

This opinion piece by PCI Board Member, Professor Chung-in Moon, appeared in the Foreign Affairs on Tuesday, June 19, 2018



JONATHAN ERNST / REUTERS U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meet at the start of their summit at the Capella Hotel on the resort island of Sentosa, Singapore, June 2018.

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June 19, 2018

North KoreaSouth Korea

## There Were No Losers at the Singapore Summit

### What Critics of the U.S.–North Korean Meeting Get Wrong

By *Chung-in Moon*

Immediately after U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed a joint declaration at the end of last week's [summit](#) in Singapore, I received a harsh assessment of the meeting from a conservative colleague in South Korea. In his view, the summit was “a total failure. They failed to agree on CVID [complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization]. It is a victory for North Korea.” Other experts in Seoul raised concerns about the future of the U.S.–South Korean alliance following Trump's abrupt announcement that South Korean–U.S. “war games” would be suspended, as well as his decision not to raise the issue of human rights with Kim. In this sense, there is a paradoxical similarity between South Korean conservatives' and the American liberal mainstream's criticisms of Trump and his [agreement](#) with the North Korean leader.

Yet as South Korean President Moon Jae-in explained to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on June 13 during his visit to Seoul, public sentiment in South

Korea is very different from that expressed by experts. According to one survey conducted a week before the meeting, 81 percent of South Koreans expressed an optimistic attitude toward the summit and its prospects. More important, Trump is now viewed as a champion of peace and denuclearization in the country. This represents an amazing transformation of his image.

South Koreans still vividly remember Trump's remarks at the United Nations in September of last year: "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea....The United States is ready, willing, and able, but hopefully this will not be necessary." This came after his provocative statement in August: "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen." These were truly frightening words. No wonder South Korean media portrayed Trump as a warmonger and the public shuddered at his rhetoric throughout 2017.

Contrast those comments to Trump's stunning remarks after the Singapore summit. "When I came in, people thought we were probably going to war with North Korea. If we did, millions of people would have been killed." He went even further, saying, "the U.S. must pursue a chance to avert nuclear conflict at all costs." With these words, Trump went from being a callous warmonger into an unlikely hero for peace in the eyes of many South Koreans. Of course, this could change at any time. For now, however, the South Korean public is deeply grateful to Trump for his peacemaking attitude and his determination to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue through dialogue and negotiation.

## A PROMISING PATH TO PEACE

My colleague's characterization of North Korea as the winner of the summit seems misleading. In a war there are losers and winners but in diplomacy there are rarely black-and-white outcomes. Rather than keeping score, the goal is to find acceptable compromises for both sides. Although there might be differences in relative gains, diplomatic negotiation usually entails an imperfect win-win outcome. That was the case with the Singapore summit. The United States was assured that North Korea is committed to complete denuclearization, while the North was assured of a new relationship with the United States and a security guarantee. South Korea was also a beneficiary of the summit, because the Singapore declaration explicitly reaffirmed the April 2018 Panmunjom Declaration between Seoul and Pyongyang regarding denuclearization and the building of a peace regime. So, too, was China a winner, because its proposal for a "double suspension" of both North Korea's nuclear and missile activities and U.S. military exercises with South Korea, and the dual-track approach to denuclearization and a peace regime, were all reflected in the signed statement and post-summit

announcements. In short, there were no losers in Singapore, which is quite an accomplishment.

The concern my colleague expressed about the absence of CVID in the Singapore joint statement, as well as other experts' concerns about the lack of a timeline on denuclearization, are well taken. Yet these should not be considered signs of failure. During the Panmunjom summit, North and South Korean leaders had an in-depth discussion of the issue of CVID, but they agreed to use the term "complete denuclearization" instead. CVID was coined during the time of the U.S. negotiations with Libya in 2003, and carries with it a semantic connotation of unilateral surrender on the part of North Korea. That is why Pyongyang has been extremely sensitive about the use the term CVID. At the same time, Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington have a common understanding of "complete denuclearization" as synonymous with CVID. As far as the lack of a detailed timeline, summits usually deal only with the big picture and general framework of bilateral relations. The first summit in the history of U.S.–North Korean relations was no exception. Specifics such as the scope, contents, methods, and timeline for building a peace regime and getting rid of North Korea's nuclear threat should be dealt with at working-level talks. Thus, it seems premature and even presumptuous to say that the lack of a CVID clause in the document represents a failure of the entire summit.

