

The US-DPRK Singapore Summit was a meaningful step towards peace on the Korean Peninsula

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The June 12th Singapore Summit between the US and the DPRK was an important, positive step towards the achievement of peace on the Korean Peninsula, normalized relations between the US and North Korea, and the reunification of Korea.

Contents

- [The summit was a real movement](#)
- [There is strong support \(...\)](#)
- [Troubling criticisms of \(...\)](#)
- [The importance of history](#)

In the words of the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union [[1](#)], one of South Korea's largest unions:

"The very fact that the top leaders of North Korea and the U.S., two countries whose relationship has been laced with hostility and mutual threats for the last seventy years, sat together in one place and shared dialogue is historic and signals a new era in which peace on the Korean Peninsula is possible. We therefore welcome the North Korea-U.S. Summit and joint statement."

At the same time, it is important not to lose perspective. The Summit was a step, but only step, towards improved relations. Many challenges remain on the road ahead, and it is going to require popular pressure to keep us moving ahead.

The summit was a real movement away from war

On the North Korean side [[2](#)], Kim Jong Un, even before the Summit, announced an end to his country's missile and nuclear weapons testing. At the Summit, he once again committed his country to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which is a commitment to end the country's nuclear weapons program if matched by a US commitment to refrain from threatening a nuclear attack on North Korea or introducing nuclear weapons on or around the Korean Peninsula. He also agreed to destroy his country's main missile engine testing facility, having already destroyed the country's nuclear bomb testing facility. He also agreed to allow a return of US military personal to search for and repatriate the remains of US soldiers killed during the Korean War.

On the US side, Donald Trump pledged to end the war games which are held several times a year in and around the Korean Peninsula and which include simulated nuclear attacks on North Korea and planning for the "decapitation" of North Korea's leadership.

And both sides agreed to more meetings to work on structuring a process designed to achieve the denuclearization of the Peninsula and the normalization of relations between the US and North Korea, which would mean among other things, an end to the Korean War and US sanctions against North Korea.

And thanks to the positive momentum generated by the Singapore Summit, North and South Korea continue to build on the success of their own recent summit. For example, the militaries of the two countries recently held their first general level talks in ten years and agreed to fully restore their military communication lines, as well as began talks to demilitarize the DMZ area.

These are incredibly positive developments, especially in light of the fact that only months ago we faced the very real threat of a new Korean War.

There is strong support in South Korea for improved North Korean relations

These developments are extremely popular in South Korea. More than 80 percent of South Koreans support South Korean President Moon's policies, including his own summit meeting with Kim. And in elections held the day after the US-North Korean summit [3], his Democratic Party won 14 of the 17 mayoral and gubernatorial races and 11 of 12 parliament by-elections. Opposition parties that criticized Moon's approach to North Korea were thoroughly defeated.

If this response has surprised people in the United States, it is only because many have little understanding of the costs paid by people in South Korea from the state of war between the US and North Korea. For example, the state of war has allowed conservative governments in South Korea to use national security laws to outlaw a progressive political party, dissolve militant trade unions, arrest trade union leaders, break strikes, and restrict freedom of speech. It has also enabled conservative forces to win massive increases in military spending at the expense of social programs and legitimated the growth of US military bases throughout the country, with their immense environmental and social costs. And then there is the real and constant threat of war.

Of course, the people in North Korea have suffered the most—the threat of war and the need for greater military spending as well as the economic embargo and sanctions have taken a real social and economic toll; political and human rights have also suffered. At the same time, it is worth pointing out [4] that despite claims that the North Korean government cares little for the well being of its people,

"several reports and academic studies show that North Korea's food situation is stable and on par with – or even better than – some other nations in Asia.

Professor Hazel Smith, Director of the International Institute of Korean Studies at Cranfield University in the UK, concluded in a new research paper [5] that levels of severe wasting – people being underweight for their height because of acute malnutrition – is lower in North Korea than in a number of other low-income countries [including India, Pakistan, and Indonesia] and equal to those in other developing countries in Asia."

Troubling criticisms of the Summit

Tragically, many liberal voices have been raised in opposition to the Summit and the possibilities for peace it has encouraged [6]. Progressive commentators, as well as Democratic Party politicians and established journalists, have expressed outrage and worry over the fact that Trump met with Kim. In

broad brush, they say that the US gave Kim all he wanted, which was legitimacy on the world stage, and got nothing in return. Or that by agreeing to halt war games, the US gave away its most important bargaining chip. Or that the US flag and NK flag should never have flown side by side—given the dictatorial nature of the North Korean regime. Or that the US is undermining the ROK-US alliance.

As Korea analyst Tim Shorrock noted [7]:

"Even as the first images flashed across the world of Trump and Kim shaking hands against the unusual background of US and DPRK flags flapping together, social media and op-ed sections of media sites were filled with denunciations of Trump. Democratic leaders in the House and Senate led the attack."

"In his haste to reach an agreement, President Trump elevated North Korea to the level of the United States while preserving the regime's status quo," charged House minority leader Nancy Pelosi. Senate minority leader Charles Schumer, who last week warned that the Democrats might oppose any agreement that didn't include the now-famous CVID commitment, said on the Senate floor that Trump had "legitimized a brutal dictator."

Conservative columnists had a field day. "The spectacle of the murderous dictator Kim Jong Un on equal footing with the president of the United States—each country's flag represented, a supposedly 'normal' diplomatic exchange between two nuclear powers—was enough to turn democracy lovers' stomachs," Jennifer Rubin wrote in the Post. Similar analyses were posted all day on Twitter."

