

# Korean Peninsula: South Korea President Moon's Delicate Dance

Thursday 21 June 2018, by [BAKER John Carl](#) (Date first published: 20 June 2018).

**Trump might get all the attention, but South Korean president Moon Jae-in is the real key to securing peace on the peninsula.**

After weeks of hype and hope — and a bizarre cancellation that didn't quite stick — the Singapore summit [1] between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un is now history. And history it was: no sitting US president had ever met with a North Korean leader. Pushed by South Korea and his insatiable desire for self-aggrandizing spectacle [2], Trump broke with decades of US policy — and peace on the peninsula lurched forward.

The joint statement that emerged from the summit has been widely characterized as a “deal,” [3] largely due to the Trump's administration's flawed messaging and promises of a miraculous breakthrough. High expectations for a landmark agreement have led to criticisms of the statement's obvious thinness, some of them warranted. The administration's inability to even secure an official nuclear and missile test moratorium from the North (which has not tested a missile in more than six months) was particularly puzzling. Codifying the current freeze, with the possible addition of a halt on weapons production, would have been a positive and relatively simple step.

Yet the joint statement is not really a deal. It is, at base, a declaration of shared principles and a starting point for sustained negotiations between the US and North Korea [4]. It outlines four broad goals — an improvement in US-DPRK relations, the establishment of a “peace regime” on the peninsula, “complete denuclearization” of the Koreas, the recovery of POW/MIA remains — and commits both parties to holding talks “at the earliest possible date” to hash out how to meet these objectives. It is the latter commitment that matters most for now. The Trump administration is talking with North Korea instead of threatening to eradicate it [5].

In this sense, the greatest success of the Singapore summit may be that it did not stand in the way of inter-Korean dialogue. South Korean president Moon Jae-in believes that reconciliation between the two countries and the denuclearization of the peninsula [6] must go hand-in-hand, but no doubt also recognizes the risks of having to outsource the second goal to Trump.

Contradictory, erratic, and occasionally incoherent, the Trump administration has nearly derailed the twin processes on multiple occasions [7] by not holding up its end. Moon knows he must keep denuclearization talks on track to prevent the US from disrupting the inter-Korean detente. The US-DPRK summit was only salvaged, lest we forget, by an impromptu second meeting between the Korean leaders [8].

It is this intricate linkage between the two processes that many critics have missed. Moon, who did not attend the Singapore summit [9], continues to drive the diplomatic opening from Seoul. It is his administration's innovative, even brave, approach to the North that informs the language and goals of the US-DPRK joint statement. Critics may call the statement weak or naive [10] (perhaps

justifiably), but there is a logic behind it that departs considerably from conventional wisdom.

For years, the prevailing consensus has held that military de-escalation would have to occur in stages, in exchange for the North's gradual denuclearization. The DPRK, of course, would have to move first. Then and only then could the process move forward, in a phased, tit-for-tat manner. A peace treaty — the ultimate carrot in the minds of many security experts — would be left until the bitter end.

Thanks to Moon, Trump has — at least for now — strayed from this inherited doctrine. As indicated by the South Korean push for a declaration to end the war [11], the decision to suspend major military exercises [12] (a scandal here in the United States [13]), and the Singapore summit itself, the two leaders are trying to create the conditions for improved relations before moving to the thorny details of denuclearization.

The basic logic behind this strategy makes sense. Security assurances (or even “guarantees”) may never be enough to address the North's concerns about regime change, given that the US has maintained a combative pose toward the DPRK for nearly all of its seventy-year existence. But genuinely better relations might lessen the North Korean fear of military action, and with it, the country's desire to develop nuclear weapons. While military shifts such as the suspension of large exercises are part of this condition setting, Moon and Trump are particularly banking on economic ties [14] as a fast track to a peace regime [15]. They may be right. If the DPRK's propaganda documentary about the Singapore summit is any indication, Kim could be willing to play ball.

The forty-two-minute film [16] and the Rodong Sinmun coverage of the summit [17] broke with DPRK precedent, portraying Singapore as a glittering capitalist metropolis and Kim as a curious, willing student of its development. The disparities between Singapore and Pyongyang, not to mention the rest of North Korea, would be immediately apparent to anyone back home. Kim seems to be signaling that he can bring this sort of development to the DPRK by autocratically shepherding the country into the world capitalist economy.

