

The Singapore Kim-Trump summit - A huge win for Kim. Optimism and confusion in Seoul

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Kim victorious

Kim Jong-un came out victorious from the summit

The Singapore summit has not done more than legitimise the North Korean regime.

After months of nail-biting anticipation, US President Donald Trump held an historic meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jung-un.

The city-state of Singapore, a mercantile nation that has maintained robust ties with both sides throughout the years, hosted the two leaders at the luxurious Capella Hotel on Sentosa island.

Singapore spent close to \$15m to cover the North Korean leader's accommodation, logistics of the meetings, as well as overall security for the two world leaders. International sanctions made it difficult for Kim to cover his overseas accommodation.

China, a close ally of North Korea, provided transportation logistics by offering an Air China plane, a retrofitted Boeing (747-4J6), for the 3,000-mile trip from Pyongyang to Singapore.

Kim's official carrier, a four-decades-old Soviet-made Ilyushin Il-62 dubbed "Air Force Un", was deemed unfit for the voyage.

Thousands of journalists flocked to Singapore to cover the historic summit.

But despite all these grand preparations and despite all the big expectations, the outcome of the summit proved largely disappointing. The US-North Korea joint declaration was a broadly generic document, containing no tangible compromise between the two sides.

In the end, what this summit achieved was have the US president indirectly legitimise a notorious dictator.

Much ado about nothing

Both men were desperate for this meeting, Trump perhaps even more so. The US president wanted to score his first major foreign policy achievement. His tenure in office, so far, has been marked by growing tensions with neighbours and allies as well as a massive collapse in US global influence.

He recently faced a barrage of criticisms over his trade policy, including the imposition of punitive tariffs on the US' top trading partners, proposal for readmission of Russia to the G7, the abrupt withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal earlier this year and reneging on the Paris Agreement on climate change last year.

The North Korean leader, however, provided Trump a chance for diplomatic redemption, no matter how fleeting. Visibly pleased with his highly anticipated summit in Singapore, Trump reassuringly told Kim that they would have "a tremendous relationship." The less enthused North Korean leader simply replied, "We're here [gladly], overcoming everything" to make this meeting happen.

In their joint declaration, Trump and Kim vowed to continue building "a lasting and robust peace regime on the Korean Peninsula". More specifically, the US "committed to provide security guarantees" to Pyongyang, while the latter "reaffirmed [its] firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula."

Yet, there was no mention of Washington's key demands, namely the Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Disarmament (CVID) of North Korea's nuclear infrastructure. Trump also provided no clear idea of the kind of "security guarantees" the US is willing to offer Pyongyang.

The two leaders simply underscored their "firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula". To Trump, perhaps the instantaneous media mileage generated by the event was more important than negotiating a truly consequential deal, which, according to leading experts, may take more than a decade to complete.

Thus, it's hard to see the outcome of the summit as anything but a series of "motherhood statements" with little substance.

The two leaders will likely have to conduct reciprocal visits to each other's capitals over the coming years before working out a final deal. The White House has indicated the possibility of multiple meetings between Trump and Kim, while diplomats and defence officials painfully hatch out the devil in the details of a final agreement.

A victory for Kim Jong-un

While there was little substance in the summit declaration, Kim came out as the winner of this set of talks. He basked in global stardom and managed to enhance his regime's legitimacy by engaging in high-stakes diplomacy with the support of all major powers. Thus the summit undoubtedly helped the Korean regime partially lift the veil of its profound international isolation.

Now, all key players, from China to South Korea, Singapore and the US, have a direct stake in ensuring that the peace negotiations move forward and as smoothly as possible. As a reward for the summit, Trump is expected to suspend joint military exercises with South Korea and contemplate the prospect of drawing down US military presence in the Korean Peninsula.

The announcement has provoked displeasure in Seoul, but it is music to the ears of the North Korean regime, which has managed to secure concessions from the US without necessarily agreeing to a clear denuclearisation plan. The summit was, in many ways, war by other means.

With Trump constantly heaping praise on the North Korean leader and dangling the prospect of full normalisation of bilateral ties, the reclusive regime is gradually and stealthily dispensing with its “axis of evil” pariah status. There is even talk of a Nobel Peace Prize for Trump and Kim.

