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Why so much Western disdain for the Trump-Kim summit's successes in Singapore?

Tom Plate says positive outcomes for North Korea and China in the 'Peninsula Cup' don't make the US and South Korea losers, and the Western media's reaction betrays a cold-war world view that is out of step with the geopolitical reality

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Tom Plate

Who won? That a [couple of leaders](#) ranked among the least-cuddly on the face of the Earth could produce something of great potential value was – let's face it – the longest of long shots. But history does not always move in the straightest of lines, and the

unusual is often difficult to quickly accept. The cascade of negative reactions from most of the Western media and some public to the [Singapore summit agreement](#) is not in itself surprising. What is disturbing is the compulsive rush to turn a positive into a negative.

True, many sentient human beings find it difficult to look in an emotionally detached way at [Donald Trump](#) with his [gigantic gaffes](#) or [Kim Jong-un](#) with his gigantic gulags. But, without at least some measure of detachment, all metrics of discernment evaporate.

Neither the leader of the United States nor the leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea remotely resembles virtue incarnate.

But virtue incarnate can be overrated – it does not always produce positive results and sometimes does the reverse. Legendary sociologist Max Weber put it this way: “The early Christians knew full well the world is governed by demons ... it is not true that good can only follow from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant.”

The oft-cited example is Winston Churchill (“goodness incarnate”) working with Stalin (“evil incarnate”) against Hitler (“evil beyond incarnate”). Necessity is sometimes the pushiest mother of anti-convention.

The June 12 Singapore summit agreement is further devalued for [deficiency of detail](#). But an abundance of detail can be a ticking bomb in an agreement the success of which is ultimately dependent on political will rather than precision of terms.

In 1994, the stitched together Agreed Framework between the US and North Korea offered more detail than a Shanghai Metro map. Though negotiated on the US side by gifted diplomat Robert Gallucci, it collapsed after a few years amid the usual finger-pointing.

Then came 2005: after years of hyped six-party talks in Beijing, there came a promising accord on normalisation and denuclearisation that offered new details while recycling old ones. Hailed by many, including (alas) myself, as if salvation for the [Korean](#)

[peninsula](#) were finally at hand, it wound up evaporating into rhetorical fumes.

“The Singapore deal is a different animal and might just play out with originality”

The Singapore deal is a different animal and might just play out with originality. Rather than a diplomatic talkathon, with North Korean negotiators trembling in fear for their lives if they deviated an inch from the Pyongyang playbook, the Singapore round came about after good, if rushed, roadwork by Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) and US diplomats paved the way for the Trump-Kim reality show.

To be sure, one good episode does not a hit series make: the game of war and peace is long and arduous. As Singapore’s Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong put it to me in [an interview](#) in late May: “This summit is taking place at not very long notice. It is not easy to make a sudden breakthrough, but it is the first step towards both sides resuming a dialogue.”

When viewed this way – with patience and perspective – jump-starting a normalisation and denuclearisation process, perhaps leading to the giant leap for mankind that everyone wants, could prove no minor favour to East Asian peace and stability. But the Western media seemed to be in a tizzy to tally a final score, as if judging a sporting event, and forthwith presented the “Peninsula Cup” to Kim Jong-un and [Chinese President Xi Jinping](#).

“Nobody greeted the news from Singapore with more delight than China,” concluded one prominent pundit writing in *The New Yorker*, airing what turned out to be almost the consensus Western perspective on the summit.

“Western strategic thinking tends to quantify only win-lose outcomes, and the media reflects this binary philosophy”

What explains the persistent pessimism? Putting aside the immense US media animosity to Trump, Western political self-confidence is, in fact, at a very low ebb. Western strategic thinking tends to quantify only win-lose outcomes, and the media reflects this binary philosophy as if in a post-cold-war trance.

This observation seems truer in the Trump era than the Obama presidency, but the march of binary melancholy is not new. This world view betrays a deep lack of respect for the complexity and priorities of other cultures and political systems.

In reality, today's world is one vast network of codependency (environmental, economic, health). Before too long, narrow-minded practitioners of gain-loss geopolitics will find history leaving them behind.

China's delight, after all, is everyone's gain if it motivates its neighbour, North Korea, to stay a proper peaceful course. Can anyone imagine proposing a durable East Asia peace plan that China opposes? Those who knock the Singapore statement because it has Beijing's approval must still be reading international relations textbooks half a century old. The utilitarian geopolitics of yesteryear won't get us past tomorrow.

Consider the roiling [trade tension](#) between Beijing and Washington, that didn't originate with the current US administration. Even so, in pressing the issue, Trump went from taking the bull by the horns with North Korea – to becoming a bull in the China shop. The Xi government's problem is that, if it reacts to every Trump policy it doesn't like, Beijing will become one of the led rather than a prospective leader.

So, who won? Too early to say, but my best premature bet is South and possibly North Korea. A total of 76 million Koreans live on that peninsula, after all. Don't they count?

Columnist Tom Plate, the author of the book *Yo-Yo Diplomacy*, is vice-president of the Pacific Century Institute and a professor at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles