

The North Korea Summit Through the Looking Glass - South Koreans greeted the agreement with optimism, but not Western pundits

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As much of the world celebrates a modest step towards peace in Korea, Western pundits seem to be panicking.

On Tuesday, as Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un shook hands for their much-anticipated summit in Singapore, one Korean reporter observed a curious episode [1]. Koreans watching the scene unfold on a TV screen at a railway station in Seoul began applauding. Meanwhile, some nearby Western tourists, perturbed by this development, scratched their heads in confusion.

“I am actually baffled to see them clapping here,” said one British tourist.

There’s perhaps no better symbol of the gulf in worldwide reactions to the summit than this episode. While South Koreans cautiously celebrated a historic step in the thawing of hostilities that have hung over them for almost seventy years, the Western media seemed to look on with alarm — even anger.

Hostility to the summit, much of it from Democrats and liberals, had been a staple of press coverage in the months leading up to it, often from commentators who just a few months earlier had been panicking about exactly the opposite outcome. But it reached a fever pitch over the last few days.

There was, for example, the collective hyperventilation over a symbolic arrangement of North Korean and US flags. There was MSNBC’s Nicole Wallace, who warned that the whole summit was actually a “Trumpian head fake,” [2] a mere artifact of Trump’s “midterm strategy” and his “get out of sitting with Bob Mueller strategy.” Sue Mi Terry of the defense contractor-funded Center for Strategic and International Studies cautioned that “a peace treaty is not okay” and should “come at the end of the process” because it “undermines the justification of our troops staying in South Korea.”

But things really ramped up once the summit was over. The signing of the joint statement was met with near-universal [3] derision and skepticism from Western observers [4] and mainstream news outlets, citing a variety of objections: the idea that Trump had “legitimized” Kim and given him a propaganda victory; that he had given too much away with little in return; that he was praising Kim too generously; that he had used the North Koreans’ own rhetoric about “provocative” US military exercises; and the weird and unintentionally hilarious US-made video exalting the greatness of the agreement.

Much of the criticism focused on the fact that Trump had offered to suspend US and South Korean war games — apparently without informing the South Koreans — and to withdraw some troops from

the country. (A regular feature of establishment anti-Trump coverage is that he is both an unhinged maniac ready to start war at any moment, and that under no circumstances should he reduce the size and scope of US military power.)

As before, however, it was liberal media that seemed particularly confused and infuriated by the agreement. Rachel Maddow, who once wrote a book about the US addiction to perpetual war [5], found a way to link the summit to Russia, explaining that Trump's troop pull-out plan was actually a dangerous giveaway to Putin [6]. "Why did that happen?" Maddow asked about the agreement in brow-strained confusion. "What was *that* for?" Vox wrote about the "shockingly weak deal," [7] citing an analyst from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a neoconservative think tank financed by Republican fundraisers like Sheldon Adelson, which spent years fighting the Iran deal.

"This. Is. Fucking. Nuts," wrote Mother Jones's Kevin Drum in reaction to the deal [8], in a column titled "Donald Trump Abandons South Korea." Weighing the concessions Kim won against what Trump received ("nothing"), Drum determined that "this whole thing looks like the same kind of train wreck dealmaking that produced the Trump Plaza Hotel." *The Guardian's* Jonathan Freedland called the deal "a historic breakthrough — for the Kim dynasty," citing just about every boilerplate criticism so far listed. Freedland wrote that a "useful way to test the deal" was to imagine what Trump would have said if Obama had negotiated it — an odd point, given that liberals have (rightly) spent years complaining about Trump's ignorant, bad-faith attacks on the Iran deal.

If this coverage were all one were exposed to, it would be hard to be left with any other impression than that Trump had just single-handedly sealed the doom of South Korea, and indeed the whole world. Which begs the question: why do Koreans themselves seem surprisingly okay with it?

Seeing A Different Summit

You wouldn't know it from the vast majority of Western news coverage (with some notable exceptions), but South Koreans greeted news of the agreement's signing with optimism — often cautious optimism, to be sure, but optimism nonetheless. Which isn't surprising — 81 percent of South Koreans wanted Trump to meet with Kim [9], though that was not much higher than the 70 percent of Americans who felt the same.

Based on this coverage, you probably wouldn't have learned that the agreement was backed by the UN secretary general, who urged the international community to support its objectives. You wouldn't have heard, for example, from the residents of a Chinese city on the North Korean border who expressed quiet hope about the negotiations to come. And you certainly wouldn't have heard that the summit was considered a great success by South Korea's extremely popular president, Moon Jae-in [10].

While Western news columnists stood in nearly lockstep opposition to the deal, Moon was glowing. He wore a smile as he watched the two leaders meet, and later heralded the agreement as "a historic event that has helped break down the last remaining Cold War legacy on earth," even as he acknowledged it was "just a beginning and there may be many difficulties ahead."

When one looks at the statements of South Koreans themselves, it's hard to argue with a straight face that they've been "abandoned." Indeed, reading President Moon's effusive statement, issued less than a day after he admitted he "hardly slept" the night before the summit, you'd wonder how it was possible to mug for the camera and ask incredulously, as Rachel Maddow did, "What was this summit all about?"

Reading non-Western media reports on the summit, you'd be forgiven for thinking you had dropped into another reality. Singaporean newspaper the *Straits Times* called the summit the "first step on [the] long road to peace." While acknowledging the deal's skimpiness in terms of specifics, the paper quoted experts who pointed out that "there will be operational content to follow" and that "even a general commitment passes the bar."

Similarly, the *Korea Herald*, an English-language newspaper in South Korea, declared that the deal "open[ed] a new era of detente," and that it was the "first step toward peace on [the] Korean peninsula." While noting the agreement's lack of detail, the paper pointed out that "it created space for the two sides to move forward into a cooperative relationship." While the Herald also aired more skeptical views, it made sure to quote experts who took a less alarmist view of the deal's shortcomings and who suggested that specifics would be worked out in negotiations to come.

Why this marked difference? For one thing, coverage in non-Western media tends to center Moon, who has been the real driving force behind the talks. Western media, by contrast, obsessed as it is with Trump — for both ideological and business reasons — can't help but interpret any and every event in relation to him. So we get columns talking about how the deal was simply a piece of "Trumpian stagecraft" that the media "fell for," and pundits confidently asserting that the whole thing is a master move in Trump's eight-dimensional chess strategy to give Robert Mueller the slip. For such pundits, South Korea — indeed, any country outside the US — doesn't seem to exist.

One ominous result is that liberals, panicked at the idea that Trump might receive credit for lowering the risk of war, are starting to become increasingly militaristic. It will be a sad irony if it ends up being Democrats who torpedo Moon's quest for peace.

The agreement is, of course, far from perfect and not above criticism. But despite the breathless denunciations of Trump for talking to a dictator — and let's be honest: many of these come from the same people who hail the Saudi crown prince as a modernist reformer — what's unfolding right now is probably the best outcome in a bad situation. Koreans themselves seem to realize this. Why can't our pundits?

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P.S.

* Jacobin, 06.13.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/singapore-summit-korea-kim-trump-moon>

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Footnotes

[1] <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180612000772>

[2] <https://www.alternet.org/news-amp-politics/whole-thing-was-trumpian-head-fake-msnbcs-nicoll-e-wallace-explains-how-trump>

[3] <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-analysts-skeptical-of-north-korea-summit-results-lack-of-details-1528808231>

[4] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/trump-kim-meeting-latest-denuclearisation-north-korea-us-nuclear-weapons-a8394566.html>

[5] <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/105954/drift-by-rachel-maddow/9780307460998/>

[6] <http://www.msnbc.com/rachel-maddow/watch/trump-military-exercise-giveaway-to-n-korea-suits-putin-s-goals-1254434371701?playlist=associated>

[7] <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/6/12/17452616/trump-kim-jong-un-north-korea-summit>

[8] <https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2018/06/donald-trump-abandons-south-korea/>

[9] https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/06/11/poll_most_americans_south_koreans_back_summit_137245.html

[10] Reactions and articles mentioned here and below are available on ESSF (article 44819), [Reactions to the Kim-Trump Singapore Statement](#).