As a result, the regime change agenda is definitively off the table for now. This could, over time, also weaken international resolve and the willingness of many nations, particularly outside the West, to implement international sanctions against North Korea.

Thus, the summit was a big win for Kim, giving him a deep measure of strategic respite. Over the coming months, the North Korean regime will explore its next move in chess-like, technical, and potentially drawn-out negotiations towards a final and enduring agreement.

At stake is not only Kim’s regime survival, but also the welfare of his people who are desperate for greater economic engagement with the world.

The views expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera’s editorial stance.

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* <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/kim-jong-victorious-summit-180612114159725.html>

A huge win - for North Korea

**The Guardian view on Trump in Singapore: a huge win - for North Korea
Editorial**

The US president made a major concession at his summit with Kim Jong-un, for minimal return.

A confident leader strode into the Singapore summit and won. Kim Jong-un went with a plan, gave little and left with plenty: bolstered status and diplomatic leverage, lavish praise from the US president, the promise of an end to US-South Korean military drills - and, surely, a growing confidence that North Korea is doing well at this game. A meeting supposed to effect a breakthrough on denuclearisation looked “more like a big welcome party to the nuclear-armed club”, in the acid but accurate words of one observer.

Better than war, for sure. But since it was Donald Trump who raised that spectre, giving him credit for dispelling it would be like calling a man a life-saver when second thoughts stay his hand from murder. The US president handed over gift after gift in exchange for the inflation of his ego. He does not know or does not care that his country went home poorer than it came. The language in the joint statement was weaker than in previous agreements - the very significant difference being that the

North is now much further advanced in its nuclear programme. There was not even a pledge that either side “shall” take action; just the assertion that North Korea will “commit to working towards” denuclearisation, which it sees as a general, not unilateral, process.

In return Mr Trump axed the drills with, it seems, no warning to Seoul (or even US forces). Worse, he described them as “provocative” and “inappropriate”, not just giving the North what it wanted, but suggesting it was right to demand it. He added that he hoped to withdraw US troops from South Korea at some point – further undermining the long alliance.

Mr Trump’s recounting of the meeting would have been laughable were it not so shocking. He explained to the North Koreans that they could have “the best hotels in the world” on the beaches they use for artillery drills. He presented Mr Kim with a Hollywood-style movie trailer laying out the choice before him, complete with growling voiceover. He described the 100,000 or more North Koreans held in prison camps as “one of the big winners” of the meeting, though not even the vaguest assurance was extracted on their behalf. While finding time for another crack at Canada’s Justin Trudeau, he called Mr Kim “a very talented man” who wants to do the right thing and loves his country. He praised him for “running it tough” (quite the euphemism for a dictatorship with human rights atrocities which the UN calls unparalleled in the modern world). And the comprehensive, verifiable, irreversible denuclearisation on which the US was to insist? Ah: “There was no time!” to cover that. But he would be surprised if the North Koreans hadn’t begun already. Mr Trump thinks that the two sides probably have a rough transcript capturing all this, but does not need to verify anything because “I have one of the great memories of all time”. No satirist would dare to invent this.

Hope for the best but don’t expect much progress in lower-level talks next week; nor at meetings at the White House or in Pyongyang, mooted by the US president. China has already implied that it may be time to relax sanctions; South Korea and Russia have hinted that they are similarly minded. Even Mr Trump acknowledged that in six months’ time it may emerge that the North Koreans are not taking action (adding, in a startling moment of candour, that “I will find some sort of excuse” rather than admit that).

“He trusts me and I trust him,” Mr Trump boldly declared of Mr Kim. But if the US president is so naive, surely the North Korean leader cannot be. In so far as the US president has any enduring belief, it appears to be that disruption is a good in and of itself: that throwing everyone else off-balance must benefit the world’s only superpower, as one official has suggested (his colleague had a cruder characterisation). Withdrawal from the Iran deal proved that America’s enemies cannot rely upon its word. The G7 and Singapore summits demonstrated that allies cannot either. But Tuesday’s meeting also showed that Americans have reason to be wary. They too cannot count upon Mr Trump to live up to his promises.