Progressive media commentators also joined in. For example, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow warned that Trump was being played by both Russia and North Korea [8]:

"Russia has just this tiny little border, 11 mile long border, with North Korea, with one crossing on a train. And they've got a troubled and varied history over the decades with that country. But Russia is also increasingly straining at its borders right now, and shoving back U.S. and Western influence. Especially U.S. and Western military presence anywhere near what it considers to be its own geopolitical interests. And one of the things that they have started to loudly insist on is that the U.S. drop those joint military exercises with South Korea. The U.S. has kept those going as a pillar of U.S. national security strategy for 70 years, now. Until last night, when Trump casually announced that that's over now. He's doing away with those. Blindsided everybody involved. And gave North Korea something they desperately want and would do almost anything for. Except he gave it to them for free. How come?"

This is puzzling and disturbing. We were on the verge of a new Korean War, and now we are engaged in serious peace talks. That is a positive step. Underlying these criticisms seems to be the assumption that the US always pursues a democratic foreign policy and thus should be allowed to have nuclear weapons, test new ones, and threaten to use them against other countries as it sees fit. And other countries should refrain from objecting to or actively resisting US actions, especially developing their own weapons in response to US threats. This is a very problematic assumption.

The importance of history

Most Americans do not know the history that got us here, starting with the fact that the Korean War ended with a cease fire, not a peace treaty. For many years, neither the US or North Korea showed much interest in ending the state of war. That changed in the early 1990s with the end of the Soviet Union. This event left North Korea without a powerful military protector and its major trading

partner. At the same time, the country was also hit by major floods in the mid-1990s, further adding to its security and economic problems. These developments led North Korea to seek an accommodation with the US, which it hoped would lead to an end to the state of hostilities between the two countries. North Korean overtures were generally rejected by the United States [9].

The US threatened to drop nuclear bombs on North Korea during the Korean war. The US introduced nuclear weapons into South Korea in the late 1950s, against the terms of the armistice agreement that ended the fighting in Korea. In the 1970s the US began war games that soon included simulated nuclear attacks against North Korea. Without the Soviet Union's protection, the North felt it had no choice but to take steps to protect itself, and that led it to pursue its own nuclear weapons program while simultaneously seeking peace talks with the United States. North Korea repeatedly said, as it said again in Singapore, that it would abandon its nuclear program if the US ended its hostile policies.

While North Korea is always presented as an aggressive military power, the fact is that South Korea has outspent North Korea on defense every single year since 1976. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, South Korea currently spends roughly \$40 billion a year on defense—and this does not include US military spending in the region. By contrast, North Korea spends only \$4 billion.

Trump's willingness to cancel war games is a positive first step in showing that the US is seriousness about creating a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. These war games, which happen at least twice a year, include B-52 bombers that are nuclear capable, stealth fighters, submarines with nuclear missiles, hundreds of thousand troops, and are organized to practice attacking North Korea.

North Koreans still remember the Korean War, which included, as historian Bruce Cumings describes [10],

"three years of "rain and ruin" by the US air force. Pyongyang had been razed to the ground, with the Air Force stating in official documents that the North's cities suffered greater damage than German and Japanese cities firebombed during World War II.

Just as the Japan scholar Richard Minear termed Truman's atomic attacks "exterminationist", the great French writer and film-maker Chris Marker wrote after a visit to the North in 1957: "Extermination crossed this land." It was an indelible experience still drilled into the heads of every North Korean."

In light of this history, one can easily understand why North Korean leaders find current US war games threatening.

Agreeing to halt these massive exercises is not giving North Korea something undeserved. It is an important way for the United States to demonstrate that it is serious about achieving peace. And, as noted above, North Korea is taking its own actions to demonstrate its seriousness, halting all missile and nuclear tests and destroying its test sites. In this context, it is worth pointing out that North Korea has not demanded that the US stop all its missile and bomb testing, which continue. It asks only that the US agree to normalize relations and commit not to threaten to attack the North or introduce nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula—thus producing a nuclear free Korean Peninsula.

Agreeing to end the state of war is not giving North Korea some special benefit. It is helping the Korean people gain the space they need to deal with their own division. Supporting such a process is also the best way to generate the kinds of interactions needed to promote real democratic change in

both Koreas. It also helps us in the United States, making it easier to confront our own militarism and the huge costs that we pay for it.

Real change is possible. This is the moment to do what we can to build a strong popular movement on both sides of the Pacific for peace and reconciliation.

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P.S.

* Reports from the Economic Front:

<https://economicfront.wordpress.com/2018/06/21/the-us-dprk-singapore-summit-was-a-meaningful-step-towards-peace-on-the-korean-peninsula/>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 44791), [After the Singapore Summit: Real Denuclearisation and the Establishment of a Lasting Peace on the Korean Peninsula are Up to Us](#).

[2] <http://kpolicy.org/dprk-reports-outcome-of-the-singapore-summit/>

[3] ESSF (article 44923), [South Korea: Moon Jae-in's Democratic Party Sweeps Local Elections](#).

[4] <http://www.atimes.com/article/north-korea-famine-focus-misses-starving-children-india/>

[5] https://www.academia.edu/25554321/Nutrition_and_Health_in_North_Korea_Whats_New_Whats_Changed_and_Why_It_Matters

[6] <https://economicfront.wordpress.com/2017/12/03/media-complicity-increases-the-possibility-of-a-new-korean-war/>

[7] ESSF (article 44925), [Trump Meets Kim, Averting Threat of Nuclear War—and US Pundits Are Furious](#).

[8] <http://kpolicy.org/koreans-want-peace-do-liberal-pundits-want-war/>

[9] <https://economicfront.wordpress.com/2017/05/26/the-need-for-a-new-us-foreign-policy-towards-north-korea/>

[10] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/13/america-carpet-bombed-north-korea-remember-that-past>