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TAKEAWAYS FROM TRUMP-KIM SINGAPORE SUMMIT: A SKEPTIC'S VIEW

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12 June 2018, Singapore witnessed history. For the first time a US President and a North Korean leader came face to face with each other to sign a mutually agreed framework for establishing a peaceful Korean peninsula, primarily aimed at preventing any future nuclear crisis emanating in the region. Considering that US-DPRK have always had a Faceoff-Standoff kind of dynamics, this development is indeed a fresh note touching their nuclear dyad. After a series of escalating nuclear rhetoric, with DPRK allegedly claiming capability to produce a hydrogen bomb, and the Panmunjom declaration almost getting lost due to the cancellation of talks once, the present summit appears to be a step in the right direction. The Singapore Summit produced a joint declaration document¹ that concluded the essence of their meeting in four points, in less than 100 words. To sum up, both countries have put forward four major commitments: a) to establish new US-DPRK relations b) take joint efforts to build lasting peace in the Korean Peninsula c) affirmation to the Panmunjom

declaration of 27 April 2018, and work towards denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, as well as d) a commitment to recover the POWs including immediate repatriation. This is indeed a huge precedent as both sides have been able to sign a document with valuable pledges.

However, these valuable pledges are just that – ‘pledges’. A lot of ground work needs to be done by both sides if these pledges are to be actualized. One can argue that the summit did not produce anything substantially different than the previous commitments from past agreements that would remain ‘life altering’ to either US-DPRK relations or DPRK-RoK relations and the larger goal of maintaining security and stability of the Korean Peninsula. To start with, on the grand idea of ‘denuclearisation’, the Singapore declaration shied away from making any mention of the Comprehensive (sometimes Complete) Verifiable, Irreversible Disarmament (Dismantlement) of nuclear weapons. Caution should be exercised while hoping that this goal of

denuclearisation will be met any sooner even when the declaration has said so. The first, obvious question that comes to mind is “When has any country, after testing its nuclear capability, ever given up its nuclear weapons capability”? The answer is – “Never”. While there is no harm in being hopeful in the North Korean case, the reality dictates against it. In this context two separate but related variables need to be connected. First, is the recent constitutional amendment by DPRK in 2012 that legitimizes its pursuit of nuclear weapons and officially makes the pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development of the country a goal to be achieved simultaneously. Second is the North Korean principle of *Juche* that is the core philosophy of the country, which implies self-reliance and autonomy. According to scholars that observe North Korea closely, “the North Korean Government has worked to inspire the entire nation with the *Juche* ideology...”² It is a coherent body of thought that reflects in North Korean understanding of its dynamics of relations with other countries and also guides its perception of the international system as well. In this regard it is important to ask the question: “By giving up nuclear weapons – a pursuit that was followed for more than three decades – how is DPRK adhering to its *Juche* philosophy”? Another vague pledge that is the outcome of the Singapore summit is the American pledge to suspend military exercises with South Korea as a quid-pro-quo for denuclearization. This is a significant concession and an excellent step that promises

the potential to denuclearize, because it mutes North Korea’s threat perception from US-RoK and thus negates the need for North Korea to possess nuclear weapons. It is to be noted that this however, may not actually be realized. Interestingly, this huge concession that involves the security of US’ important ally was given without even consulting South Korea. Even if it is assumed that these military exercises will be cancelled, how will the US assure South Korea that it (the US) will be a responsible security ally is not clear. Let us assume that it will do so by strengthening military aid, but will that not further form North Korea’s threat perceptions and make it unsure of ‘peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula’ –the second most important goal of the Singapore Summit?

Thus, to conclude, one may argue that the summit was able to produce an ambitious, non-binding document that may not result in any tectonic shift in the dynamics of the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula; after all it is easy to reach an agreement when the pledges are vague, unbinding, without concrete timelines and a methodology to progress it, promising a hypothetical peace scenario. This seems like an ‘up-cycled’ promise of some de-escalation of tension between the US and DPRK without substantial consequences for the future of peace as promised to the people.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ “Full text of US-North Korea joint statement in Singapore”, (2018) 12 June 2018, Available at <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20180612/p2g/00m/0in/100000c>, Accessed on 13 June 2018

²Jina Kim, (2014)“ The North Korean Nuclear Weapons Crisis: The Nuclear Taboo Revisited”, Palgrave Mcmillian, UK, pp.42