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Trump really has achieved a historic breakthrough - for the Kim dynasty

A useful way to test the deal Donald Trump has reached with Kim Jong-un is to imagine what Trump himself would have said had it been Barack Obama rather than him who shook hands with the North Korean dictator. Trump and his echo chamber on Fox News and elsewhere would have poured buckets of derision on Obama for the piece of paper he signed with Kim, for the fawning praise he lavished on a brutal tyrant, and for the paltry non-concessions he got in return. He would have branded the agreement a “horrible deal” and condemned Obama as a sucker for signing it.

Look first at what Kim got from the encounter. Once ostracised as a pariah, Kim was treated as a world statesman on a par with the president of the United States, the two meeting on equal terms, right down to the equal numbers of flags behind them as they shook hands. The tyrant now has a showreel of images – including his walkabout in Singapore, where he was mobbed by what the BBC called “fans” seeking selfies – which will feature in propaganda videos for months, if not years.

What’s more, Trump lauded Kim as “a very talented man ... who loves his country very much,” a man the US president admired for his ability to take over North Korea at such a young age and to “run it tough”, as he put it in a later press conference. There was not so much as even a rote condemnation of the brutality of the Kim regime – indeed Trump reserved the word “regime” for the Clinton administration of the 1990s. And when asked if he had even mentioned human rights in their talks, he said it had only been discussed “briefly”. The harshest words he had for a country that starved its own people in a famine that cost up to three million lives, were: “It’s a rough situation there ... it’s rough in a lot of places by the way.”

So Kim leaves Singapore having gained much of the international legitimacy the dynastic dictatorship has sought for decades. But the gifts from Trump did not end there. He also announced an end to US military exercises in the Korean peninsula – the “war games” which he said were costly and, deploying language Pyongyang itself might have used, “very provocative”. Trump also hinted at an eventual withdrawal of the 28,000 US troops stationed in the Korean peninsula.

And what did Kim give Trump in return for this bulging bag of goodies? The key concession, the one Trump repeatedly invoked, was a promise of “complete denuclearisation”. Trump held this aloft as if it were a North Korean commitment to dismantle its arsenal, with work beginning right away. To be sure, such a commitment would be a major prize, one that would merit all the congratulation a beaming Trump was heaping on himself. But this is where you need to look at the small print.

First, the text itself says merely: “The DPRK commits to work toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.” Kim has promised not “complete denuclearisation” but simply “to work toward” that end. Negotiators the world over know is the fudging language you use when you’ve extracted something less than a real commitment. Kim has offered only an aspiration, with no deadline or timetable, not a concrete plan.

Still, even if Kim had pledged “complete denuclearisation” that too would be less than a genuine breakthrough. The longstanding goal of US policy has been CVID: complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear arsenal. The words “verifiable” and “irreversible” are entirely absent from the agreement.

Again, think of what candidate Trump would have said about that. The Iran deal, which he regularly denounced as “horrible” and from which he withdrew last month, consisted of 110 pages of detailed arrangements – including the deployment of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, cameras, seals and the like – to verify Tehran’s fulfilment of its nuclear promises. The Singapore text, which barely runs to a page and a half, does not so much as breathe the word “verifiable”.

Indeed, Trump could not even get a commitment from Kim to basic transparency, to disclose the scope of North Korea's current nuclear capacity, both the weapons it has and its manufacturing capability. How can the world know what Pyongyang has got rid of if it doesn't know what it has?

But the heart of the matter is the word "denuclearisation" itself. The problem here is that that word does not mean to Kim what Trump thinks it means. To North Korea, it is not shorthand for unilaterally scrapping its arsenal, but a vague aspiration for a nuclear-free region (a move that would, incidentally, require the US to withdraw its nuclear forces from Asia and remove South Korea from the protection of its nuclear umbrella). It would be like misreading the speeches Obama often made calling for a nuclear-free world as a firm US commitment to ditch its nukes. That's not what they meant at all.

