progress made; DPRK condemns US tactics as "gangster-like" after Pompeo's departure.

July 8, 2018: DPRK calls US stance "regrettable;" Pompeo urges DPRK to follow Vietnam's example.

July 9, 2018: Trump suggests China is interfering in US-DPRK talks.

July 12, 2018: Moon says US-DPRK talks are "on track," dismisses criticism.

July 13, 2018: US accuses DPRK of UN sanctions breach and demands end to illicit fuel sales.

July 15, 2018: Pompeo announces that US and DPRK to resume search for war remains.

July 18, 2018: Trump tweets he received “very nice note” from Kim Jong Un; Pompeo says DPRK deal “may take some time” and sanctions to remain in place.

July 19, 2018: US Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats says denuclearization in a year not likely.

July 20, 2018: Secretary Pompeo and US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley urge strict UN sanction remain in place until DPRK acts on denuclearization.

July 23, 2018: ROK Defense Ministry announces plans to reduce number of guard posts along DMZ.

July 26, 2018: DPRK hands over 55 boxes of US war dead remains.

July 27, 2018: Trump thanks Kim for transfer of US war dead remains.

July 30, 2018: *Washington Post* reports that US intelligence agencies believe DPRK is working on new missiles.

Aug. 1, 2018: White House reports Trump received letter from Kim Jong Un.

Aug. 3, 2018: Pompeo says DPRK weapons work counter to denuclearization pledge; confidential UN report says DPRK has not stopped its nuclear and missile programs.

Aug. 4, 2018: DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho says it is alarming that the US is returning to hostile ways “far from its leaders’ intentions.”

Aug. 6, 2018: US backs guidelines in UN Security Council for streamlining delivery of humanitarian aid to the DPRK.

Aug. 9, 2018; DPRK criticizes US sanctions pressure on denuclearization process

Aug. 15, 2018: US targets Chinese and Russian firms over DPRK sanctions breaches.

Aug. 17, 2018: DPRK presses demands for end-of-war declaration ahead of Pompeo visit.

Aug. 20, 2018: Divided family reunions begin at Mount Kumgang.

Aug. 21, 2018: US Treasury sanctions Russian firms for violating sanctions on the DPRK.

Aug. 22, 2018: USFK commander Gen. Brooks acknowledges security risks in defense scale-down at DMZ, but is dealing with “change and uncertainty in stride.”

Aug. 22, 2018: Satellite imagery shows DPRK halted work to dismantle Sohae satellite launch site in the first part of August.

Aug. 25, 2018: Trump cancels Pompeo visit to the DPRK with new special representative for North Korea, Stephen Biegun.

Aug. 26, 2018: DPRK’s *Rodong Sinmun* accuses US of “double dealing” and “hatching a criminal plot” against Pyongyang with drill preparations.

Aug. 28, 2018: Secretary Mattis announces that the US and ROK have no plans to suspend military exercises that are planned next year.

Aug. 29, 2018: Trump says he thinks US is “doing well” in its diplomacy with North Korea, hails his relationship with Kim, and says there are no reasons to resume US-ROK military exercises at the present though, if he elected, they would be “far bigger than ever before.”

Aug. 30, 2018: US State Department extends ban on US citizens’ travel to North Korea for another year.