

## North Korea in 2018

### *Kim's Summit Diplomacy*

#### ABSTRACT

Kim Jong-un showcased a series of summit meetings throughout 2018, including the first-ever meeting of a North Korean leader with a sitting US president. North Korea improved its strained relations with China and South Korea. The country's denuclearization has yet to be seen, but these events sparked considerable debate about the future.

**KEYWORDS:** summit diplomacy, denuclearization, geopolitical relations, North Korea, Kim Jong-un

IN 2018 NORTH KOREA PURSUED vigorous summit diplomacy, greatly changing the geopolitical dynamics in the region. On July 4, 2017, North Korea had conducted its first test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (Hwasong-14), followed on July 28 by another that showed a range of over 10,000 km, which could reach mainland North America. And then on September 3 came its sixth nuclear test. The international community, led by the US, reacted strongly to the North's provocations, with sanctions such as UN Resolutions 2371 and 2375, which targeted its principal exports, such as coal, iron, seafood, and textiles. The Trump administration threatened the North with "military options," and Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un engaged in a war of words. Many in the region were concerned with growing tensions and possible military conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Yet, in 2018, the situation took a radical turn from tension to negotiation. After expressing his interest in dialogue rather than confrontation in his New

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Year's speech, the North Korean leader first reached out to South Korea, taking advantage of the new progressive government there. Seoul was desperate to improve inter-Korean relations to reduce tension on the peninsula in time for the Winter Olympics in February 2018. With Seoul's backing, Kim secured a date for a once-unthinkable summit with the US, relieving the imminent threat of war.

Then, using the US summit as leverage, he skillfully drew China closer by holding his first meeting with Xi Jinping in late March 2018, garnering Xi's support and approval for his strategy toward the US and demonstrating to the US that China had his back. Even Trump's abrupt cancellation of the planned summit failed to catch North Korea off guard. Instead it triggered a surprising second round of the Kim–Moon summit, highlighting Kim's strategic prowess. In 2018 alone, Kim met with Xi three times (they had never met before), and three times with Moon Jae-in of South Korea, including the first visit by any North Korean leader to South Korean soil. And he met with President Donald Trump, the first-ever meeting of a North Korean leader with a sitting US president, something both his father and his grandfather wanted but could not achieve.

At the June 12 summit with Trump in Singapore, Kim showed the world that he was no longer the leader of a “hermit kingdom” and brought home a propaganda victory establishing himself as a world-class leader on par with a sitting US president. He was also able to persuade Trump to suspend the US–South Korean joint military exercises, assuaging North Korea's long-standing paranoia—a move that created internal division in South Korea, while pleasing China. Even if Kim's diplomatic successes were to end here, analysts point out, he could be assured of improved relations with Beijing and Seoul, which would make it difficult for them to actively join the US's maximum-pressure campaign, including Trump's renewed economic sanctions on North Korea—not to mention supporting US military action. In light of these rapid developments (Kim had never left the country since he came to power in late 2011), this essay reviews North Korea in 2018, with a focus on its summit diplomacy.

## WHY NOW?

Much of debate has centered on why Kim suddenly emerged from long-held isolation to take the world's center stage through a series of diplomatic

summits. First, experts argue that economic sanctions by the international community were critical in forcing North Korea to come to the negotiating table.<sup>1</sup> The Bank of (South) Korea estimates that North Korea's trade volume declined by 15% in 2017 from the previous year, with overall exports dropping 37%. In the past, the impact of international economic sanctions was ineffective, largely because China and Russia did not join in. Yet this time the North Korean economy appears to have suffered from China's active participation in the international campaign of maximum-pressure sanctions. These include UN Security Council Resolution 2397, which imposed an embargo on North Korean exports and ratcheted down essential imports such as petroleum and food. China accounts for over 90% of North Korea's trade, and North Korea criticized China for joining the sanctions.<sup>2</sup>

Second, others, including Trump himself, believe that a series of military threats by the US and the war of words with Trump—which stirred fears of war in both the US and Northeast Asia, let alone North Korea—forced Kim to the negotiation table. “Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely,” Trump tweeted on August 11, 2017. “Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!” Kim may have decided that it would be wise to avoid military conflict during Trump's term—he might even be trying to run out the clock on Trump's presidency.

