



#90

The Summit in Singapore and the Failure of Donald Trump's Diplomacy

Andrei Lankov

About the Author

Andrei Lankov

Professor, Kookmin University (Seoul)

This publication and other papers are available on
<http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/>

The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

© The Foundation for Development and Support
of the Valdai Discussion Club, 2018

42 Bolshaya Tatarskaya st., Moscow, 115184, Russia

The past year and a half in US–North Korea relations have been marked by dramatic events that are interesting in many respects, not least because they reflect President Donald Trump's personal approach towards foreign policy as well as that of his administration.

North Korea's Missile Success

At first glance, every political move related to the North Korean nuclear issue from February 2017 to early June 2018 seems a brilliant success for the Trump administration. However, US diplomats failed to build on it. In fact, the efforts of the US administration ended in complete failure, even though Trump himself is unwilling to admit it. The June 12 summit in Singapore culminated in what can be seen as a major setback for US foreign policy. This outcome could have grave consequences not merely for the US but for the entire nuclear non-proliferation system as well.

Accurate assessment of the aftermath of the US–DPRK summit is impossible without proper recollection of the events that preceded it – in regards to both the radical about-faces in US policy and fundamental changes in North Korea's nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities.

By the year 2017, North Korean engineers, after almost two decades of efforts, were about to reach their long-term goal and came close to developing an ICBM theoretically capable of delivering a nuclear warhead on the Continental United States. In 2017 they developed and successfully tested two versions of such an ICBM – Hwasong-14 (launched twice) and Hwasong-15 (launched once). All the three were tested on a lofted trajectory, i.e. the missiles were

launched to reach their near-maximum altitude and then land not far from the launch site. Having provided a full-scale combat simulation for the ICBMs, this method allowed to avoid penetration of other nations' territory and prevent further diplomatic uproar. The success of the three tests strongly suggests that North Korea has already become, or is about to become, the third country in the world (after Russia and China) capable of striking US territory with nuclear missiles.

In September 2017, North Korea also conducted a detonation of a thermonuclear weapon, a hydrogen bomb with a variable yield of 50 to 100 kilotons. It should be considered the first confirmed DPRK's thermonuclear test. Previously, in January 2016, North Korean media reported hydrogen bomb detonation, yet back then few experts believed the claims. This time, however, there were no doubts left about the thermonuclear character of the test.

North Korean missile and nuclear engineers' efforts have changed the nature of North Korean nuclear programme. Initially, it was generally defensive, despite Pyongyang often using it as diplomatic leverage. Naturally, even at its most modest scale this programme posed a threat to the international non-proliferation regime and as such was opposed by the five officially recognised nuclear powers, including Russia. However, with the development of delivery systems that enable North Korea with means to target a good part of the globe with its missiles, the DPRK nuclear programme could evolve into an offensive one. Such a prospect unsurprisingly caused anxiety even within nations that do not have a particular affection for the US, the latter remaining so far the primary target of North Korean nuclear capabilities.

Trump Incumbent

It so happened that North Korea's missile successes coincided with a sea change in US politics. In January 2017, Donald Trump, a very unconventional leader who made North Korea one of the key issues in his foreign policy platform during the presidential campaign, took office as the 45th president of the United States. Trump accused his predecessors of being soft and indecisive, and assured his supporters that when he became the president, he would act decisively and promptly to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. Since the major changes in North Korean nuclear and missile programme made it so much more dangerous for Washington in 2017, Donald

Trump set about trying to fulfil his campaign promises on North Korea from his very first days in the White House.

'Toughness' promised by Trump was – in part – outright rhetorical. Throughout 2017, the world witnessed fierce high-level diplomatic brawls between the DPRK and the United States, when adversaries would sometimes reach largely unprecedented in the history of foreign relations levels of coarseness. Strictly speaking, Pyongyang diplomats for long time have been at ease with terms befitting either ragtag hucksters or petty punks. (In a private conversation, a high-ranking North Korean diplomat once said that the extensive use of crude expressions is seen in North Korea as a 'specific form of verbal deterrence'.) Therefore, few observers were surprised when Pyongyang would call Trump a 'mentally deranged dotard' and threaten to turn the capital cities of neighbouring countries into 'a sea of fire'. The most recent of such threats with regard to Seoul (or rather, its central districts) came in November 2017. Yet, Trump administration officials retorted with similar eloquence. Trump himself would repeatedly call Kim Jong-un a 'little rocket man' and vow to respond to North Korea's unacceptable behaviour with 'fire and fury the world has never seen'.