On the contrary, analysts say that the Singapore text's reference to the Panmunjom declaration of April this year - when the leaders of North and South Korea met for the first time in over a decade - is a further signal that Pyongyang sees the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula as part of a wider process of global disarmament. Put simply, Kim is saying he'll get rid of his nuclear weapons only when Russia, China, the US and everyone else gets rid of theirs.

In his press conference, Trump praised himself for achieving a historic milestone that had eluded his predecessors. But it turns out that Pyongyang already offered very similar pledges in agreements it signed with the US in the early 1990s and in 2005. In fact, those earlier accords pushed the North Koreans much further: the former included an inspection regime, the latter a verification process. As the former US negotiator with North Korea, ambassador Wendy Sherman, told MSNBC, "Not only have we been here before, we've been here before with much greater specificity."

Small wonder that the Seoul-based analyst Andrei Lankov declared of the agreement: "It has zero practical value. The US could have extracted serious concessions, but it was not done. N Korea will be emboldened and the US got nothing." Other experts chorused that the deal was even "thinner" and "looser" than they'd feared.

Of course it is better for the world that Trump and Kim are shaking hands rather than hurling insults and threatening nuclear war. For that we should be grateful. It's also possible that US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, might now get stuck into the detail and work to fill the yawning gaps. But for now, this is only a historic breakthrough for the Kim dynasty, whose rule over an enslaved nation has been given a huge boost. They will be celebrating. For the rest of us, it is further cause to grieve that the world's most powerful nation is in such incapable hands.

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What is next for North Korea after the Singapore summit?

Opening up the economy might prove risky for the North Korean regime.

After weeks of uncertainty about the planned US-North Korea summit, US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un signed a “comprehensive” document. Kim claimed that “the world will see a major change”, while Trump described him as “a very talented man” who “loved his country very much”, and appeared willing to invite him to visit the White House.

The document apparently embodies four pillars: first, the two sides commit to establishing “new ... relations in accordance with the desire of the peoples of the two countries for peace and prosperity”; second, they will “join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula”; third, North Korea reaffirms the “April 27, 2018 Panmunjom Declaration ...[and] commits to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula;” and fourth, they “commit to recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified”.

The possibility of a deal was signalled by Kim Jong-un at the beginning of the summit when he said, “The old prejudices and practices worked as obstacles on our way forward, but we’ve overcome all of them, and we are here today.”

However, the text of the document does not contain much that is new. It merely recites already documented positions. Its real significance lies in the context in which it was signed and the accompanying statements by the two leaders.

In this sense, what “old prejudices” is Kim referring to and what “change” is the world likely to see? Are the two leaders simply promising to stop using characterisations such as “little Rocketman” or “mentally deranged US dotard” and avoid threatening to unleash “fire and fury”?

Or is the North Korean leader referring to deeper, older prejudices that have held back his country for decades? If so, is it really possible for him to overcome them and still stay in power?

The answer to these questions depends on a good understanding of how central these “prejudices” are to the very *raison d’être* of Kim Jong-un-ism and his regime’s survival.

If a transition towards the Chinese model is what the future holds, Trump might be doing China a massive favour.

His grandfather, Kim Il-sung, instituted a cult of personality in addition to a centralised system of self-reliance and extreme nationalism - “*juche*”. This ideology requires North Koreans to build their country by relying on their own resources under the guidance of the supreme leader. Following his death, his son and successor, Kim Jong-il, devised another doctrine to consolidate power, “*songun*”, or military first.

Kim Jong-un clearly embraces this doctrine - as he must to survive. In 2013, he described *songun* as a “revolutionary idea” that his father built by “the strengthening of the KPA [Korean People’s Army] ... as the buttress, the main force, of our revolution and achieved the historic victory in the grim anti-imperialist, anti-US showdown in defence of the country’s security and socialism by training the KPA to be the army of the leader boundlessly faithful to the cause ...”

Surely, *juche* and *songun* qualify as old prejudices and represent obstacles to cooperation. Will North Korea jettison such core values?

If you think these are not enough, consider the “Ten Principles in Establishing Party’s Monolithic Ideological System,” which remains the manifesto for the regime. Article 2.1 states “The Great Leader Comrade Kim Il-sung is a genius of the revolution, the sun of the people and a legendary hero whom we must respect unendingly, revere eternally and come to with the greatest happiness and glory ...”