On the other hand, some experts point out that Kim's change of strategy reflects the strength, not the weakness, of the regime. These analysts argue that North Korea has attained a satisfactory level of military deterrence, enabling a shift in national strategy. Thanks to his nuclear and missile capabilities, experts believe, Kim may have calculated that he could now sit at the negotiating table with the US from a greater position of strength, if not quite equality, and that Washington would be ready to offer Pyongyang legitimacy and rewards upon commitment to denuclearization. In this vein, disputing Washington's belief that “pressure brought Kim to the negotiating table,” Leon Sigal claims that “Pyongyang signaled its current course more than three years ago in informal contacts, long before tougher sanctions took effect. US demands . . . had only delayed diplomatic give-and-take for five

1. Joseph Dethomas, “Are Sanctions Part of the Problem?” *38 North*, September 13, 2018, <<https://www.38north.org/2018/09/jdethomas091318/>>.

2. Samuel Ramani, “China's Approach to North Korea Sanctions,” *The Diplomat*, January 10, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-approach-to-north-korea-sanctions/>>.

years, enabling it to add to its nuclear capacity and boost its bargaining leverage in the meantime.”<sup>3</sup>

Finally, new strategic calculations may have led to Kim’s policy shift from nuclear to economic development, for which lifting or easing international sanctions is essential. The main pillar of the Kim regime has been simultaneous nuclear and economic development, known as *byungjin*, to achieve a “strong military, [and] rich nation.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, in his 2018 New Year’s speech, he signaled that now with nuclear power in hand, he wished to shift his policy focus to economic development.<sup>5</sup> As Robert Carlin, a longtime North Korea watcher, has pointed out, “Kim Jong Un has declared victory on the nuclear front, a step that allows him to justify a decisive shift from a focus on the nuclear issue to concentration on the economy.”<sup>6</sup>

#### WHAT HAS BEEN DISCUSSED AND ACHIEVED?

In the Panmunjeom Declaration of April 27, 2018, the leaders of the two Koreas “confirmed the common goal of realizing, through complete denuclearization, a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.” In the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 19, 2018, they “shared the view that the Korean Peninsula must be turned into a land of peace free from nuclear weapons and nuclear threats.” Kim also agreed to visit Seoul at an early date at the invitation of President Moon, it added. If that happens, it will be the first visit by any North Korean leader to the capital of the South. These statements are significant in that nuclear issues have become an important agenda item in inter-Korea summit meetings besides the usual focus on inter-Korean economic and humanitarian cooperation—in the past, North Korea insisted on deliberating nuclear issues only with the US. In Singapore on June 12, the leaders of North Korea and the US agreed to “establish new U.S.–DPRK relations in accordance with the desire of the peoples of the two countries for peace and prosperity” and reaffirmed North Korea’s commitment to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

3. Leon V. Sigal, “Pyongyang’s Brushback Pitch,” *38 North*, May 18, 2018, <<https://www.38north.org/2018/05/lsigal051818/>>.

4. Shin Gi-Wook and Rennie J. Moon, “North Korea in 2017: Closer to Being a Nuclear State,” *Asian Survey* 58:1 (2018): 33–42.

5. National Committee on North Korea, “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address,” January 1, 2018, <<https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427>>.

6. Robert Carlin, “Kim Jong Un’s New Strategic Line,” *38 North*, April 23, 2018, <<https://www.38north.org/2018/04/rcarlin042318/>>.

Kim's vigorous summit diplomacy has dramatically changed the geopolitical landscape around the Korean Peninsula. North Korea improved its strained relations with China and South Korea and established a process of negotiations with the Trump administration, which had openly made threats of military options just the year before, in 2017. Progress has been made on both nuclear and non-nuclear fronts of the Singapore deal, such as dismantling of a nuclear test site, the suspension of the US–South Korean joint military exercises, and repatriation of the remains of US prisoners of war. Kim also caught worldwide attention as head of a “normal state.” Coming out of isolation, he showcased these summit meetings within the parameters of conventional “state-to-state” relationships, departing from past practices of the “hermit kingdom.” Standing side by side with the South Korean president to read out a joint declaration, immediately releasing news of Kim's summit meetings through its media, presenting Kim Jong-un's wife, Ri Sol-ju, as the state's first lady—all of this would have been unthinkable in his father's or grandfather's generation.