Nevertheless, this somewhat comical exchange was not what attracted most attention of observers. Instead, the focus was more on unceasing hints from Trump administration about its willingness to resolve to the military solution in the North Korean nuclear issue. This was not limited to verbal threats and hints: since the summer of 2017, the US military presence in the area adjacent to the Korean Peninsula has been gradually increasing. Rumours that leaked out of the White House confirmed that there were high-ranking officials in Trump's administration who were ready to use military force if North Korea did not make meaningful concessions. Although specific plans for possible military operations were kept secret for obvious reasons, it was generally understood that they were revolving around targeted attacks against military and industrial sites somehow related to developing, manufacturing and deployment of nuclear and missile weapons.

However, the idea to give a pre-emptive strike a try did not enjoy a universal support among the US policy-makers. The State Department – largely sidelined under Trump – opposed it, but it seems the diplomats were not the only ones to disapprove of the military solution. The majority of the US military establishment, whose advice Trump heeded much more than that of the diplomats, were also against the use of force in the matter. The Pentagon was well aware that even a limited military action on the Korean Peninsula could easily escalate into a disaster for the United States.

The threats coming from the White House were taken seriously exactly because the observers were not sure whether Trump was going to push the situation to – or through – the limits. The key reason US presidents for decades have exercised caution and refrained from actual consideration of a military operation against the DPRK was, above all, the location of the South Korean capital. The Seoul metropolitan area is home to about 25 million people, that is half the country's population, and the whole of it is within reach of North Korean heavy artillery.

Clearly, a US military operation is likely to provoke a retaliatory strike from North Korea that might start shelling Seoul. Regardless of further flow of events, such shelling would bring about thousands and even tens of thousands of casualties in Seoul and its suburbs, not to mention enormous economic losses, thus undermining the US-South Korean alliance. Despite South Koreans' generally positive attitude towards the United States, few people in Seoul would appreciate their ally deliberately sacrificing a multitude of South Korean citizens and allowing the nation to suffer a major economic damage while indulging in a relatively low-cost and reckless adventure.

However, it is widely believed that Trump is dismissive of interests of allies, especially if his chosen course of action bolsters security of the United States (and brings economic benefits). Fairly or not, Trump was widely considered someone who could launch a military operation against the DPRK while remaining totally oblivious of the consequences of such a decision.

Today, one cannot be sure whether Trump was really planning to attack the DPRK in 2017, or whether it was merely a well-weighted bluff. Only historians in a relatively distant future will be able to answer this question. However, the behaviour of most of the stakeholders, including China and North Korea, shows that Trump's threats were taken seriously.

During the entire period from Trump's inauguration in January 2017 to early June 2018, i.e. right up to the summit, high-ranking officials from the administration were emphasising that the only acceptable solution of the North Korean issue would be what was called the CVID – 'complete, verifiable, irreversible disarmament' – concept. They would headstrongly insist that North Korea should take immediate steps towards this goal, preferably scrapping its entire arsenal before the end of the year. Only with the summit date approaching, those officials' statements slightly changed. While still persisting on CVID, US officials began to admit that it might take a while to achieve this goal.

The Chinese Threat

Apparently, deep concern over the looming prospects of US military operation was the reason for China's unconventional reaction to the 2017 developments around the Korean nuclear problem. For many years, China was practicing both fair caution and a certain degree of ambiguity towards this issue. As one of the officially recognised nuclear-weapon states under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, China was striving to hold proliferation of nuclear weapons in check and therefore disapproved of Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. At the same time, maintaining of the status quo in Northeast Asia has always been the best strategic choice for China. Therefore, Chinese diplomacy persistently objected to the excessively tough economic sanctions that might undermine North Korea's domestic stability and thus ultimately endanger the Kim Family regime. Beijing is not interested in either a crisis, or even more so – the downfall of the Kims' dynastic rule.

However, in the face of mounting threat of war in the region, China decided to make concessions to the US and agree to exercise toughest pressure yet on North Korea. In the late 2017, China substantially toughened its policy towards DPRK. Particularly, in December 2017, Chinese representatives in the UN Security Council voted for sanctions against Pyongyang unprecedented in their severity. In effect, these sanctions that are still in place are close to a complete embargo because they ban export of those few North Korean items that are in certain demand in international markets – namely, minerals, seafood, textiles and workforce.

