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Trump-Kim Summit

A Tale of Two Endings

By Alan Chong and Graham Ong-Webb

Synopsis

The Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore both raised high hopes amongst public opinion as well provided familiar fodder for critics of Trump's foreign policy. The Summit should be regarded as a proverbial fork in the foggy road of international diplomatic history.

Commentary

THE TRUMP-KIM Summit of 12 June 2018 in Singapore was a spectacle of tearful catharsis and missionary idealism on one hand. On the other, pundits and hard-nosed diplomats had a field day decrying Trumpist theatrics all over again. Symbolically, Trump left a confrontational and indecisive G7 summit behind in Canada and revelled in what seemed like a refreshing deal-making event, the likes of which Asia has not witnessed since President Richard Nixon's rapprochement with Chairman Mao Zedong in 1972.

Back then, as today, two very unlikely personalities — both commanding impressive military and political power — met and decided to thaw a Cold War between them with very surprising results. There was method in their vague phraseology, supplemented with plenty of unpublicised verbal commitments each leader gave to the other as 'food for thought'. The Nixon-Mao 'Shanghai communiqué' was remembered as epoch making almost overnight. One wonders if the Trump-Kim Summit could trigger a comparable geopolitical dividend for the world in our own time?

Optimistic Scenario: Trump, Real Estate Guru

Much has been made of Donald Trump's rich experience as a real estate developer. The facts of his record bear this out – a penchant for personalised deal-making and the art of overselling a deal in order to clinch it is evident. It is also quite plausible that he is deliberately inventing impromptu diplomacy based on this.

In this optimistic reading of the proceedings of the Singapore Summit, one might assume Trump to have sized up his negotiating partner – not as an adversary – but one sincerely desiring a deal with an eye on making history and anchoring one's legitimacy along with it.

To entice Kim, Trump offered vaguely worded but generous chips such as the suspension of US military exercises with Seoul, security guarantees for Pyongyang's sovereignty, and the lifting of sanctions in exchange for denuclearisation. On top of that, the face-to-face summit was in itself a grand concession to North Korea's long standing list of demands. Trump tactically offered Pyongyang virtually everything, potentially to signal an earnestness in making denuclearisation a reality

Kim on his part must have read Trump's carrots as a vindication of years of Pyongyang's hardline foreign policy strategies. Moreover, the vagary probably suited Kim's game plan. This room for manoeuvre allows him to project his magnanimity in agreeing to denuclearisation as statesmanship.

Kim: Man of the Moment?

Potentially, the enormous diplomatic gesture of denuclearisation would cement his image in the eyes of both North Korean and world public opinion as the man of the moment who made the peace that eluded his father and grandfather, on North Korean terms, and with honour. Additionally, even if denuclearisation evolved at a glacial pace dictated by Kim's whims, it would still count as progress after 55 years of Cold War with the belligerents of the Korean War.

What about the political payoffs for Kim the pragmatic reformer, and potentially the builder of a modern North Korea? Here is where Donald Trump's 'real estate rhetoric' suits both artful dealers perfectly. One simply needs to watch Trump's picture perfect 'let's build up Pyongyang's gleaming skyscrapers' video clip, then read between the lines of Trump's opening remarks at his post-summit press conference:

"We had a tremendous 24 hours. We've had a tremendous three months, actually, because this has been going on for quite a while. That was a tape that we gave to Chairman Kim and his people, his representatives. And it captures a lot. It captures what could be done. And that's a great place. It has the potential to be an incredible place. Between South Korea — if you think about it — and China, it's got tremendous potential. And I think he understands that and he wants to do what's right"... Is this not the verbal articulation of a glamorous developmental bonanza awaiting both grandstanding deal makers?

Pessimistic Scenario: Geopolitical Constraints

To be sure, Trump's approach to resolving the North Korean problem through the lens of a real estate developer is not necessarily inappropriate in itself. What is clearly risky is Trump's intention to develop North Korea's acreage in a manner that ignores how his proposed arrangement affects the wider 'master planning' that shapes the current political, security, and economic architecture of the immediate region.

To use a real-estate metaphor again, Trump would do well to consider the viability and impact of his development project alongside the mix of existing real estate managed by their respective landlords — South Korea, Japan, China, and even Russia. An approach devoid of consultation and coordination amongst them makes for a poor township.

In particular, Trump's cocktail-mix enticement of US-oriented economic investment, compromised denuclearisation demands (removed of the verification and irreversibility of North Korea's nuclear weapons dismantlement), and the provision of "unique" security guarantees, is likely compelling Japan and South Korea to push back against the US in a manner that reflects existing geopolitical constraints.

Summit's Pushback?

Because of the current US administration's penchant for not consulting, clarifying, and coordinating with its allies, Trump's offerings to Kim, such as the cessation of an upcoming large-scale US-South Korea military exercise, will be viewed with dismay and suspicion.

While Mr Trump may believe that he "gave up nothing other than agreeing to meet" with Kim, as he said during the press conference, the things of little value being negotiated away by the US may be precisely those that matter critically to South Korea and Japan. The decision to temporarily halt the exercise, which clearly will be difficult to restart (because Pyongyang can accuse the US and South Korea of military escalation) is leading both Seoul and Tokyo to rethink the efficacy of their standing alliances with the US.

The series of signals both countries are receiving shore up a grim path in which the return to self-help (involving independent nuclearisation and militarisation) is becoming a more realistic recourse by the day.

In light of the potential trail of destruction Trump's summit overtures may leave in Northeast Asia's wake, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, is now saddled with the onerous task of clarifying and coordinating with regional allies — performing the necessary 'science' of good deal-making —albeit a little late — to mitigate the risks of Trump's prior art.

Nevertheless, like Nixon and Mao in 1972, there may be many more positive diplomatic currents running below the surface of 'Instagram-worthy' denuclearisation that we cannot yet see and feel – for now. The world continues to expect the unexpected in the Trump-Kim era.

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University (NTU), Singapore. Graham Ong-Webb is Research Fellow in the Office of the Executive Deputy Chairman at RSIS. This is part of a series on the Trump-Kim Summit held on 12 June 2018 in Singapore.