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Trump-Kim Summit

The Razzmatazz of Public Diplomacy

By Alan Chong

Synopsis

The Trump-Kim Summit of 12 June 2018 in Singapore is not to be remembered solely for its diplomatic significance. Thanks to today's image-making culture and the cult of social media, the summit was equally about making both leaders look heroic.

Commentary

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY is that subset of political communication between governments where they attempt to communicate directly with members of the public in the target state. This may be carried out with or without the permission of the host government, depending on ideology, political circumstances and the dominant forms of media available at any point in time.

During the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, both utilised commercial and state-produced films and technology exhibitions to influence opinion within each other's populations. Today, it may well be social media, cable and satellite television that are offering global platforms for governments to send messages to target populations. But increasingly, the proliferation of social media means that entities other than governments and the traditional media can gain control of the diplomatic narrative. Other than social media publicity by onlookers, the media themselves ran updates on their social media platforms in addition to their print and online coverage.

Making of the 'Heroic' Leader?

The Trump-Kim Summit on 12 June 2018 in Singapore witnessed the features of a new environment for diplomatic summits as processes that are more than just formal

meetings for heads of state or government. Summits today have become circuses: just as much as they are venues for serious intergovernmental communication, they are also platforms for image-making, merrymaking, jokes and mass catharsis concerning the gravity of global insecurity. With about 2,500 journalists from all over the world and those based in Singapore here to cover the summit, the publicity is multiplied many fold.

One of the most gripping and long running stories accompanying the summit was that of its scene-setting. Not unlike a movie set, the arrival planes – both Kim's *Air China* flight and Air Force One were classic Boeing 747s – and the hotel accommodation, right down to the dining menus, all had to be matched to convey a sense of equality. This was equality of grandeur.

In Kim Jong-Un's case, his title was not that of President of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), yet his very presence had to approximate precisely that. Chairman Kim Jong-Un of the DPRK's State Affairs Commission was the effective leader of his country. In this regard, he was President Donald Trump's equal in terms of domestic political power and authority. Trump was directly elected and his office was the Presidency, as specified in the American Constitution. There was little doubt about that.

But the images for the DPRK's propaganda needs on their state-run television back home demanded even more. Chairman Kim had to appear a world statesman at the signing table in the Capella Hotel on Sentosa. This explained the near-riotous jostling of both sides' security agents and approved journalists, for the choicest photographic spots near the table.

This was of course augmented by the early morning spectacle of the placement of US and DPRK flags side by side signifying the commencement of formal diplomatic contact between Washington and Pyongyang. The fact that both Chairman Kim and President Trump strode to the middle of the panel of flags to shake hands spelled out a great deal of state-to-state equality between the two nuclear powers. Such a picture was truly worth a thousand words.

Social Media Summit for All

As events and participants unfolded in parallel to the official channels, the Korean diaspora and American citizens worldwide were not the only ones invested emotionally in the summit. Trump's already legendary outbursts on Twitter and his brusque exit from the G7 summit in Canada the weekend before shaped Twitter-sphere expectations of more drama to come. Some of the hashtags compared Trump's presence to wrestling legend Hulk Hogan, or Heavy Metal icon Def Leppard. Moreover, Dennis Rodman, Kim Jong-Un's baseball acolyte, called for a journey of trust by both leaders, wore a red cap emblazoned with 'Make America Great Again' and shed tears before CNN coverage and social media. As if on cue, Rodman revealed he was thanked by Trump's White House for supporting Trump's brave gesture towards Pyongyang. All round, #peace, #love, #HistoricalSummit, and #Singapore were announced on Rodman's own tweets.

Even the fact that the State Department committed a *faux pas* by initially placing Singapore in Malaysia, added to Singapore's unprecedented positive exposure worldwide. Coverage by prominent media correspondents like Christiane Amanpour of CNN who interviewed Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, added to the heightened attention.

During the summit, Singapore became the most searched term on Google. Also heard on a Singapore radio station was the epiphany by the DJ that a new dawn in world peace was breaking in the tiny island-state, accompanied by breath-taking popular songs of hope and harmony.

Foreign tourists, members of the Singaporean public, and food outlet owners were equally regaled by the presence of renowned Trump imitator, Dennis Alan, and Kim imitator, Howard X. Both were spotted on innumerable advertisements touting Singapore's tourist attractions like the Merlion park and promoting vending machine-retailed Chilli Crab meals. At popular Singaporean mall, Bugis Junction, both imitators conducted a light hearted pre-summit on 9 June, ahead of the actual meet.

Substance Does Not Matter?

Finally, Trump's production team must surely take the prize for producing the ultimate 'promotional video', themed 'Two Leaders, One Destiny', contrasting images of nuclear missiles, starvation, destitution and destruction against construction cranes, beaches with resort potential and two leaders walking into the sunrise of history.

In several quick strokes, the images circulated fast and scintillating through the social media sphere transformed the Trump-Kim Summit into a sentimental keepsake for the ordinary citizen everywhere. This was personalised drama for everyone who wanted to remember *what it was like* that day in history.

Pyongyang was not remiss in this jazzy image-making. The forty-minute video on state TV in DPRK on Kim's journey to and from Singapore projected unprecedented diplomatic brilliance and a celebratory mood. The strategic, military and political substance of the summit appears unimportant.

Still, the razzmatazz would have lost its glitter if not boosted by the "soft power" of comfort food and things that work. Many a journalist expressed appreciation for the food, especially those arriving after a long journey, and for the continuous stream of coffee and tea which energized them when filing their reports.

No longer would 12 June 2018 be about President Trump and Chairman Kim signing a declaration of principles of agreement for bureaucrats to act upon; it was equally a memorable moment for the souvenir hunter and the entertained. It also did not seem to matter that some of this exhilaration may be misplaced.

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