

POLICY BRIEF

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Between Hope and Misgivings: One Summit and many questions

Valérie Niquet

A Post Singapore summit analysis

A few weeks after it was held, it is still not possible to draw definitive conclusions from the June 12 summit in Singapore between Donald Trump and Kim Jung-un. Many critics insist on the absence of any binding precise engagement, referring to the model of arms control negotiations between the United States and the USSR. However, it would have been difficult to imagine that this type of document, based on decades of building a shared, if not common, strategic culture, could be so rapidly drawn up between two powers as asymmetrical as the United States and North Korea.

However, the 12 June summit, whether it initiates a real positive evolution or ultimately proves to be a complete failure, as well as the diplomatic games surrounding it do influence the expectations and strategic choices of the major Asian powers, potential adversary, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), or allies of the United States such as Japan and South Korea.

What are the outcomes Singapore Summit

Defense Secretary James Mattis had been very firm at the Shangri La Dialogue on security in Asia that took place only a few days before the Singapore summit. He stressed in particular the demand for a complete, verified and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea's nuclear and ballistic capabilities (CVID). The document produced at the end of the talks between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump is much vaguer, despite the assurances of the American president as to its "historical" character. On the main issue, the document states that the United States and North Korea want to establish a "lasting and strong" peace on the Korean peninsula. Kim Jong-un reaffirms his "firm and unwavering" commitment to "work toward" a complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Both parties pledged to implement these decisions "fully and expeditiously".

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However, no specific agenda is mentioned, nor are the concrete verification processes that would be put in place. The ambiguity over the scope of “denuclearization”, limited to North Korea or extended to the entire peninsula, at least potentially implicating the abandonment of the US nuclear umbrella since no US nuclear weapons have been stationed in South Korea since the early 1990s, has not been removed.

At the press conference following the summit, President Trump said he was “certain” of the North Korean leader’s commitment to achieving a denuclearization of the peninsula. He added that, outside the document, Kim Jong-un had also committed to destroy two missile test sites, including one specifically dedicated to engines, and that the Yongbyon nuclear test complex had already been destroyed.

Trump also pointed out that North Korea has not conducted new ballistic and nuclear tests for several months.

With regard to the timetable, he mentioned that the process could be very long, even if critical developments, preventing any resumption of the programme, could take place more rapidly. For some Japanese and American experts, the timetable could indeed extend over fifteen years if the horizon envisaged is that of the entire process. It may, however, be much shorter if only the initial courses, prohibiting any resumption of the programme, are taken into account. In both cases, the question of effective control and non-proliferation will remain on the very long term.

In exchange for these first elements, the American president announced the suspension of the joint exercises (war games) with South Korea, described as “provocative and costly”. At the press conference, he gave after the summit, Donald Trump did not clarify the actual scope of his decision. However, in the days that followed, Washington and Seoul specified that the “suspension”, described as a confidence-

building measure (CBM), would only concern the Ulchi freedom Guardian exercises, which take place every year in August. No decision has been taken concerning the next winter and spring exercises.

The eventual withdrawal of American troops from South Korea (28500 men) was also evoked by Donald Trump taking up the themes of his campaign on the cost of the protection “granted” by the United States to South Korea and Japan. These announcements, despite the vagueness of North Korean commitments on the content and timing of the denuclearization process, were generally denounced as a major mistake marking the failure of the summit.

Yet other elements of Donald Trump’s speech put these “mistakes” into perspective. The refusal of any real concession, in the absence of irreversible progress on the North Korean side, has been repeatedly reaffirmed by Donald Trump, particularly with regard to the continuation of sanctions. Similarly, the withdrawal of American troops would only be possible in the very distant future, in the event of a fundamental transformation of the situation on the Korean peninsula.

A challenge to China and Beijing’s reactions

From Kim Jong-un’s decision to participate in the Pyong-yeong Olympic Games in February 2018, followed by Donald Trump’s acceptance of a summit, Beijing’s priority has been to escape marginalisation and at least preserve the image of the regime as a key player built since the late 1990s. The day after the summit, the Chinese press insisted on the “major” role played by China in facilitating the organization of the summit and the “irreplaceable” dimension of Beijing’s involvement.

While Kim Jong-un had never been received by the Chinese leadership since he came to power in 2012, he went to Beijing three times in a few weeks, including once a few days after the

Singapore summit. He also met with Xi Jinping in Dalian on the eve of the Singapore Summit.

Beijing's desire not to appear marginalized, and to retain the room for manoeuvre associated with the role that China was supposed to be able to play in the North Korean question, could only increase after the Singapore Summit. At the press conference that followed, Donald Trump repeatedly expressed doubts about China's "positive" role and Beijing's implementation of sanctions in recent months. In reality, despite the desire to appear to be in control, the position of the PRC has been much more reactive than proactive.