Notably, China did not only support these toughest ever sanctions but actually began to enforce them with maximum diligence. Since summer 2017, Chinese customs officers have been checking all cargoes bound for North Korea with unusual thoroughness. Everything that could fall under the new sanctions was subject to confiscation. The Chinese customs, for example, once detained 80,000 first aid kits – just because they contained scissors. Chinese entrepreneurs using cheap North Korean labour were informed that work permits for DPRK citizens would not be extended. Considering that China accounts for 85–90 per cent of all North Korean foreign trade, its tough position on sanctions is of decisive importance. Sanctions against North Korea can only work as long as they are supported by China.

The de facto embargo imposed on North Korea by the UN in December 2017 and supported by China posed both economic and political threat to Pyongyang. Since he took power, Kim Jong-un has launched bold market reforms that are generally very similar to those of Chinese Deng Xiaoping's in the early 1980s. These reforms jumpstarted economic growth, driven primarily by the rapidly growing private sector. Police control over the population has been slightly relaxed. North Korean leadership has all the reasons to believe that an economic crisis, which might strike after several years of rapid rise in living standards, could indeed instigate serious domestic political problems.

Pyongyang Backs Off

Consequently, in 2017 the North Korean leadership faced an unprecedented challenge that is twofold – a credible threat of a US military strike combined with the near certainty that sooner or later new, extremely tough sanctions would deal a heavy blow to the North Korean economy.

Under these circumstances, North Korea made groundbreaking concessions. In late November 2017, immediately after the successful launch of the Hwasong-15 ICBM, Pyongyang declared that it had fully completed the development of its nuclear missile deterrent, thus sending an indirect signal to the world that North Korea has unilaterally stopped its missile and nuclear tests. A few months later, Kim Jong-un made a clear-cut statement calling a moratorium on nuclear tests and ICBM launches.

In his traditional New Year address on January 1, 2018, Kim Jong-un said he was open to reconciliation with South Korea. He also said that North Korean athletes were ready to take part in the Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea. The North Korean Olympic team was accompanied by a high-level government delegation de facto led by Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's sister. Her visit to Seoul where she met with new South Korean President Moon Jae-in was followed by numerous diplomatic contacts between Seoul and Pyongyang, which culminated in the inter-Korean Summit on April 27, 2018, the first in a decade. Moon Jae-in's mediation paved the way for the meeting between Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump. They met in Singapore on June 12, 2018.

In the run-up to the Singapore summit, North Korea made a variety of other unilateral concessions. It released American citizens imprisoned in North Korea

for missionary activities and demolished tunnels of the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site. Of course, one should keep in mind that this site has recently encountered serious technical problems and most likely would have been shut down in the near future anyway. Thus, the real importance of the latter concession should not be overestimated. In addition, Pyongyang officially declared that its long-term goal was denuclearization. As such, this statement contradicted all what the official North Korean media and the officials had said in recent years, persistently stating that the country's nuclear status, all the more so enshrined in the constitution, is not negotiable.

Needless to say, despite all the fuss in the world press, this talk of denuclearization should not be taken seriously. To start with, the North Korean government has an impressive record of making false claims. It is noteworthy that for many years, up to the first nuclear test in 2006, North Korean officials ardently denied the very existence of a military nuclear program and dismissed any notion of nuclear weapon development in their country as 'slander' and 'hostile allegations'. Incidentally, under the provisions of the 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, all nuclear powers, including the US, Russia and China, took a formal pledge to gradually abandon nuclear weapons – yet in practical terms this pledge is purely rhetorical and does not exert even the slightest influence on the real policy of these nations.

To all intents and purposes, North Korea has never intended any 'complete, irreversible and verifiable nuclear disarmament' that the US has for years considered the only acceptable solution to the North Korean nuclear problem. Bitter experience of Iraq and especially Libya has taught the North Korean leaders that nuclear disarmament is suicidal. This is the lesson they have learned by heart. Nevertheless, however unwilling the North Korean leadership might be to give up its nuclear weapons for good, under certain conditions Pyongyang might settle for a certain reduction of its nuclear arsenal. Such a reduction seemed fairly likely when Pyongyang became subject to the unprecedented pressure from the outside.

Pyongyang's main goal in the past six months has obviously been to lower the likelihood of an American military attack and at the same time secure some sanctions relief. Meanwhile, in the medium term Pyongyang's task was to play for time and wait out Trump in the hope that his successor will revert to the more 'conventional' approach to the North Korean issue. Presumably, a future 46th President of the US would be much less willing to put Seoul at risk, or jeopardize the US-South Korean alliance, which would greatly reduce the threat of military action on the peninsula. However, North Koreans could

only hope to 'outwait' Trump if they make tangible concessions that would be enough to 'buy off' Washington.