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"We will be stopping the war games [with South Korea], which will save us a tremendous amount of money. It is very provocative," Trump said after the summit. Of all the news coming out of Singapore, this probably caused the biggest commotion among conservative critics in Seoul, as well as skeptics in Washington. First, they argued that Trump's remark seriously weakens the 70-year alliance between South Korea and the United States, not only because it undermines combat readiness but also because his mentioning of the costs of joint military training puts American credibility as an ally into question. Second, some experts argue that stopping war games is a mistake because it amounts to a major concession by Trump for little in return from Kim. To them, it is a serious violation of the concept of reciprocity in negotiations. Finally, by using the term "provocative," Trump is accused of having delegitimized what have always been seen as legitimate military exercises and training between Washington and Seoul.



KCNA VIA REUTERS

U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un sign documents in Singapore, June 2018.

For its part, the South Korean government has shown a prudent and open-minded attitude on this issue. Military representatives from both countries will soon be discussing the specifics of Trump's decision. In my view, however, a temporary suspension should not be construed as a reduction or an elimination of these exercises, and its impact on the alliance and combat readiness will remain minimal. Moreover, this has been done before—the United States suspended Team Spirit exercises in 1992, 1994, and 1995, which were considerably larger than current ones such as Key Resolve, Foal Eagle, and the Ulchi Freedom Guardian. Moreover, Trump's decision is conditional—suspending the war games is tied to the process of negotiation. It also seems to have been conceived as a reciprocal gesture. In the words of Trump on Twitter: “Hostages are back home, will be getting the remains of our great heroes back to their families, no missiles shot, no research happening, sites closing.” For him, the suspension of war games is to reward North Korea's proactive concessions. Trump's gesture also has an anticipatory function. Despite tremendous opposition at home and abroad, he decided to suspend the military exercises. In return, the North is now obliged to reciprocate by taking bold steps toward denuclearization. It is a sort of down payment on Kim's investment in peace.

Finally, Trump was criticized for not taking a tough stance on human rights violations in the North, reminiscent of conservative critiques of former South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Liberals in South Korea take human rights seriously, having struggled to turn the country's own military dictatorship into a true liberal democracy only a few decades ago. Moon himself was a student activist and human rights lawyer during that struggle. And all Koreans, regardless of ideology, feel a profound concern for the well-being of their brothers and sisters living in the North. Many have thought long and hard about how to integrate the issue of human rights into an overall strategy for dealing with North Korea. There is no perfect or easy solution. We must be smart and think in terms of the long view.

## THE FUTURE OF NEGOTIATIONS

The first step is the prioritization of the agenda in dealing with North Korea. Pyongyang has been subject to international criticism over numerous issues such as nuclear weapons, ballistic missile testing, chemical and biological weapons programs, cyberattacks, human rights violations, and the deterioration of the conditions of basic human needs. The United States cannot solve all these issues in one fell swoop. It is essential to prioritize them in terms of urgency. The primary focus should now be on the nuclear issue. Progress made in this area will eventually lead to breakthroughs on the human rights issue through enhanced mutual understanding and trust-building. Second, there is spillover effect from peace to human rights. Ending the hostility that dominates North Korean relations with the United States and other countries, building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, and integrating North Korea in the community of nations will translate into profound improvements in the lives of average North Koreans. We cannot pretend that the human rights problem will be fixed easily or soon, but we also should not miss the opportunity to encourage systemic improvements in the North.

The Singapore process is not perfect, but it has laid the foundation for a constructive path toward denuclearization and peace-building in Korea. We should be patient and prudent as we see future negotiations forward, and hold off on rendering any final judgments that would not only be premature but that could undermine the very process that Trump and Kim have begun.