For the Chinese leaders, the most negative hypothesis, which justifies the very pragmatic change of attitude towards the North Korean leader, is indeed that of a true rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang. Chinese leaders view this hypothesis with all the more concern as the path followed by Pyongyang strongly recalls that of the PRC in the 1970s, when Beijing chose to approach the United States, with a historic summit between Mao Zedong and Richard Nixon, to face the "Soviet threat". Kim Jong-un is thus denounced by some Chinese analysts as "very shrewd and capable of pitting major powers like China and the United States against each other in order to profit from them".

At the same time, Beijing seems satisfied with the outcome of a summit that could pave the way for a long phase of gradual solution to the nuclear issue in North Korea, even if Beijing's interests are far from coinciding with those of the United States and its allies. For Beijing, the solution of the nuclear issue should indeed lead to an appeasement in the peninsula, which could justify a withdrawal of American forces from the whole area. For Washington's allies, on the contrary, the security guarantees offered by Washington are only partly linked to the solution of the nuclear and ballistic question in North Korea.

The day after the summit, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that "the summit paved the way for a new history". The rapid suspension of sanctions which, according to Beijing's usual position, "cannot be an objective in itself", in response to gestures of goodwill without major consequences on the part of North Korea, was also very quickly mentioned by the Chinese spokesman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For Beijing, the lifting of sanctions could indeed enable it to regain a major influence on the North Korean regime. Finally, the hypothesis of a "progressive and synchronized denuclearization of the Korean peninsula", by lifting the threat of growing tensions with the United States that could lead to open conflict, and the possibility of a significant weakening of the United States' engagement in the region, is also positive.

On the other hand, contrary to what some analyses have put forward, the Singapore summit does not correspond to the "freeze for freeze" mentioned by Beijing at the height of tensions between Pyongyang and Washington in 2017. Indeed, the "freeze for freeze" only implied a suspension of the nuclear and ballistic tests, in exchange for an end of the Korean-American military exercises. The conclusions of the Singapore Summit, despite their limitations, go beyond this simple suspension of testing, although implementation remains uncertain. Moreover, the uncertainty factor related to the personality of the American president does not allow China to be assured of a lasting appeasement in the event of North Korea's non-compliance with the commitments that Donald Trump believes he has obtained at the summit.

For China, in fact, despite all its limitations, and in particular the bilateral game with the United States which has considerably increased Kim Jong-un's room for manoeuvre, North Korea can still play a role in its strategy against the United States. The relation is described as a long-term rivalry which concerns many subjects, including the question of Taiwan or

that of trade. Beijing is thus trying to keep the ability to link the North Korean factor to these other issues, including that of trade exchanges, in order to strengthen its position.

At the regional level, Beijing’s objective remains to regain more room for manoeuvre, to preserve its influence, and its image as a leading and influential power. In other words, the ideal for Beijing would be to impose, in any future solution, the primacy of the US-China-North Korea triangle over the US-Japan-South Korea triangle in the denuclearization process of North Korea.

It is not certain however that this strategy is possible, Kim Jong-un will try, thanks to Beijing, to preserve the more comfortable triangular game which he set up. On the other hand, for contemporary reasons, including Beijing’s decision to vote and apply with much greater severity the sanctions of the UN Security Council adopted in September and December 2017, but also for historical reasons, the North Korean regime’s strategy will be to extract itself from a “semi-tributary” relationship of exclusive dependence, on Beijing.

The possible success of the delaying and control strategy that Beijing wishes to put in place is also a major element in the strategic evaluation of the immediate and forthcoming results of the Singapore Summit for Seoul and Tokyo.

The ambivalence of South Korea

President Moon Jae-in’s, by creating the conditions of an overture for the North Korean leader, and by playing the role of intermediary between Pyongyang and Washington had a major role in organizing the Singapore summit. However, for Seoul, if the resolution of the nuclear issue would be positive in itself, the priority remains also to try to make progress towards a lasting peace, opening the way to closer ties between the two Koreas. Moreover,

South Korea refuses any marginalization that would see China, the United States and North Korea manage the process of denuclearization, without major involvement of Seoul.

However, South Korean positions seem to have evolved since the summit. At the Shangri la dialogue in early June, South Korean Defence Minister Song Young-moo called for more “confidence” in the North Korean leader’s sincerity, so as not to waste the chances of a positive solution. After the summit, Seoul, seems to be more cautious. Responding to the announcements of the suspension of annual exercises with Washington, the South Korean authorities insisted that this was only a one-off resolution.

According to the Ministry of Defense spokesman, no decision has been taken on subsequent exercises, and the suspension of other exercises could only result from the continuation of a “peace process” and the adoption of concrete measures concerning North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic facilities.

On the other hand, as the South Korean defence minister indicated during the Shangri la dialogue, South Korea’s position on issues vital to Japan can be worrying, assuming that the process towards an effective and verified implementation of the denuclearization of the peninsula, leading to subsequent normalization and confidence-building measures, could “eventually” lead to the resolution of the issue of short- and medium-range missiles, if the security of the North Korean regime is guaranteed.

