

# Getting Back to Singapore

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by John Delury

Exactly one year ago today, I was wandering Singapore's Downtown Core awaiting the outcome of the drama unfolding, behind closed doors, just a few miles away on Sentosa Island. The whole thing felt rather surreal; a summit that seemed to defy history. Only a few weeks before, Donald Trump had called it off, spurring Moon Jae-in to hold an impromptu one-on-one session with Kim Jong-un in order to get things back on track. Once Trump recommitted to a summit, he sought to moderate expectations, emphasizing that it would only mark the beginning of a long process. "I think we are going to have a relationship, and it will start on June 12," Trump told the press gaggle assembled on the White House lawn as he announced the meeting was back on.

Given how far both men had traveled and how much was at stake, the dialogue on Sentosa that day was remarkably brief. It struck me as especially un-Korean that they did not even have a meal together. But their body language in front of the cameras before and after private talks suggested rapport. The big reveal in terms of substance came at the signing ceremony, when Trump held up the Joint Statement as the cameras snapped. "I think our whole relationship with North Korea and the Korean Peninsula is going to be a much different situation than it was in the past," he affirmed, Chairman Kim sitting and smiling at his side. "We both want to do something. We both are going to do something, and we have developed a very special bond."

Later that afternoon, at a solo press conference, Trump read from prepared remarks and said that the day's

**If Singapore opened the door to real progress, why do we find ourselves, a year later, seemingly stuck once again in the all-too-familiar quagmire of frustrating negotiations with North Korea? Since Singapore, Trump frequently comes back to the refrain of doing a deal with Kim, and when he talks about "the relationship", he refers to his personal relationship with Kim Jong-un. For Kim Jong-un, on the other hand, the relationship in need of transformation is not with the person of Donald Trump, but with the United States of America. Kim has to look beyond Trump and beyond a "deal". Trump is trying to negotiate what is, essentially, a business deal whereby the United States buys out North Korea's nukes, at an acceptable cost, by leveraging the pressure of sanctions and promise of foreign investment. But Kim is not looking for a deal in that sense. Kim is trying to navigate a new relationship wherein the United States views and treats North Korea as a friend. Changing the relationship takes time—it cannot be done in a meeting or two.**

events had shown that "adversaries can indeed become friends". He announced that the US would suspend joint military exercises with South Korea, and that he looked forward to visiting Pyongyang and host Kim at the White House "at the appropriate time". Trump talked about the promotional video made for Kim, featuring a glimmering future of North Korea as an economic powerhouse; the last Asian tiger. He sensed that Kim wanted that future, and promised the sky was the limit.

Trump said people would be impressed at how much he had gotten, in return for giving up very little. But the initial reaction from media pundits, as well as many experts, ranged from disappointment at the lack of detail, to dismay that Trump had allowed himself to be conned into thinking Kim would give up his nukes. Sitting in a nearby café, perusing the Joint Statement over kaya toast and coffee, I had a different impression. The document struck me as an artless yet sturdy foundation for transformative progress. One phrase leapt out from the page, repeated four times in a 400-word communiqué: the two leaders agreed to “establish new US-DPRK relations”. That was the key to unlock a different future. The key to progress on North Korea policy—including, but not limited to, steps towards complete denuclearization—is to change the nature of US-North Korean relations. Trump, with a bit of help from his ally in Seoul, was opening the door to a new world.

If Singapore opened the door to real progress, why do we find ourselves, a year later, seemingly stuck once again in the all-too-familiar quagmire of frustrating negotiations with North Korea? The many post-mortems about what went wrong in Hanoi may, in focusing on the details, overlook a more fundamental problem. We appear to be stuck in the conceptual gap between transforming a relationship (Singapore) and doing a deal (Hanoi).

For Trump, it is possible that the distinction does not register. His worldview, after all, is defined by and as the Art of the Deal. Consider, for example, a revealing exchange during the Singapore press conference, when a journalist pressed Trump on how he could “ensure” Kim would carry through the promise to “denuke”. Trump first challenged the premise: Can you “ensure” anything, he asked rhetorically. How can I ensure you will sit down properly after asking this question? There was only one thing Trump felt certainty about: “All I can say is they want to make a deal. That’s what I do. My whole life has been deals. I’ve done great at it. That’s what I do. And I know when somebody wants a deal

and when somebody doesn’t. A lot of politicians don’t. That’s not their thing. But it is my thing.”

In the year since Singapore, Trump frequently comes back to the refrain of doing a deal with Kim, and when he talks about “the relationship”, he refers to his personal relationship with Kim Jong-un. Trump’s tweet after North Korea’s first missile test since November 2017 was typical: “Anything in this very interesting world is possible, but I believe that Kim Jong Un fully realizes the great economic potential of North Korea, and will do nothing to interfere or end it. He also knows that I am with him and does not want to break his promise to me. Deal will happen!”

For Kim Jong-un, on the other hand, the relationship in need of transformation is not with the person of Donald Trump, but with the United States of America. The making of “deals”—small or big, good or bad—is just one part of a larger process of transforming the bilateral relationship. Trump represents an important interlocutor, but also a temporary one. Kim is a 35-years-old hereditary “Supreme Leader” who expects to be in charge of his country long after Trump leaves office. Kim has to look beyond Trump and beyond a “deal”. He wants a new and different kind of relationship with the United States. One that allows him to carry out his explicit strategic priority, announced in April 2018, of focusing “all efforts” on economic development. Kim also appears to be pursuing an implicit strategy of repositioning North Korea in the context of intensifying geopolitical competition between the United States and China.

For Kim, deals are means to other ends; for Trump, the deal is an end-in-itself. Trump is trying to negotiate what is, essentially, a business deal whereby the United States buys out North Korea’s nukes, at an acceptable cost, by leveraging the pressure of sanctions and promise of foreign investment. But Kim is not looking for a deal in that sense. Kim is trying to navigate a new relationship wherein the United States views and treats North Korea as a friend.

Changing the relationship takes time—it cannot be done in a meeting or two. It also has to manifest in manifold forms—political, security, economic and cultural. New economic linkages to the United States and its ally South Korea are not sufficient incentives

to convince Kim to surrender his nuclear deterrent, but elements in a comprehensive process of assuring Kim that the relationships have really changed. It is on such a basis, and through such a process, that complete denuclearization becomes conceivable.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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