Article 4.3 commits people to “Unconditionally accept, treat as a non-negotiable condition, and decide everything” upon Kim Il Sung’s “instructions” and in every act think only about his “greatness”. Further, article 4.10 pledges to “Fight with all one’s will against anti-Party and anti-revolutionary thinking trends that have its origin in capitalistic ideas ...” and retain “the purity of revolutionary thought and Juche ideas of the Great Leader.”

In other words, the “old prejudices” that are obstacles to cooperation are intrinsic to the North Korean state. If Kim Jong-un has to overcome them, he will have to accept the prospect of a much-diminished role in the future.

He knows that if North Koreans are told that there is a way to prosperity other than through self-reliance and that the imperialist US approach is not so bad after all, this risks undermining the regime.

Citizens might ask for justice for past wrongs and seek to overthrow the supreme leader because the entire edifice upon which his rule rests would be invalid. And there is plenty for Kim to fear. North Korea has a record of horrific human rights abuses. Tens of thousands are in prison and disappearances, executions, torture, rape, and forced labour are widespread.

No rational leader would risk being held accountable for such crimes. The best-case scenario is that Kim Jong-un will seek a soft landing away from the Ten Principles and songun rather than a crash-and-burn outcome. That might mean a transition away from self-reliance and towards opening up the economy while maintaining pervasive social controls a la China in the era of Deng Xiaoping.

Even that carries significant personal risks to himself and the regime. Therefore, much like China, Kim is likely to retain his military capability. In such a scenario, Tiananmen Square-style events might occur. As all the historical evidence shows, once people experience freedom, they are reluctant to accept servitude.

Rights beget demands for more rights. This begs the obvious question: will the West stand by if such a crackdown occurs when North Korea opens up and its citizens demand more?

So, the sensible conclusion is that Kim Jong-un’s idea of overcoming old prejudices hints at a much more limited conception of obstacles to North Korea’s integration into the global economy. The farthest extreme of what is possible is post-Deng China: an open economy governed by a dictatorship.

If a transition towards the Chinese model is what the future holds, Trump might be doing China a massive favour. Kim Jong-un will naturally seek guidance from the Chinese to script such an outcome.

Once North Korea opens up and sanctions are lifted, Chinese enterprises will seize the opportunity to secure highly lucrative deals - from building infrastructure to supplying weapons to exploiting North Korea’s cheap labour for its own purposes. This will not advance US interests.

In the end, if Trump succeeds in opening the door, his biggest challenge will be to stop China from coming in after him to steal the family jewels. That will be a presidency-defining transaction for the

“Dealer-in-Chief”.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.

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US to suspend military exercises with South Korea, Trump says

US move in exchange for North Korean denuclearisation pledge takes Seoul by surprise.

Donald Trump has ordered the suspension of US military exercises with South Korea, in a surprise concession at an extraordinary summit with North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un.

The US had previously ruled out such a move on the grounds that the exercises were a key element of its military alliance with Seoul and deterrent against North Korea.

In return for the US concession, Kim signed a joint statement committing to denuclearisation, but it was a vaguely worded commitment that the regime has made several times before over the past three decades. Asked what would be different this time, Trump pointed to his instincts as a dealmaker.

“We got to know each other well in a very confined period of time,” Trump told reporters. “I know when somebody wants to deal and I know when somebody doesn’t.”

As proof of Kim’s good intentions, Trump said Kim had offered to destroy a missile engine testing site. “I got that after we signed the agreement,” he recalled. “I said: do me a favour. You have this missile engine testing site ... I said can you close it up. He’s going to close it up.”

Nuclear weapons experts suggested the site in question could be the Hamhung missile site, thought to have been damaged in a recent engine test. They said it was a minimal part of North Korean weapons programme.

By contrast, the cancellation of the military exercises has been a priority for North Korea for decades. Surprising US allies in the region, Trump declared that the war games, involving planes flying long distances, were too expensive. “We will be saving a tremendous amount of money. Plus, it is very provocative,” Trump said.