Japan’s justified concerns

Japan’s position is much more focused on effective and verifiable results concerning both the nuclear issue, the missiles issue, including middle and short range missiles and the abductee issue. Tokyo’s initial reaction following the Singapore summit remained cautious, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who had met

Donald Trump a few days before the summit, expressed his hope for a successful solution to the nuclear and ballistic issue in North Korea. On the other hand, Defence Minister Onodera, whose speech at the Shangri dialogue had been very firm, particularly on the essential issue for Tokyo of all of North Korea's ballistic capabilities, strongly expressed his concern at the suspension of joint exercises with South Korea, described as "vital for the security of East Asia and the assurance of American deterrence". In spite of the reassurance given by Defense Secretary James Mattis during his visit to Japan at the end of June 2018 cautiousness has not completely disappeared.

The position of some analysts, who – with reasons - underline the failure of the summit and the blows to confidence in US engagement with its allies, also reflects the opinion of those in Japan who might want to seize the opportunity offered by Donald Trump's "weakness" to push for an acceleration in the normalisation of Japan's military capabilities.

For these analysts, the Singapore Summit provided no concrete answer to the question of North Korea's complete, irreversible and verifiable denuclearization, nor to that of intermediate missiles that directly threaten Japanese territory, whether equipped with nuclear, chemical, biological or conventional warheads. Moreover, for Tokyo, taking into account only long-range missiles in a possible agreement with North Korea could only reinforce the risk of "decoupling" between the interests of the United States and those of its allies in Asia, further weakening confidence in the security guarantees offered by the United States, including the nuclear umbrella, that remain the cornerstone of the security system in the region. In these circumstances, following these analysis, the North Korean crisis and the attitude of the United States, could play the role

of a welcomed wake-up call to take its defense more seriously and abandon its traditional "utopian pacifism".¹

Not all analyses, however, reflect this pessimism. The announcement of the suspension of the joint exercises with South Korea is also interpreted by some as a potentially positive move in the context of a "bargaining deal". These analysts stress that the military exercises could resume at any time and do not involve a significant reduction in US engagement in the region.

For all however, the major challenge remains the necessity to maintain the strategy of maximum pressure, and in particular economic sanctions and that remains the position of the Japanese government. For Tokyo, the principle of a phased and reciprocal process involving the gradual lifting of sanctions, defended by Beijing, would be difficult to accept.

Faced with these uncertainties, which concern both the choices made by North Korea and the United States, three paths might be chosen or taken simultaneously to increase the strength of Tokyo's position. While Donald Trump mentioned in his press conference the financial role that Japan could play, with Seoul, to finance the process of denuclearization in North Korea, Japan could be interested – using its financial capabilities - by a bilateral strategy towards North Korea but also China, taking into account its own interests and in particular the question of abductees.

The possibility of a meeting between Shinzo Abe and Kim Jong-un has been raised, although Japan also stated that any financial cooperation could only be envisioned after the normalisation of diplomatic relations and the solution of the nuclear and ballistic issue and that of the abductees. However, by putting forward the

¹ Kuni Miyake, « Beginning of the End to the 1953 Regime », *Japan Times*, 18-06-2018, access on <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2018/06/18/commentary/japan-commentary/beginning-end-1953-regime/#.Wznm7dgzahQ>

hypothesis of a more autonomous strategy, Japan can hope to convince Washington to take better account of interests essential to Tokyo.

Another strategy would be to strengthen the alliance with the United States by highlighting - beyond the nuclearization of North Korea - the persistence of a Chinese threat which in itself justifies the continuation of a strong US commitment in the region - whatever the presidency - and confirms the importance of the alliance with Japan as a cornerstone of the regional security system.

Finally, the solution of a major reinforcement of Japan's military capabilities, involving a very significant increase in the defence budget and a complete change of paradigm can be tempting but would be very difficult to implement. The rejection of the three non-nuclear principles mentioned by some or, in a more moderate hypothesis, of the principle of non-reception and non-deployment of American nuclear weapons on Japanese territory remains extremely hypothetical in the absence of an immediate existential threat.

Apart from these possible evolutions, the Japanese Prime Minister has launched an

initiative to contribute in a major way to the denuclearization process in North Korea. Japan proposed the setup of a fund, to finance IAEA inspections, the decommissioning of nuclear facilities and the transport of North Korea's nuclear materials. The funds however, would not be controlled by Pyongyang - a major weakness of the kedo (Korean peninsula energy development) process that was launched in 1994 - but by a consortium set up with the support of the United States, South Korea and Japan. That initiative could enable Tokyo to play a major role, and to counter the "united front" strategy between Beijing and Pyongyang against the demands of the United States and its allies, while at the same time appeasing Donald Trump's expectations towards Tokyo.

All future evolutions and proposals, however, remain suspended to two major factors. The first is the uncertainty related to the "genuineness" of the North Korean leader in his motivation to launch his country onto a radically new path. The second is related to the capability of the United States to stay firm, on the side of their allies, on all the necessary conditions that could make the denuclearization process of North Korea a success for all.