## REACTIONS, PERCEPTIONS, AND CONCERNS

Public reception of these summits in South Korea and the United States has been largely positive. In surveys conducted by Realmeter and *JoongAng Ilbo* on May 10 and September 27, 2018, 66% and 69% of respondents said that they supported the Panmunjeom and Pyongyang declarations, respectively.<sup>7</sup> President Moon's approval ratings went up after each meeting with Kim, though the conservatives in South Korea remain critical. Moon's approval ratings rose following his meetings with Kim on April 27 (67.9% on April 26, 76.3% on April 30, and 78.3% on May 2)<sup>8</sup> and September 18–20 (53% on the 17th, 61.4% on the 19th, and 65.7% on the 21st).<sup>9</sup>

7. Ha-young Choi, “66% of South Koreans Support Ratification of Inter-Korean Agreement,” *Korea Times*, May 10, 2018, <[https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/05/356\\_248780.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2018/05/356_248780.html)>; Jin-Kyu Kang, “69% Approve of Pyongyang Summit Accord,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, October 2, 2018, <<http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3053742>>.

8. Yoon Jung Yon, “Moon's Approval Ratings Following the South North Summit Jump to 77.4%,” *Labor Today*, May 8, 2018, <<http://www.labortoday.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=151358>>.

9. Ji Yong Choi, “Moon's Approval Ratings a Sharp Rally, Increased 3% Daily after the Summit,” *OhmyNews*, September, 24, 2018, <[http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS\\_Web/view/at\\_pg.aspx?CNTN\\_CD=A0002474625](http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/view/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002474625)>.

China also responded positively to the inter-Korean summits. Right after the Panmunjeom Declaration of April 27, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson said, “The positive outcomes of the summit are conducive to promoting reconciliation and cooperation between the two sides, upholding peace and stability on the Peninsula and advancing the political settlement process of the Peninsula issue. China welcomes it and extends its congratulations.”<sup>10</sup> Trump tweeted with excitement after the April and September inter-Korea summits: “KOREAN WAR TO END! The United States, and all of its GREAT people, should be very proud of what is now taking place in Korea!” (April 27); “Kim Jong Un has agreed to allow Nuclear inspections, subject to final negotiations, and to permanently dismantle a test site and launch pad in the presence of international experts” (September 18). Likewise, the American public largely approves engagement with North Korea if the regime denuclearizes. In a 2018 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, three-quarters of Americans (77%) supported establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea should it give up its nuclear weapons, and a majority (54%) were in favor of providing economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea.<sup>11</sup>

Despite all these developments and the support for engagement, however, there still exists strong skepticism about North Korea’s denuclearization and the efficacy of Kim’s recent summit diplomacy. Many experts note that recent progress with North Korean denuclearization pales in comparison to some of the previous breakthroughs with the regime. In their view, North Korea promised denuclearization in 2000 and 2007, as well as in the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, but none of these promises were enough to prevent the North from going nuclear. Under the framework of the Six Party Talks from 2003 to 2008, North Korea pledged multiple times to denuclearize. The 1994 Agreed Framework engaged North Korea to freeze its graphite-moderated reactors and related

10. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Statement on the Inter-Korean Summit,” April 27, 2018, <[https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2535\\_665405/t1555181.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2535_665405/t1555181.shtml)>.

11. Karl Friedhoff, “The American Public Remains Committed to Defending South Korea,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, October 1, 2018. Still, the American public continues to see Kim highly unfavorably. In the survey, he remains the least favored international leader, with only 6% holding a positive view of him.

facilities and allow inspections in exchange for light water reactors—but officially collapsed in 2002 with the revelation of North Korea’s highly enriched uranium–based nuclear program.

Very few observers believe that CVID (complete verifiable irreversible dismantlement), the proclaimed goal of the US, can be achieved.<sup>12</sup> Unless North Korea voluntarily produces a full declaration of its existing nuclear infrastructure and stockpiles, it will be impossible to pinpoint all of the country’s nuclear and missile assets. Also, North Korean nuclear engineers continue to train a future generation of nuclear experts so as to keep the country’s nuclear knowledge from ever being eradicated, making denuclearization easily reversible. An intelligence report by the US Defense Intelligence Agency, which points to evidence of North Korean efforts in the wake of the Singapore summit to “conceal key aspects of its nuclear program,” supports such skepticism about the feasibility of CVID.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, there is increasing concern that differing strategies and uncoordinated moves toward North Korea could pose a great challenge to the US–South Korea alliance.<sup>14</sup> South Korea’s self-proclaimed stance as a “mediator” between the US and North Korea often raises the reasonable concern in Washington that the alliance with South Korea might be compromised for the sake of improved inter-Korean relations. The South wants to ease sanctions on the North to realize its promises and efforts toward inter-Korean economic cooperation, while the US maintains and even steps up the sanctions. The South has also asked the US to jointly declare, with both Koreas, the formal end of the Korean War by the end of 2018, on the grounds that it would foster denuclearization, but the US maintains the stance that North Korea needs to deliver more on denuclearization up front. Trump’s pressure on South Korea for an increase in burden sharing could be another source of strain in the alliance.