Trump noted that Kim had committed his regime to “work towards complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula”. However, the joint statement did not define what denuclearisation meant, a point of longstanding contention between the US and North Korea.

Denuclearisation is the longstanding policy of the Pyongyang regime, but the regime interprets this as being an open-ended, gradual process in which other nuclear powers will also disarm.

Absent from the joint statement was the definition, promoted up until now by the Trump administration, of complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID).

Asked at a press conference why those terms were not included, Trump replied: "Because there's no time. I'm here one day. It wasn't a big point today because really ... this has been taken care of before we got here."

The outcome of the summit appeared to be a solution that had been championed by Beijing, a "freeze for freeze" in which the North Koreans continue to suspend nuclear and long-range missile tests while the US halts military exercises and does not impose new sanctions.

It is solution that the US had hitherto rejected, arguing that it implied an equivalence between North Korea's nuclear weapons programme and South Korea's right to maintain its defences in concert with allies.

Both the South Korean government and US forces in the region appear to have been taken by surprise by Trump's declared suspension of joint exercises.

US forces in Korea said they had not received updated guidance on the matter. "In coordination with our ROK [Republic of Korea] partners, we will continue with our current military posture until we receive updated guidance," a spokesperson told Reuters.

The South Korean presidency issued a statement saying: "At this moment, the meaning and intention of President Trump's remarks requires more clear understanding."

Kelly Magsamen, who was a senior Pentagon official dealing with Asian and Pacific security in the Obama administration, said Trump's announcement "continues [his] disturbing pattern of undermining our democratic alliances while praising our adversaries".

Trump said he accepted that dismantling North Korea's nuclear arsenal would take a long time, but it would be carried out "as fast as it can be done scientifically, as fast it can be done mechanically".

On the complex question of how North Korean disarmament would be verified, Trump was vague. "We will be verifying," he maintained. "It will be achieved by having a lot of people there. As we develop a certain trust."

The language on disarmament in the Singapore statement was similar to that of previous agreements, in 1994 and 2005, which ultimately collapsed amid differences over interpretation and arguments about verification.

Trump said the summit on Tuesday would be followed next week by more negotiations between US and North Korean officials to work out the details of the agreement.

Before his press conference, reporters were shown a video that Trump said he had played to Kim and his aides towards the end of their talks. It was credited to Destiny Productions and was presented in Korean and English in the style of an action movie trailer.

It sought to illustrate alternative futures for North Korea: one a bright, colourful world of scientific progress and happiness, the other a monochrome world full of weaponry accompanied by ominous

music. Only one person could choose between these two destinies, the film's narrator said.

In assessing the outcome, some analysts argued that the suspension of nuclear and missile tests coupled with a halt to military exercises at least defused tensions and created space for possible disarmament in the future. Others were more sceptical.

Beatrice Fihn, the executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (Ican), tweeted: "We support diplomacy and peaceful solutions. But there is no agreement on nuclear disarmament and this all looked more like a big welcome party to the nuclear-armed club."

Vipin Narang, an expert on the North Korean nuclear programme, was even more scathing. "President Trump said he was going to take away Kim's nuclear weapons," Narang said in a tweet. "Instead he legitimised the value of nuclear weapons in international politics. Even a 'pipsqueak fourth-rate power' can bring the US to the table and win if it has nuclear weapons."

Kim also undertook to cooperate with the US in the recovery of the remains of American soldiers killed in the Korean war - a longstanding US request that has so far produced only limited assistance.

Trump was repeatedly asked after the summit about North Korea's appalling human rights record. He said he had raised the issue with Kim, but he defended the North Korean leader.

"Well, he is very talented. Anybody that takes over a situation like he did at 26 years of age and is able to run it and run it tough," the president said. "I believe it is a rough situation over there. We will be doing something on it. It's rough. It's rough in a lot of places, by the way."

During the leaders' public exchanges - a few months after the pair had swapped insults and threatened imminent war - they went out of their way to be gracious. Trump even declared it an "honour" to be sitting next to Kim.

At the start of the first meeting between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, the pair walked towards each other and shook hands, then turned unsmiling towards the cameras.

