



US-North Korea Summit: An Assessment

*Dr Jojin V. John**

On June 12, 2018, President of the United States, Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un had a Summit in Singapore. It was the first-ever meeting between a sitting US President and a North Korean leader. At the Summit, the leaders adopted a joint statement, calling for a new era of US-North Korea relations. President Trump committed to provide a security guarantee to North Korea.¹ In this regard, he announced the discontinuation of the joint US-South Korea annual military exercises.² Kim Jong-un “reaffirmed his firm and unwavering comment to complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula”.³

The joint statement adopted three broad principles.⁴

- Commitment to establish a “new US-DPRK relations.”
- Joint effort to establish a peace regime in the Korean Peninsula
- Working towards the goal of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. In this regard, North Korea reaffirmed its denuclearization commitment, which it made through Panmunjom Declaration of April 27.

President Trump and Chairman Kim also agreed to recover and repatriate the remains of prisoners of war and soldiers who were declared missing in action during the Korean War. They also committed to start the follow-up negotiations to achieve the agreed commitments at the earliest day possible.

Assessment

The Singapore summit of President Trump and President Kim was historic, not only because it was the first event summit-level meeting between the US and North Korea, but also it scripted a new narrative of the US-North Korea relation. President Trump said that he has come to the Summit to deliver a “message of hope and vision and a message of peace”.⁵ Chairman Kim in his remarks said that the “world would witness an important change”.⁶

The Summit also marked the beginning of a new phase of US-North Korea relations by initiating three simultaneous processes as envisioned by the joint statement. First, it committed

to a process leading to the establishment of a “new” US-North Korea relation. This invariably means taking steps to normalize and to establish diplomatic relationship between the two countries. The second principle involves the establishment of a peace regime in the Korean Peninsula to replace the armistice, thus to bring a formal end to the Korean War. The third principle of the joint statement commits to set in motion to a process of denuclearization with the goal of achieving a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. North Korea on its part reaffirmed its commitment to denuclearization as stated in the Panmunjom Declaration of April 28, 2018.

Though the joint statement is vague on the definition and process of denuclearization, it has become clear what it is not. The denuclearization doesn't mean a unilateral denuclearization of North Korea and involves quid-pro-quo. It has also become clear that it will be a phased process involving multiple stages. The details of how, when and under what condition is yet to emerge.

As President Trump stated, the Singapore Declaration is a comprehensive document, which provides a broad framework and general direction to refurbish the unsettled US-North Korea relations. In essence, Singapore Declaration is aspirational and above all a political statement of the top leadership. This is what makes June 12 Summit different from the previous US-North Korean agreements, which followed a bottom up-detailed process-oriented approach lacking political will.

Apart from the top down approach reflected in the Singapore Summit, the signing of a comprehensive agreement indicates a fundamental departure in Washington's framing of the North Korean problem. Setting motion to a parallel process to establish diplomatic normalization, peace regime and nuclear free-Korean Peninsula, Washington no longer view North Korea's nuclear programme as an isolated issue.

The Singapore Summit was also made possible in the context of President Trump's deal-making approach to foreign policy departing from previous administration's emphasis on value-driven foreign policy. North Korea's bad human rights record has been a hindrance and in many cases a non-starter in the past.

Singapore Declaration, which aspires for diplomatic normalization, peace regime, and denuclearization with a top-down, pragmatic and comprehensive approach, has much in common with the Panmunjom Declaration.⁷ Common grounds shared in these two documents indicate a policy convergence between Washington and Seoul. Policy divergence between Washington and Seoul was a major stumbling block to South Korea's engagement approach to North Korea in the past. Washington's approach also shares similarity with Chinese and Russian proposal of “double freeze” and “dual-track approach”.⁸ Washington's decision to discontinue its joint military exercise with South Korea and North Korea's announcement of freezing its nuclear and missile testing and its dismantling of nuclear and missile engine testing site add up to the double free proposal. The comprehensive approach that the joint statement envisions is comparable to a “dual-track approach” that suggests the parallel initiatives of denuclearization and the establishment of a peace regime in the Korean Peninsula.

For North Korea, the summit was a major political victory. A summit with US was something that the North Korean leadership has been trying for quite some time. From a domestic political perspective, Kim Jong-un managed to achieve what his father and grandfather couldn't achieve, a significant boost to his image. By standing on an equal footing with the US

President, Chairman Kim elevated North Korea's status and legitimacy in the international community.

Conclusion

President Trump's decision to have a summit and to depart from traditional Washington's approach to North Korea was a bold move. The underlying vision that is reflected in Washington's new North Korea policy is that of a 'cautious engagement', which can be comparable to President Moon Jae-in's vision. It is an approach that seeks to make North Korea a 'normal country' by co-opting it into the international community by ending its diplomatic isolation and by facilitating economic development. This involves a great deal of belief and confidence in Kim Jong-un's leadership and its desire to bring about a change in North Korean behaviour.

The approach is apparently a political gamble dismissed by pessimists and traditionalist as nothing but yet another appeasement policy. It involves the risks of repeating the past. However, past experiences and risk associated also suggest that there is nothing alternative to a political and diplomatic solution in the Korean Peninsula. Considering the fact that now there is greater political will and convergence in vision among countries directly involved, there is a better chance of a resolution even if it may take a longer period of time.

The Summit appears to have reduced the risk of an armed conflict in the Korean Peninsula and created a political environment for diplomacy. Hence, the Summit was successful in breaking the ice between the two long term adversaries. However, the change in status quo has also opened a new situation of uncertainty for all parties for fresh strategic maneuvering. It seems that in the new context all major countries directly involved in the Korean Peninsula issue prefer to deal with North Korea bilaterally to maximize their interest, which will invariably, strengthen the North Korean position. China and Russia have already taken steps to strengthen their relationship with Pyongyang.

Trump's decision to halt joint military exercise and the mention of cost and eventual withdrawal of American forces from Korea has also raised worries about Washington's alliance commitments and its security role in Asia especially in Japan and South Korea. The change in the Korean Peninsula status quo mounts challenges to the post-war Northeast Asian security order opening up the dangers of Japan going nuclear.

Finally, it is a mistake to see developments in the Korean Peninsula as an isolated incident. North Korea though continues to remain a security puzzle but is also becoming an important instrument of domestic political mileage and international bargaining for the Trump administration. Hence, it is too early to call the Singapore Summit a success without grasping a clear picture of how North Korean deal fits into President Trump's domestic and foreign policy calculations.

**Dr Jojin V. John, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

Endnotes

¹ "Joint Statement of President Donald J. Trump of the United States of America and Chairman Kim Jong Un of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea at the Singapore Summit", White House, June 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-president-donald-j-trump-united-states-america-chairman-kim-jong-un-democratic-peoples-republic-korea-singapore-summit/>

² "Press Conference by President Trump", White House, June 12, 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-conference-president-trump/>

³ Joint Statement, Op.cit

⁴ Ibid

⁵ "Press Conference by President Trump", Op.cit

⁶ "Historic First DPRK-US Summit Meeting and Talk Held", KCNA, June 13, 2018, www.kcna.kp

⁷ "Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Unification of the Korean Peninsula", KOREA.NET, April 27, 2018, korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Press-Releases/view?articleId=3354&pageIndex=1&gov=

⁸ "Joint statement by the Russian and Chinese foreign ministries on the Korean Peninsula's problems", MOFA, Russian Federation, July 4, 2017, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/2807662