



Congressional Testimony

**Before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

Hearing on “The Trump-Kim Summit: Outcomes and Oversight”

Abraham M. Denmark
Asia Program Director
Senior Fellow at the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

June 20, 2018

Rayburn House Office Building Room 2172

Chairman Yoho, Ranking Member Sherman, members of the Committee, my distinguished fellow panelists: it is an honor to be invited to give testimony today to review last week's remarkable summit between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Given what happened in Singapore – and what didn't happen – this hearing provides an opportunity for a valuable public discussion about a topic of critical importance.

My name is Abraham M. Denmark, and I am Director of the Asia Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, where I also hold an appointment as a Senior Fellow in the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States. The views I express in my testimony are mine alone, and not those of the Wilson Center or of the U.S. government.

At the outset, I want to be clear that **I am a strong supporter of diplomacy with North Korea.** I worked the North Korea challenge every day in my time at the Department of Defense, and I am deeply familiar with the costs and risks that would be involved in a military conflict with North Korea. While I oppose taking military options off the table, I firmly believe that realistic diplomacy – complemented by sustained pressure as well as the resolve to demand reciprocal concessions from North Korea – is preferable to the risks of a potentially catastrophic conflict. As President Kennedy said, “let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”

Still, while I believe in diplomacy, we should remember it is a tactic – not a strategy, and certainly not an objective. While entering into a diplomatic process with Pyongyang is a positive development, North Korea has so far received several significant concessions without giving much in return. In several ways the United States emerged from the Singapore summit at a greater disadvantage than when it began. **While the diplomatic process that has begun may yield results eventually, the unfortunate fact is that the United States got a bad deal in Singapore.**

What Happened in Singapore

Regardless of its outcome, a meeting between the President of the United States and the North Korean leader was undeniably historic. After over 70 years of hostility and multiple instances of extreme tension, the meeting of the two leaders offered a moment of hope despite all the skepticism, doubt, and distrust that infuses U.S.-DPRK relations. Despite the significant disappointment of the summit overall, it did have some tangible results.

- **The most geopolitically significant outcome of the summit was to officially set the U.S.-DPRK relationship onto a diplomatic track.** While it is unclear if this process will generate any tangible results, this is far better than the tension and “fire

and fury” rhetoric from previous months.

- Though often overlooked, it is important to recognize that North Korea committed to recovering American POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those remains already identified. While this is a positive gesture from Pyongyang, we should recall that they have in the past demanded payment for the return of our people’s remains.
- **Unilaterally suspending major U.S.-ROK joint military exercises gave away a major piece of American leverage while over time weakening the capabilities of our forces stationed in Korea, for no appreciable gain.** North Korea is still free to conduct its major exercises, and its pledge to halt nuclear and missile tests was not included in the Singapore summit joint statement – meaning the president’s concession appears entirely unilateral. Cancelling these exercises has been a long-held goal for North Korea and China, and the president adopted their argument when he called the exercises “provocative”.¹ I disagree with the president’s characterization. These joint military exercises are stabilizing and defensive, and they are essential for deterrence, reassurance, and readiness. They ensure that that U.S. and ROK forces are ready to “fight tonight” to defend against any potential aggression on the peninsula. The President often touts the power of the U.S. military – in the past, he has warned that U.S. military options are “fully locked and loaded” in Korea.² But the reality is that the only reason these forces are so ready to go is because they exercise regularly.

This is not to say that military exercises are sacrosanct and should not be adjusted under any circumstance. Adjusting exercises should be part of a negotiation with North Korea - not a unilateral concession for which we get nothing in return. In any case, it does not require the president denigrating the utility of our exercises. Doing so suggests that exercises are primarily bargaining chips – not actions that are necessary to maintain military readiness – and will have global implications for exercises held all around the world.

What Didn't Happen in Singapore

¹ Jim Michaels, “U.S. will suspend military drills with South Korea, but they can be restarted quickly,” *USA Today*, June 12 2018, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/06/12/trump-suspend-military-exercises-south-korea/693527002/>.

² “Trump: military solutions 'locked and loaded' against North Korea threat,” *Reuters*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-trump-idUSKBN1AR15M>.

- **North Korea has made no new commitments to denuclearization, and in fact has backed away from its previous commitments.** In Singapore, Kim was able to simply reiterate the commitment made at Panmunjom in April, that “South and North Korea confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.”³ North Korea remains free to manufacture more nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and other weapons of mass destruction – even though it has unilaterally frozen testing of its nuclear weapons and certain ballistic missiles. There is no deadline for them to eliminate their illegal capabilities, or even freeze their continued production.

Further, as you can see in the chart I appended to my testimony, North Korea’s denuclearization commitment made last week was the least specific commitment it has ever made. For example, in 2005 as a result of the 6-Party Talks process, North agreed to “verifiable” denuclearization and to “abandoning all its nuclear weapons and nuclear programs and returning, at an early date” to the NPT.⁴ The reality is that the commitment Kim made last week is a significant downgrade from any of its previous commitments.

- **The joint statement from Singapore did not mention human rights, other weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missiles or verification, meaning the president could only point to his personal trust in Kim Jong Un.** Considering North Korea’s repeated history of violating past agreements, there is little reason to trust them this time. Moreover, Kim rules a regime that commits systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations against his own people, and is believed to have directed acts of aggression against our ROK ally and the rapid acceleration of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile testing program upon taking power. Yet in the Singapore joint statement and in the president’s comments since then, there has been no mention of verification or enforcement. Instead, the president has repeatedly described the trust he holds for Kim Jong Un. Time will tell if this trust is well placed, but I am skeptical about entrusting the future security of my country or our allies in the goodwill of Kim Jong Un.
- **Despite their pledge to completely denuclearize the Korean peninsula, Washington and Pyongyang have yet to agree on a common definition of denuclearization.** Without a common understanding of what is to be achieved, it is

³ *Panmunjeom Declaration for Peace, Prosperity, and Unification of the Korean Peninsula*, April 27, 2018.

⁴ *Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks Beijing*, September 19, 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>.

more likely that negotiations will end in disappointment and recrimination. Pyongyang may believe that the “complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” entails the United States withdrawing its extended deterrent commitment to the ROK, or even to end the U.S.-ROK Alliance. Indeed, Secretary Pompeo’s statement that “complete” includes verification strongly suggests that establishing a common understanding of the terms being used will be an essential step in the diplomatic process.

Implications

- **Despite the president’s claims, North Korea remains a significant threat to the United States and our allies in East Asia.** While the President’s summit with Kim may have generated some goodwill and even built personal trust between the two leaders, North Korea has not given up a single warhead or ballistic missile. Its WMD production facilities are free to continue to manufacture their illegal arms, and not a single long-range artillery tube has been withdrawn from threatening the Seoul metropolitan area. North Korea has the same ability today to strike our allies, and possibly the United States, with nuclear weapons as it had before the President met Kim in Singapore.
- **The summit was a tremendous propaganda victory for Kim Jong Un.** This is why previous presidents have refused to meet with North Korean leaders – doing so in itself is a major concession and conveys tremendous legitimacy to the North Koreans. Images of Kim’s meeting with the President of the United States will likely be used for years to show his people that he is respected and admired around the world and is considered an equal to the world’s most powerful leaders. He can show the North Korean flag sitting next to the American flag and tell his people that his leadership has made the DPRK respected as an equal to the United States and recognized as a *de facto* nuclear power. And he can show the President saluting a North Korean General and tell his people that even the American President respects the Korean People’s Army.
- **The Singapore summit injected new turbulence into U.S. alliances with Japan and the ROK.** The President’s effusive praise of Kim Jong Un, and his willingness to meet with Kim and make significant concessions - despite making so little progress on denuclearization - inflamed allied concerns about the reliability of the United States. Tokyo has been more open about expressing their concerns, though it has been sure to praise the Trump administration for raising the issue of Japanese

abductees with Kim⁵ and its pledge to sustain economic sanctions until concrete steps toward denuclearization have been taken. In Seoul, the Moon administration has been officially supportive of the summit's outcomes and endorsed the president's decision to suspend military exercises.⁶ Yet both Seoul and Tokyo are concerned about the suspension of exercises without corresponding North Korean concessions and without prior consultation. Such actions can, over time, damage the confidence of our allies in American reliability. Moreover, giving away significant mechanisms of alliance cooperation without coordination inflames fears that the United States will make another deal with North Korea that undermines their interests.

- **China got everything it wanted.** China has long sought for the United States to be committed to a diplomatic process and to suspend its military exercises in Korea. Beijing increasingly views issues on the Korean peninsula through the lens of geopolitical competition with the United States and seeks to diminish American power and influence in Korea. Further, China has long sought to cancel major U.S.-ROK joint military exercises and inject turbulence into the Alliance – both of which President Trump fulfilled unilaterally.

Going forward, the Trump administration may have an opportunity to point to its tacit adoption of China's preferred strategy in order to sustain Beijing's continued enforcement of sanctions. This may be important, as China had already begun to soften its enforcement of sanctions weeks before the summit.

Next Steps

While it is too soon to know whether the diplomatic process that has been put in place will ultimately be successful, the United States has an opportunity to add specifics to the broad principles agreed to in Singapore. When looking forward to future engagements with North Korea, I want to make four concluding points.