Julian Borger in Singapore

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Optimism and confusion in Seoul over Trump-Kim summit

Agreement welcomed in South Korea amid bemusement over war games and dismay from North Korean refugees.

Seoul has reacted with a mixture of optimism and confusion to the historic summit between Donald Trump and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, after the US president announced an end to joint military exercises with South Korea.

Leaders from around the region sought to capitalise on the momentum of the meeting, which resulted in a signed agreement that was light on substance but held up by Trump as a victory.

The South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, welcomed the outcome of the summit and praised the “courage and determination of the two leaders”.

“This is just a beginning and there may be many difficulties ahead but we will never go back to the ways of the past and never give up on this bold journey,” Moon said in a statement. “It is a great victory achieved by both the United States and the two Koreas, and a huge step forward for people across the world who long for peace.”

But Trump’s pledge to halt longstanding military drills with South Korea sparked widespread confusion. The exercises have been repeatedly criticised by Pyongyang, which in the past has responded with missile tests.

The South Korean military issued a statement to NBC News saying: “Regarding President Trump’s comment regarding ending of the combined military drills ... we need to find out the exact meaning or intention behind his comments at this point.”

For its part, North Korea agreed to “work towards complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula”, language which was open to interpretation and fell short of Washington’s long-stated goal of complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal.

No report of the summit was broadcast on North Korean television, where it is not uncommon for news to be delayed or even ignored.

Japan’s prime minister, Shinzo Abe, praised the agreement’s references to denuclearisation and said he was willing to engage with Pyongyang to resolve the cold war abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korean spies. “I’m determined that Japan will have to directly face North Korea and resolve [the abductions] bilaterally,” Abe said.

China also appeared to want to seize on the positive atmosphere. “The United States and North Korea have been in a state of antagonism for more than half a century,” said the foreign minister, Wang Yi. “Today, that the two countries’ highest leaders can sit together and have equal talks has important and positive meaning and is creating a new history.”

China suggested the international community could consider lifting economic sanctions on North Korea. “Sanctions are a means, not an end,” said Geng Shuang, a spokesman for China’s ministry of foreign affairs. “The [UN] security council’s actions should support and conform to the efforts of current diplomatic talks towards denuclearising the Korean peninsula.”

The comment by Chinese officials suggests the US policy of “maximum pressure” on Pyongyang until it relinquishes nuclear weapons is already showing signs of cracking. There have been reports that Kim’s charm offensive over recent months has led China to relax restrictions on trade with North Korea, violating UN sanctions.

Trump alluded to relaxed Chinese restrictions, which have come without substantial concessions from Pyongyang, in a press conference in which he also praised the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, for implementing sanctions. “He really closed up that border ... but maybe not in the last couple of months but that’s OK,” the president said.

At a train station in Seoul, people cheered and applauded as television screens broadcast the Trump-Kim handshake live.

But the reaction among many South Koreans was disappointment, and in the community of North Korean refugees now living south of the border there was a feeling of betrayal.

Choi Jung-hoon, a member of the North Korean Liberation Front, a quasi-military group that advocates for the overthrow of the regime in Pyongyang, said he was furious at the outcome of the summit, which had led to “only good things for Kim Jong-un”. Choi was an army officer in North Korea’s cyber-hacking unit for almost 20 years before he escaped in 2006.

“Trump completely lost to Kim, he was dragged around by Kim,” Choi said. “This has all been a political show by Trump, North Korea got away with everything they wanted. They said they will ‘denuclearise’, nothing has been said in detail.”

Choi was dismayed that the US demand for complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement was absent from the agreement, and he was particularly disappointed human rights were not prominently featured. The UN estimates North Korea is holding up to 120,000 political prisoners and says the regime is guilty of crimes against humanity.

Another refugee, Jung Gwang-il, who works to smuggle information into North Korea, said he was “moderately disappointed”. He previously worked at state-run trading companies but was later sent to a labour camp and tortured. He arrived in South Korea in 2004.

“Promising security for Kim’s regime will mean he can stay in power and will just keep on oppressing the North Korean people,” Jung said. “If denuclearisation happens while people in North Korea are dying, it’s pointless.”

