

# US - North Korea Relations on the Anniversary of the First Trump - Kim Summit

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by Robert E. Kelly

One year ago, US President Donald Trump and North Korean supreme leader Kim Jong-un met in Singapore. This was the first ever meeting of a US president with a North Korean leader. The symbolism was enormous. Media coverage at the time was breathless about dramatic change in the air. The South Korean government of President Moon Jae-in coined a new slogan: 'Peace, a new era.' Trump, on his return home, tweeted that the North Korean nuclear threat was over.

A year later, this ebullience is unmerited. There has been disappointingly little movement on the core political and strategic issues which divide North Korea from the US, and from South Korea. By core issues, I mean the regime's (1) political identity – its human rights violations, personality cult, police state, totalist social control, and so on; and (2) strategic choices – most obviously its nuclear missile deployment. On these points, disappointingly, there has been almost no progress. American MIA remains from the Korean War have been returned in accord with the Singapore summit declaration, and the North and South have slightly demilitarized the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) between them in accord with their summits. But these are side issues, designed to grease the wheels of the larger negotiations, especially over nuclear warheads and missiles.

Few analysts thought that the regime would make any concessions on its political character, so it is unfair to blame Trump or Moon for stasis there. North Korea is still the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – a brutal, orwellian gangster fiefdom. There was some hope of progress on human rights, especially after Trump invited

**A year after the first summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, little has changed in the strategic situation in Korea. The North has retained its nuclear weapons, missiles, and forward conventional force structure, while the US has similarly given up nothing substantial. The Korean status quo is deeply enduring and not simply subject to presidential whim. The stalemate is due to both sides' refusal to make genuinely painful concessions. The US has repeatedly demand complete, verifiable, irreversible disarmament upfront for vague future guarantees. The North will not foolishly do that, but Pyongyang's offers have been similarly fanciful. Engagement boosters will argue that talks curtailed war in 2017 and are progress in themselves. But Trump ginned up that crisis unnecessarily, and talking to the North is just process not substance. On substance, very little has changed since Trump entered office, no matter the war-threats of 2017 and flattery of 2018. This will persist as long the political and strategic gaps between the two sides are enormous. It would be better to resume talks at the expert working level to forge small, manageable deals in the place of all-or-nothing summits.**

Ji Seong-ho to the 2018 State of the Union address and the tragic passing of Otto Warmbier. But unfortunately, this topic was dropped almost immediately by the US and the South. DPRK totalitarianism is unchanged.

Stepping down a level of analysis, from the political to the strategic, the year since the Singapore summit has not witnessed any progress there either. This is more disappointing, as both Trump and Moon have repeatedly talked up strategic change, raising expectations. Specific strategic issues of concern include: nuclear warheads, long-range missiles, mobile missile launchers, other weapons of mass destruction, and the North Korean army's forward posture against the MDL north of Seoul. Trump and Moon have repeatedly said that Kim wants denuclearization, but the North has been far more cagey. It has mostly ducked formal commentary on nuclear weapons, at best vaguely demanding that the entire peninsula be denuclearized. That would seem to imply that US extended deterrence over the South be withdrawn. Most pointedly, it has repeatedly refused to agree to any specific weapons cuts at any of the summits or working meetings since Singapore.

Trump and Moon have certainly tried, for which they deserve credit. Between them they have had five summits with Kim. But these have not translated into quantifiable movement 'on the ground'. One may blame the US and South Korea for demanding too much in exchange for too little, but whatever the reason, the status quo today is basically the status quo of last several decades, plus North Korean nuclear weapons. Little has actually improved in the long-enduring peninsular stand-off.

The usual rejoinder at this point is to say that at least we have moved on from the war threats of 2017, or that talks are a manner of progress in themselves. These points are unconvincing. First, it is not an 'achievement' for Trump to resolve a war crisis he himself created unnecessarily. The Trump administration ginned-up the 2017 crisis, in part, probably so that Trump could take credit for resolving it later. No analyst is happy that North Korea has developed nuclear weapons and missiles, but that year, on op-ed pages, Twitter, news interviews, and so on, most of us said that North Korea built these weapons for deterrence and defense, not offense. So Trump's self-generated war crisis was unneeded, because North Korea never intended to use them

preemptively against the US or its allies, or to sell them to the Islamic State, or other. That is a hawkish fantasy.

Second, talks in themselves are not progress. This is a concordant dovish fantasy. Process is just that – more talk. North Korea's appearance at the bargaining table does not imply concessions or movement on the issues we care about. Worse, the North seeks long, seemingly irresolvable negotiation. It has long sought to string out dialogue for years in hopes of dividing its counterparties against each other while seeking side-payments from each. It is true that when the North is talking, it is not launching armed provocations against the South. But that is only 'progress' if one's benchmark is North Korean blackmail. Ultimately what matters is whether the North (1) agrees to meaningful concessions, and (2) implements them. This is why so many US officials stressed in the run-up to the Singapore summit that the process had to move fast. Talk is not the goal.

In short, US-North Korean relations remain poor, but stable. 2017's war threats are past and unlikely to return. Trump has increasingly hinted that he was play-acting former President Richard Nixon's 'madman' with no intention of actually launching a war. And he has similarly bluffed in Syria, Iran and Venezuela. So he now lacks the credibility in Pyongyang and Beijing to believably pivot back to 'fire and fury'.

Relations have rhetorically improved, but that is as much due to Trump's volatile volubility as any real change in mood. And rhetorical change with North Korea is an ethereal, pseudo-achievement anyway. When the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi revealed reality to Trump – namely that sanctions relief is not enough for North Korea to unilaterally disarm – Trump walked out, breaking any new mood of detente. Now, no one knows where US-DPRK negotiations stand. Beneath all this Trumpian Sturm und Drang, the core issues remain unchanged, as does the strategic situation on the ground.

In retrospect, then, the primary outcome of the Singapore summit was its symbolic victory for the North in its quest for normalization. The Kim family regime

had long sought a meeting with the US president for the legitimacy it implied. The US and North Korea are technically still at war, and the US does not recognize the North. So meeting the lone superpower's leader as a peer, equal in front of the national flags in parallel, dramatically suggested the North's normalization and American acceptance of it in the international system. Since then, Kim has reached out to China, South Korea, Russia and Japan for summits. Kim is on his way to being a regional statesman rather than outcast.

Moving US-DPRK relations forward will be difficult after two failed summits. Trump places a lot of weight on personal relationships. He wants to think that Kim is his friend and will therefore make concessions. This is unlikely beyond mild, face-saving gestures for Trump, such as continuing the test ban (even as warheads and missiles are under production). So Trump is unlikely to come back for a third summit

unless he is guaranteed substantial Northern concessions. His hawkish staff will push hard on this.

But to pull serious concessions out of the DPRK, Trump must offer something equally substantial in return. Here is where the negotiations have failed. So far, Trump has only offered vague security guarantees and promises of aid and modernization. The North will not trade its nukes for something so imprecise. It will demand very specific, and large, US concessions in exchange for its existentially valuable nuclear weapons. Trump has not offered anything commensurate, instead demanding upfront disarmament. The North will not do this; it has always rejected this in the past. The best path forward then is to step down to smaller, less all-or-nothing deals and slowly build toward a major breakthrough. US-DPRK summit diplomacy has probably gone as far as it can at the moment.

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