- **Time is not on our side.** As Mike Pompeo stated as CIA Director in January of this year, North Korea was just “a handful of months away” from having the ability to

⁵ “Japan PM Shinzo Abe thanks Donald Trump for raising North Korea's abductions with Kim Jong-un,” *South China Morning Post*, June 12, 2018, <http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/diplomacy/article/2150426/japan-pm-shinzo-abe-thanks-donald-trump-raising-north-koreas>.

⁶ Chang May Choon, “Trump-Kim summit: Jubilant Moon Jae In pledges to write 'new history' with North Korea,” *The Straits Times*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/trump-kim-summit-sleepless-skorea-president-moon-jae-in-hopes-for-new-era-of-complete>.

strike the United States with nuclear weapons⁷ – something the president and several of his predecessors have stated would be intolerable. Yet as Secretary of State following the Singapore summit, Pompeo stated that he expects there to be significant progress toward denuclearization by the end of 2020.

While North Korea has frozen its nuclear and ballistic missile testing, its ability to continue to mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles – which Kim called for during his New Year’s speech in January of this year – remains unrestrained. There is a danger that the United States has entered into an open-ended diplomatic process which would North Korea at a distinct advantage. While Secretary of State Pompeo’s statement that he hopes to achieve North Korea’s denuclearization by the end of 2020⁸ suggests that he is aware of these time pressures, the fact that North Korea has not agreed to such a timeline suggests that this remains an unresolved issue.

As negotiations commence, North Korea will be able to continue to mass produce nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles unless we achieve a complete freeze of those programs. **One way for the United States to address time pressures on this negotiation would be to achieve a complete freeze of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs as an early step in a diplomatic process.**

- Another critical step in the denuclearization process will be to receive a full declaration from North Korea of its nuclear and chemical weapons programs, and the biological program it is suspected of possessing. Without such a declaration, it will be impossible to achieve denuclearization to any degree of confidence.
- To supplement the president’s trust of Kim Jong Un trust, the United States could insist on strict inspection and verification regimes to accompany any concession North Korea may make toward denuclearization. Without verification, any North Korean concession should be viewed with deep skepticism.
- While I take the president at his word that human rights issues were discussed in Singapore, it is clear that these issues took a back seat. While I support the

⁷ John Haltiwanger, “North Korea ‘Handful of Months’ From Being Able to Hit U.S. With Nuclear Weapon, CIA Director Warns,” *Newsweek*, January 22, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-handful-months-being-able-hit-us-nuclear-weapon-cia-director-warns-786706>.

⁸ John Bowden, “Pompeo ‘hopeful’ North Korea will move toward denuclearization in Trump’s first term,” *The Hill*, June 13, 2018, <http://thehill.com/policy/international/392059-pompeo-us-wants-concrete-steps-towards-north-korea-denuclearization>.

administration's focus on denuclearization as its top priority with North Korea, a failure to keep international attention on these issues could result in a bad deal for the North Korean people. I find it difficult to imagine North Korea being accepted into the international community if it leaves its serious human rights issues unaddressed – even if North Korea were to genuinely denuclearize.

- **The United States should prepare for increased friction with China over maintaining pressure on North Korea.** I expect China will soften its enforcement of economic sanctions on North Korea, both to thwart U.S. efforts to maintain pressure on Pyongyang and to build a stronger bilateral relationship with Kim. The United States should be prepared to hold China accountable for its continued support of North Korea, even to the point of enacting secondary sanctions on Chinese entities that continue to do business with North Korea.
- **Considering the continuing threat posed by North Korea, the United States should ensure that its military forces and alliances in the region remain ready and robust.** This may entail tailoring what exercises remain so as to maintain necessary levels of force readiness and conducting genuine coordination efforts with our allies before a decision is made. Any strategy toward North Korea – be it diplomatic or military – is far stronger if allies are consulted and if the full weight of the United States and our allies can be brought to bear on a particular issue. Our allies are the foundation of American power in the Asia-Pacific and make significant contributions to the stability and prosperity of the region and to U.S. interests around the world. They deserve to be respected and consulted.

Further, the people of the U.S. military make incredible sacrifices to defend the security and freedom of their fellow countrymen and our allies. During my time in the Department of Defense, I witnessed the incredible capabilities of the U.S. military and those of our allies. They deserve the resources needed to do their job effectively, and the ability to exercise as needed. Readiness saves lives, and ensures that our military remains the most awesome, feared fighting force in the history of the world. While negotiations with North Korea are certainly important as well, they do not have to come at the expense of the readiness of our forces or the security of our allies.

Going forward, we must remain clear-eyed about who we are dealing with. The threat from North Korea remains real, and Kim is not to be trusted. A credible, high-quality deal will be difficult to achieve, and even more difficult to implement and verify. After the pageantry of Singapore, the difficult work of diplomacy and denuclearization still lies ahead.