Together, a less antagonistic military posture and the chance for increased economic integration might be enough to convince the Kim government that a siege mentality is no longer necessary. Complete denuclearization remains an extremely tall order, but a “deep freeze” on the DPRK's weapons program is certainly a feasible goal for negotiations and could serve as a starting point for further arsenal reductions [18]. Agreeing to such deals could be in Kim Jong-un's self-interest too, aiding his attempts to rebrand himself as a global statesman and a responsible member of the nuclear club.

Moon's reversal of the usual diplomatic sequencing is refreshing, but a gamble nonetheless. Observers will be looking for concrete actions by the North as talks begin, and there is a danger that without tangible progress, Trump — not exactly known for having a cool head — could lash out at *both* Koreas [19]. He recently asked South Korea to take a more prominent role in denuclearization talks — a positive development in that the Moon government is actually competent, but also a deferral of responsibility by a US president who not even a year ago publicly accused the South of “appeasement.” [20] If the negotiations hit a wall, Trump is going to look for someone to blame. And as always, it's not going to be himself.

This is what makes the mainstream liberal response to the summit so concerning. Instead of a full-throated defense of diplomacy, Senate Democrats have instead set an impossibly high [21], John Bolton-esque bar for success. All they see in the current opening is Trump's opportunism, not Moon's vision. Some appear more concerned about maintaining a US military presence on the peninsula than promoting inter-Korean peace [22]. Worried about a potential retreat from the

region, Senators Tammy Duckworth and Chris Murphy have even introduced an amendment to prevent Trump from unilaterally reducing US troop levels in South Korea [23]. Less than a year after Democrats were rightly appalled by “fire and fury,” some are now equally appalled by its absence.

The inter-Korean process has bought valuable time, but tangible progress by the fall will be critical; Moon is scheduled to visit Pyongyang, and there is talk of Kim Jong-un attending the UN General Assembly in September. The Singapore summit may have succeeded simply by not failing, but we are not out of the woods yet. Moon’s delicate dance continues [24].

**John Carl Baker**

---

---

## **P.S.**

\* Jacobin, 06.20.2018:

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

\* ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Carl Baker is a Mellon-ACLS Public Fellow. His writing has appeared in Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the New Republic, War Is Boring, and elsewhere.

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] See John Feffer interview, ESSF (article 44752), [Kim and Trump In Singapore – Where things stand?](#).

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/05/north-south-korea-peace-war-summit-trump>

[3] <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-12/trump-s-north-korea-pact-is-different-and-not-in-a-good-way>

[4] See the text of the statement, ESSF (article 44895), [Singapore Summit: Full text of Trump-Kim signed statement](#).

[5] <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-un-north-korean-leader-suicide-mission-n802596>

[6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/nuclear-weapons-doomsday-machine-ellsberg-review>

[7] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/world/asia/north-korea-libya-model.html>  
<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/05/24/politics/trump-north-korea/index.html>

[8] <http://time.com/5292489/north-south-korea-surprise-second-summit/>

[9] <http://time.com/5309267/moon-jae-in-sleepless-singapore-summit/>

[10] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/12/the-guardian-view-on-trump-in-singapore-a-huge-win-for-north-korea>

- [11] ESSF (article 44896), [Seoul aims to declare formal end to Korean War by year end; plans to ease sanctions on North Korea.](#)
- [12] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-southkorea-drills/u-s-south-korea-agree-to-suspend-joint-military-exercise-official-idUSKBN1JE2RM?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>
- [13] <https://apnews.com/cc1cf4571b8d4600b3245290ec7ed518>
- [14] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/10/world/asia/kim-jong-un-north-korea-south-usb-economy.html>
- [15] <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/dont-forget-about-the-panmunjom-declaration/>
- [16] <https://www.nknews.org/2018/06/spotlight-on-economic-model-adoring-crowds-in-n-korean-summit-documentary/>
- [17] [https://twitter.com/martyn\\_williams/status/1006302444144324608](https://twitter.com/martyn_williams/status/1006302444144324608)
- [18] <https://www.crisisgroup.org/united-states/001-deep-freeze-and-beyond-making-trump-kim-summit-success>
- [19] <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/national/2018/06/15/0301000000AEN20180615006951315.html>
- [20] <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/south-koreans-puzzled-by-us-president-donald-trumps-north-appeasement-tweet>
- [21] <https://twitter.com/johncarlbaker/status/1003693992515694592>
- [22] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/06/trump-north-korea-kim-negotiations-deal>
- [23] <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/392081-dem-senators-move-to-halt-potential-us-troop-withdrawal-from-s-korea>
- [24] <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/smiling-and-holding-hands-leaders-of-two-koreas-kim-jong-un-and-moon-jae-in-meet-at>