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[Home](#) > A Historic Breakthrough or a Historic Blunder in Singapore?

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A Historic Breakthrough or a Historic Blunder in Singapore?

Kim Jong Un May Have Outwitted Trump at the Summit

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The Singapore summit was mesmerizing political theater. In this latest installment of “diplotainment,” live from the Oval Office, U.S. President Donald Trump assured the American people that they could trust Kim Jong Un and that North Korea’s supreme leader was sincere about denuclearization. Further adding to the spectacle was a faux film trailer that Trump had prepared for Kim. Claiming to have been produced by “Destiny Pictures,” the video featured footage of Trump and Kim as tense music played in the background; a male narrator spoke in overly dramatic tones: “A new story, a new beginning, one of peace. Two men, two leaders, one destiny. A story in a special moment in time. When a man is presented with one chance that may never be repeated, what will he choose?”

Trump is certainly correct in pointing out that he made history in meeting amicably with his North Korean adversary. But it is yet to be determined whether he made a historic breakthrough or a historic blunder. No previous U.S. president considered it prudent to embark on summity with so little preparation or on terms so favorable to the other side, let alone to promise to unilaterally discontinue defensive joint U.S.–South Korean military exercises on the Korean Peninsula. For his part, Kim can rightfully boast [1] that he has accomplished what his father and grandfather could only dream of: achieving the twin goals of building a viable nuclear weapons capability and then winning international acceptance as a “very honorable” peer, as he was referred to by the leader of the free world.

In the end, the joint statement that emerged from the summit is but a diluted version of numerous past aspirational documents put forward by North Korea and its negotiating partners. It lightly echoes inter-Korean agreements [2] dating back to the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. It contains watered-down versions of pledges in international deals such as the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2005 joint statement of the fourth round of the six-party talks. It allows North Korea to slide from its previous commitment “to abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and [return] at an early date to the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty].” And it offers a vague promise “to work toward complete denuclearization.” This can hardly be

construed as progress. The Singapore joint statement is worryingly silent on ballistic missiles, let alone chemical weapons, cyberwarfare, nuclear proliferation, and (unsurprisingly) human rights.

In any case, even a robust joint statement could not serve as a reliable indicator of progress given North Korea's spotty record of compliance and follow-through. So at this point, what progress can each side credibly claim to have achieved based on its goals coming into the meeting?

North Korea's most urgent priorities [3] were to loosen the stranglehold of sanctions and to reduce the risk of a U.S. preventive attack or a "bloody nose" strike, all without being forced to relinquish the "treasured sword," as Kim described them, of its nuclear weapons. Other priorities included using the lure of a peace treaty to undercut U.S.–South Korean military exercises and deployments, eroding the North's isolation and pariah status, and obtaining economic assistance and investment on terms consistent with regime control and stability. Pyongyang also hoped to alleviate the pressure on the nuclear issue and criticism of its human rights record by finding ways to fracture the solidarity among the five main players: China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. Kim sought to play them off against one another and strengthen the "accommodationist" camp in South Korea, which sees the South's alliance with the United States as an impediment to inter-Korean rapprochement.

By these measures, the Singapore summit has capped an astonishingly successful spring for Kim.

Take sanctions. Trump claims to have 300 powerful sanctions in his back pocket, ready to be deployed if North Korea behaves badly. But the reality is that after a decade of ratcheting up the pressure on North Korea [4], the United States has already subjected the North to virtually every significant sanction that Washington can apply unilaterally. The odds of China and Russia consenting to powerful new provisions to UN Security Council sanctions are virtually nil. Moreover, the real pressure from sanctions lies in their vigorous implementation by the countries with which North Korea does business, notably China. Kim's recent red-carpet welcome by Chinese President Xi Jinping—twice in one month, after years of estrangement—and the reports of resumed cross-border trade make clear that the era of Chinese "tough love" is over. This means that the straitjacket of sanctions has been loosened for Kim. The prospects of China and other nations ramping up the enforcement of sanctions to the levels seen in late 2017 appear dim.