Many North Koreans who have fled over the border are deeply suspicious of the Kim family, with many having suffered physical or mental abuse at the hands of the regime.

Federica Mogherini, the European Union’s foreign policy chief, said the summit proved that diplomacy was the right path to follow, as the bloc had done on the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, which Trump derided and abandoned last month.

Benjamin Haas in Singapore and **Justin McCurry** in Tokyo

Additional reporting by Junho Lee and Lily Kuo

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The view from Seoul: why the Trump-Kim ‘deal’ worries South Koreans

Critics fear Kim Jong-un has ambitions to reunify the peninsula and that, given the latest concessions, Trump may back him.

The Singapore summit made history in symbolism, but can this new dialogue end North Korea’s 70 years of isolation from the outside world and transform relations on the Korean peninsula?

Many details must be clarified before we know if the summit will make history in substance - and if the divided Korean peninsula is to move beyond the uneasy peace of the past 65 years.

Parts of the South Korean press framed the day as historic - "opening a new era of detente". But South Koreans have been here before. They remember the summits during the country's "sunshine policy" era when presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun both went to Pyongyang and met Kim's late father, Kim Jong-il. South Korea extended goodwill and investment in North Korea's direction during that period and ended up with nothing in return. Many South Koreans think they got burned then, so now they're simply taking a wait-and-see attitude. No wonder the financial markets in Seoul barely moved even as the theatrics in Singapore unfolded.

In many respects, we're still left with the same questions that have been lingering ever since Trump spontaneously agreed in March to meet Kim in person. Will North Korea get rid of its nuclear weapons in a transparent way and stick to its promises this time around? If so, what is the timetable, and how will the inspections work? Will Pyongyang also dial down its missile programmes that have threatened its neighbours in northeast Asia? Will the Kim dictatorship take steps to reform its society from within and improve its abysmal record on human rights? The statement that Trump and Kim signed in Singapore does not begin to address these kinds of details, but it does suggest the two countries have made a commitment to iron out the details that could lead, at last, to the end of the cold war in northeast Asia.

The big concession on the part of the Trump administration appears to be the suspension, at least for now, of the joint military exercises that regularly take place between the United States and South Korea. Trump even seemed to side with North Korea's longstanding objections by calling the war games "very provocative" - a view also held by some critics of the exercises in the United States and South Korea. Trump also told reporters that his long-term goal was to follow through with his campaign promise to bring home US troops stationed in South Korea.

This kind of positioning from Trump is worrying for Seoul if it signals that the US and South Korea might soften their alliance. According to some reports, the South Korean government and even the US's own military command in Seoul were not consulted in advance about Trump's statement at a press conference shortly after his meeting with Kim that the US would suspend military exercises.

The concern in South Korea is that its neighbour's militarism stems not from self-defence but from ambitions to reunify the peninsula on its terms. Indeed, many of the same people who applauded Trump last year when he was taking a more hawkish posture toward North Korea are now worried that he is getting ready to hand over South Korea to North Korea on a silver platter. Even South Koreans who are glad to see the current engagement with the North easing the heightened tensions of recent years aren't yet sure if they can trust Kim Jong-un.

It is about time that the leaders of the United States and North Korea started talking. It was also refreshing last month to see South Korea's Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un arrange an impromptu meeting at the border - just a few weeks after their own initial summit - to figure out how to salvage the Singapore summit following Trump's announcement he would cancel the meeting. The more we see political leaders reaching across the great Korean divide, the better the chance that a sustainable peace can emerge on the Korean peninsula and also across the Asia-Pacific region.

But the Trump administration needs to establish a centre ground in its approach to North Korea, and the same can be said about Kim Jong-un and his regime. Unpredictability on all sides helped create the conditions for this first meeting to happen - a possible game-changer that was needed as a first step to resolve a seemingly intractable problem. However, it's one thing to initiate a negotiation and quite another to reach a mutually beneficial agreement for all concerned - to make not just any deal,

but the right kind of deal. The debate about what this will take is still in its earliest stages, and it will be very important for both Washington and Pyongyang to establish mutual expectations and indeed some predictability in a working relationship for any progress to be made on denuclearisation and normalising relations between the two countries.

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