Indeed, it seemed until very recently that North Korea had been driven into a corner and would be willing to sacrifice much to get out of dire straits. In May 2018, high-ranking officials from the Trump administration (National Security Adviser John Bolton, first and foremost) stated that North Korea 'would be better off without weapons of mass destruction' and should be 'getting rid of all the nuclear weapons... very quickly', as it would be the only acceptable term of the deal with the DPRK. Infuriated, Pyongyang protested, albeit this protest was expressed modestly this time, at least if judged by the usual standards of North Korean diplomatic braggadocio. But Washington responded to North Korean expression of displeasure in a peculiar way – President Trump cancelled the planned summit in Singapore. In less than 12 hours, the North Korean officials effectively apologized, disavowing their earlier statements. After that preparations for the summit were resumed, and the world became even more convinced that Trump's policy of blackmail was highly potent.

Indeed, the policy of threats and pressure pursued by the Trump administration since the early 2017 had appeared surprisingly effective by late spring 2018. The expert community began to talk about potential contours of the deal that could be struck in Singapore, yet without any palpable leaks experts had to engage in guesswork based on their experience. It was often suggested, in particular, that North Korea may agree to transfer part of its reserves of plutonium and uranium to the US or third nations, completely halt operations at the facilities of its nuclear production complex and allow foreign inspectors to visit the known nuclear sites. Some experts even expected that the summit would yield a formal roadmap – a concrete plan and schedule of actions that North Korea would pledge to take on the way to complete nuclear disarmament. The results of the summit proved to be all the more surprising in this respect.

The Singapore Embarrassment

The meeting held in Singapore on June 12, 2018, lasted less than a day and can be described as a diplomatic show. Kim Jong-un and the North Korean delegation mostly avoided the media, while Donald Trump held a lengthy press conference and was generally exuberant about the situation. However, the long-

sought Singapore summit did not live up to the expectations and ended up producing meagre practical results.

The main document signed at the meeting, which is often referred to as the Singapore Declaration, is extremely vague and non-specific. Only one of the four bullet points in the joint statement is definite. It concerns the recovery of Korean War POW/MIA remains and the immediate repatriation of those already identified, which is obviously of little relevance to the international community. The other three points boil down to intention to develop peaceful relations, while the CVID, which was the focal point of the US position before the summit, is not even mentioned. Instead, the document states that North Korea commits to work towards complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

Contrary to expectations, Pyongyang did not make any other concessions in Singapore, although Kim Jong-un said in a private conversation with Donald Trump that Pyongyang would shut down a 'major missile engine testing site'. This is not a substantial concession however, considering that there are four to seven of such sites in North Korea. For his part, President Trump claimed he would suspend the joint military exercises with South Korea. It appeared to be an impromptu decision that caught the Pentagon and the command of the US forces deployed in South Korea unawares. By and large, these two concessions are not very significant, even though it may look as if the US intention to stop military exercises with South Korea is a bigger one compared to Pyongyang's promise to dismantle one of its missile engine testing sites.

Another notable feature of the Singapore summit is that no pledges were made to lift or ease UN sanctions. This leaves the North Korean economy in jeopardy, even though Pyongyang diplomats are working vigorously to neutralize the threat – to some tangible effect. The summit did not introduce any additional restrictions on North Korea's nuclear unilateral programme. In essence, it has not even led to its suspension. Despite Pyongyang's moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests, the main North Korean centres used to produce weapons-grade fissile material, nuclear charges and ICBM components are still in full operation.

The pro-Trump conservative media in the US praised the summit as the president's success that opened the way to North Korea's denuclearization. Donald Trump also hailed 'the denuclearization deal with North Korea' on Twitter. He also tweeted: 'There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from

North Korea.' However, the Singapore summit did not (and could not) end up in a denuclearization commitment on the part of Pyongyang, which will never give up its nuclear weapons for good under any conditions. Moreover, the summit has not even reduced the North Korea's nuclear capability in any noticeable way.

Prospects...

In theory, the Joint Statement signed by Trump and Kim Jong-un in Singapore is to be perceived as a token of mutual good will, paving the way to meaningful negotiations on the DPRK's nuclear disarmament. However, in the immediate aftermath it became clear that talks will not commence right away and are sure to take long time. The main goal of North Korean diplomats remains unchanged: they need to bide their time till Trump's inevitable departure from the White House. That being said, their task seems to have got easier with the recent developments.