The conventional wisdom in some quarters [5] is that Trump's talk of a "bloody nose" strike scared Kim into backing down. It's impossible to know if that's true. But even if the Kim-Trump "bromance" ends in disappointment, Washington will find it difficult to credibly leverage the threat of force in the wake of Kim's effective charm offensive. Trump would also face almost certain opposition to a strike from China, South Korea, and the international community. South Koreans, who would bear the brunt of U.S. retaliation, were skittish about a military option even when Kim was threatening to nuke them over the deployment of the missile defense system known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD [6]. Today, polling shows [7] that Kim is more popular in South Korea than Trump. Since it is hard to imagine an effective preventive attack against North Korea's nuclear facilities without the support of the South Korean government and military, it appears that Kim has significantly reduced the risk of a "bloody nose."

Trump's gambit at the summit seems to have played to Kim's advantage in other important respects, as well. North Korea has succeeded beyond its wildest dreams in shutting down defensive (but "expensive," as Trump described them) U.S.–South Korean joint military exercises. While Trump considers them expensive, North Korea refers to them as "provocative war games."<sup>[8]</sup> Trump gave up this card without even asking for a corresponding halt of North Korean conventional exercises, let alone a complete stop to its nuclear and missile programs. A long-standing goal for the Kim regime has been to enmesh the United States in negotiations over a peace treaty, partly to push for the end of the U.S.–South Korean alliance and U.S. Forces Korea, in Seoul. But it's unclear if Kim even needs a peace treaty in light of Trump's emphatic desire to "get our soldiers out." One wonders which leader is more motivated to move U.S. troops off the Korean Peninsula—Kim or Trump? Kim also cannot have missed the confused scramble in the wake of the summit by both South Korea's Blue House and U.S. Forces Korea to find out what Trump had promised, indicating an astounding gap in U.S. coordination.

The Singapore summit has paved the way for South Korea to unfreeze valuable investment projects on terms that the North can control, and it will surely open the spigots of international aid. By blindsiding China, Japan, and Russia in March with his plan to meet bilaterally with Kim, Trump set off a race for influence with Pyongyang that has made Kim, so recently an outcast, the man to meet.

These outcomes, which have both practical and propaganda value, seem certain to strengthen Kim's domestic standing and authority. Most important, the warm reception from the president of the United States has helped Kim normalize, if not legitimize, North Korea's status as a nuclear weapons state<sup>[9]</sup>. Kim is not interested in the Libyan model; he's interested in the Pakistani model.

Finally, despite bromides about denuclearization and the showy demolition by Pyongyang of a nuclear test facility that the North Koreans themselves had declared obsolete, Kim's arsenal is no smaller than it was last November, when North Korea successfully tested a new intercontinental ballistic missile<sup>[10]</sup> that it claimed was capable of striking the U.S. mainland with a nuclear warhead. All in all, this was a good first summit for North Korea.

And for the United States? In the lead-up to the summit, the Trump administration's stated priority was denuclearization<sup>[11]</sup>, albeit communicated through a noisy clash of competing signals: U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton's nukes-in-a-FedEx-box model, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's CVID model (complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization), and Trump's invitation to North Korea to "take your time" on denuclearization. At the same time, the theme that continues to surface in Trump's statements is that North Korea is not in the United States' "neighborhood" and that it is China, Japan, and South Korea that are soon going to have to shoulder the responsibility for North Korea.

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[12]

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[3]

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[13]

Unlike the substantial gains achieved by Kim thus far, progress in achieving CVID will take time to measure—if it comes at all. The rebooting of U.S.–North Korean negotiations to at least include the nuclear issue is a good thing, but it essentially takes the United States back to square one of a process that North Korea has skillfully manipulated in the past [13] to buy time and extract concessions. What’s not so good is this: not only did Trump put the cart before the horse in starting the process with a summit and thus squandering U.S. leverage, but he then proceeded to “buy the same horse,” as then U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates memorably put it nearly a decade ago, by front-loading concessions in exchange for mere promises.

The question of whether Trump made meaningful progress in Singapore will hinge on one key word: “verification.” [14] The litmus test for a process that could potentially lead to denuclearization is whether North Korea will make a full declaration of its nuclear inventory and facilities and whether credible international inspections will be able to verify that declaration as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Verification is the threshold that North Korea has never before agreed to cross, but it is the gateway to peaceful denuclearization and stability in Northeast Asia.

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