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Trump-Kim Summit

The Failure of American Leadership?

By Bhubhindar Singh

Synopsis

The impact of the Trump-Kim summit on American leadership in Northeast/East Asia is, at best, mixed. While the summit may have strengthened America's leverage in the Korean Peninsula, it failed to reassure its Northeast Asian allies.

Commentary

THE TRUMP-KIM Summit on 12 June 2018 in Singapore was described as historic. It was historic in two ways: firstly, it was the first meeting between leaders of the United States and North Korea (officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea); and secondly, it was meant to 'establish new US-DPRK relations' that signalled the beginning of a long process towards achieving stability on the Korean Peninsula.

Little attention, however, has been given to the impact of the summit on America's long-term strategic leadership in Northeast/East Asia and its ability to maintain the US-led order in the face of increased challenge from China. This impact is best described as mixed. Whilst it did not offer clear reassurances to its allies—South Korea and Japan—the summit could be construed as an encouraging move, bolstering American leverage over the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis China.

Resetting US-DPRK Relations

The Trump-Kim summit was a perfect event for America to reinforce its leadership in East Asia by resetting US-DPRK relations. Though the four-point joint statement was a disappointment compared to the Panmunjom Declaration signed after the Moon-Kim

summit, it resulted in surprising concessions from America that would give North Korea the confidence of a diminishing threat from the US.

This strong push by Washington in resetting US-DPRK relations is a positive development when the larger strategic picture of Northeast/East Asia is taken into account. This reset reinforces American leadership in two ways.

Firstly, the Korean Peninsula occupies a central geographical location in Northeast Asia. Both Koreas share a land and maritime border with China, Russia and Japan. It is perceived as a 'strategic pivot', where the interests of all the major powers in Northeast Asia overlap; is seen as a 'strategic buffer' by China and Japan against direct attack from each other; and viewed by Japan as a 'dagger pointed to Japan's heart' to symbolize how vulnerable Japan is to unfavourable events on the Korean Peninsula.

The dominant power of Northeast Asia is directly related to who controls the Korean Peninsula. This explains the constant intervention of external powers in the affairs of the Korean Peninsula – China, during the Sinocentric Regional Order; Japan, during the age of imperialism; China, Soviet Union and the US during the Cold War, that led to the division of the Korean Peninsula following the Korean War. For the United States to maintain its primacy in Northeast Asia, it is critical that it reinforces its strategic presence in the Korean Peninsula.

Secondly, the strengthened US-DPRK relations increase America's leverage over China in Northeast/East Asia. This is timely due to China's strategic rise and its increased activities in re-ordering East Asia to achieve its own interests. Though the US-led order remains resilient, perceptions of America's decline and isolationism under the Trump administration are widespread in Northeast/East Asia. Trump's policy to bolster its advantage vis-à-vis China over the Korean Peninsula is a positive attempt to challenge these perceptions.

Reassuring Allies?

An important way for the US to reinforce its leadership in Northeast/East Asia has been to reassure its allies. However, the joint statement and discussions at the summit did little in this area.

Trump's agreement to discontinue the joint military exercises with South Korea (ROK) in exchange for North Korea's denuclearisation was a bold concession. Even though this decision is a positive step forward to bringing peace on the Korean Peninsula, the way it was announced was problematic for alliance politics in three ways.

Firstly, the announcement that the US would accept the 'freeze-for-freeze' approach pushed by China caught South Korea by surprise. In response to Trump's declaration that the bilateral exercises will be discontinued, South Korean President Moon Jae-in's office said: "At this point, we need to know President Trump's exact meaning or intentions." This implied that the Trump administration did not consult its ally.

Secondly, Trump's description of the US-ROK exercises as 'provocative' was even more problematic than the declaration to discontinue these exercises. This challenged

the official narratives of both governments, who have previously maintained that these exercises are defensive in nature. Trump's description was not only buying into the North Korean narrative, but also could serve as a justification for North Korea to hold nuclear and ballistic missile tests in the future if US and South Korea decide to resume military exercises.

Thirdly, another worrying point relevant to the long-term military presence of the US military in Northeast Asia was Trump raising the possibility of withdrawing American military forces from South Korea, which would also have negative implications for the US-Japan alliance.

Implications of Summit

The outcome of the bilateral summit seemed to suggest that the Trump administration is determined to reinforce its leadership in Northeast/East Asia. This is in line with the strategy explicated in America's National Security Strategy published in December 2017.

However, the role of the alliances in reinforcing America's leadership in Northeast/East Asia is unclear. To be sure, officials in the Trump administration continue to underscore the importance of the alliance network. This was the message Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, brought when he visited Seoul after the Singapore summit to brief his Japanese and South Korean counterparts.

Whether South Korea and Japan feel reassured by these statements remains open to question. One clear lesson learned from the Trump-Kim summit is that the United States is willing to 'go-it-alone', but, at the same time, expects the allies to support American objectives even when they are not consulted.

What is important for the Trump administration to understand is that American leadership in East Asia is only as strong as its alliances. There must be a convergence of interests between America and its allies on the most important challenges facing the region through active consultation and dialogue. When allies are not reassured, they could either develop more autonomous strategies and/or incrementally display greater accommodation to China – both scenarios are detrimental to American's interests. This could even hasten the shifting of the regional order from a US-led order to a China-led order.

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