First, it has become apparent in recent months that China is bound to revise its position on North Korea again. In fact, Kim Jong-un had three meetings with Xi Jinping between March and June 2018. Such frequent courting is unprecedented for this level of contacts. And it had its effect: since April, a number of reports suggested that Chinese customs officials on the Chinese-DPRK border have become more inclined to look the other way when inspecting transiting goods, while North Korean workers are arriving in China yet again.

The change in China's attitude is primarily attributable to the US-China trade war launched by the Trump administration. While Beijing has always lacked a clear vision of how to deal with North Korea, it seems that its leadership currently believes that China should refrain from being excessively proactive in backing up American interests and goals there. It could even be the opposite, with North Korea serving as a useful irritant, a leverage of a certain kind, to be employed against the United States. Consequently, China will probably seek (and find) ways to bypass sanctions.

Second, after Trump showcased the Singapore summit as his personal victory, neither the US President, nor anyone from his administration can admit that the DPRK's nuclear disarmament is still a far cry from reality or

that the Summit was virtually fruitless, without considerable reputation losses. On the contrary, it is in the best Trump's interests to razzle-dazzle his voters and supporters with chants of the denuclearization process 'constantly gaining momentum'. By reverting to hostile rhetoric and threats, he would actually acknowledge that the Singapore summit failed to produce any tangible results. In this circumstances, it would be all but impossible for the US to re-enact its 'maximum pressure' policy effectively, which means that a unique opportunity of persuading Pyongyang to make significant cuts to its missile and nuclear programs is lost irrevocably.

Nonetheless, the Trump factor should not be ignored outright. Given the US president's controversial reputation, North Korea is likely to remain cautious, at least to some extent, when dealing with Trump's White House. Most likely, decision makers in Pyongyang will refrain from actions that Trump might construe as a personal, direct blow to his reputation. This suggests that the DPRK's unilateral moratorium on nuclear and ICBM tests could hold as long as Trump is in the White House. Pyongyang will not dare to provoke Trump, not out of sympathy, but because it would be a very dangerous thing to do. However, it is clear that all these fears will become irrelevant once Trump is no longer incumbent. This is when North Korea is likely to go full throttle on its nuclear and missile program.

...And Lessons To Be Learned

Overall, the Singapore summit could be considered one of the most impressive failures of the US diplomacy in recent years. The meeting followed what would seem to be quite successful, albeit essentially reckless, actions of the Trump administration throughout 2017. With blackmail, pressure and brinkmanship, the US diplomacy forced Pyongyang into making concessions and managed to bring it to the negotiating table without preconditions. Yet the American diplomats failed to exploit their success and pin North Korea down.

The most plausible explanation of what happened is that, if numerous leaks from Washington are anything to go by, actual diplomacy towards North Korea is effected by President Trump personally, and he, by virtue of his nature, is not keen to meddling in details and going through thorough preparations for talks.

Highly likely, Trump came to Singapore not being well briefed on the overall lamentable history of the US-North Korean nuclear talks, which have been dragging out, stumbling, over and again, for about three decades. Besides, Trump might have been interested not that much in getting real concessions, but rather in selling them to the US public. When he came to grips with the fact that the deal of CVID for the DPRK cannot be struck on-site, Trump might have well embraced the idea to turn the Singapore meeting into a politically insignificant, yet flashy, show bound to impress the domestic TV audience.

This entire case reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of Donald Trump's general approach to the US foreign policy. On the one hand, his aggressive strong-arm diplomacy, or 'blackmail diplomacy', can work and at times even yield impressive results. On the other, his disdain for systematic work and yen for staged effects (intended solely for the audience at home) may make exploiting of the initial success a difficult and even unattainable objective. Facing determined resistance from his counterparts and discovering that a showy solution his supporters would understand was out of reach, Trump retreated. Furthermore, he did not even try (or perhaps did not want) to obtain even those concessions that were quite achievable. In all likelihood, Trump's reliance on the external, non-substantial, yet showy effect is the weakest aspect of his diplomacy.

At the same time, the Singapore summit to a great extent turned out to be a declaration of success for North Korean diplomacy. A combination of ostentatious flexibility on lesser matters and toughness on really important points, as well as a knack for playing on great powers' antagonisms were demonstrated by Kim Jong-un and his negotiators in full measure. The young North Korean leader managed to show his mettle of a good diplomat.



Council on Foreign and Defense Policy



 ValdaiClub

 ValdaiClub

 ValdaiClub

valdai@valdaiclub.com