12. Gi-Wook Shin and Joyce Lee, “Back to the Basics: Above and beyond CVID with North Korea,” *38 North*, July 18, 2018.

13. Ellen Nakashima and Joby Warrick, “North Korea Working to Conceal Key Aspects of Its Nuclear Program, U.S. Officials Say,” *Washington Post*, June 30, 2018, <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/north-korea-working-to-conceal-key-aspects-of-its-nuclear-program-us-officials-say/2018/06/30/deba64fa-7c82-11e8-93cc-6d3becdd7a3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/north-korea-working-to-conceal-key-aspects-of-its-nuclear-program-us-officials-say/2018/06/30/deba64fa-7c82-11e8-93cc-6d3becdd7a3_story.html)>.

14. William McKinney, “Korea at a Crossroads: Time for US-ROK-DPRK Strategic Realignment,” *38 North*, September 17, 2018, <<https://www.38north.org/2018/09/wmckinney091718/>>.

## WHAT DOES KIM'S SUMMIT DIPLOMACY SAY ABOUT NORTH KOREA TODAY?

It is too early for a final judgment on whether Kim's summit diplomacy will succeed. Still, analyses reveal a number of important points that help us understand North Korea today. We reflect on North Korea in light of what we said in last year's review of the country.

First, Kim appears to be in full control. Clearly he has led the summit diplomacy, and looking back, he may have been preparing for it through key personnel changes. As we wrote last year,

Ongoing personnel changes have also been made to enhance Kim Jong Un's political power. In the last five years, members of the Kim family and other high-ranking bureaucrats have been promoted to or demoted from key positions—or executed—based on their proven or presumed loyalty to Kim. . . . Seven out of 27 (including alternate members) in the Politburo and four out of 11 in the Military Commission of the Central Committee are new members (excluding Kim himself), amounting to 26% and 36%, respectively. The number of vice chairmen of the Central Committee increased from nine to 11, with six new members (55%). These new appointments and generational shifts in the political elite indicate continued consolidation of Kim's power, even distancing himself from the power base of his father, the longtime leader Kim Jong Il.

In fact, some experts argue that Kim's replacement of three high-ranking military generals as recently as the spring of 2018 is meant to remove any opposition within the military and to support his engagement efforts.<sup>15</sup> We also noted that Kim's sister, Kim Yo-jeong, had been elevated to important positions, including alternate member of the Politburo, and summit diplomacy shows that she has indeed become a key player in North Korea, accompanying her brother to all the summits.

Second, summit diplomacy shows Kim's commitment to shifting the country's focus from nuclear to economic development. Although one can debate his motivations for coming to the negotiating table, it seems clear that he needs to improve economic conditions. He reportedly told US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during his visit to Pyongyang that the North Korean

15. Sofia Persio, "North Korea's Military Leadership Replaced with Kim Jong Un Royalists," *Newsweek*, June 4, 2018, <<https://www.newsweek.com/north-koreas-military-leadership-replaced-kim-jong-un-loyalists-955854>>.

economy was struggling and would need some assistance. Last year we wrote about “signs of subtle but important changes,” referring to “the rise of a new middle class and the growth of consumerism in Pyongyang and other cities,” and then pointed out that “this new middle class will expect more and eventually face economic frustration, pressuring the government into providing the necessary framework for greater commerce and economic openness.” Despite his power, Kim appears to feel pressure to perform, especially economically, in the face of increasing external sanctions. Not surprisingly, his 2019 New Year Speech focused much more on economic issues than on nuclear ones.

Third, North Korea’s summit diplomacy has revealed its desire to appear as a normal state. As noted above, Kim held the summits within the parameters of conventional “state-to-state” relationships, departing from past practices. Such efforts at international recognition as a normal state are criticized as insincere and ill-intentioned, but even so, experts point out, a window of opportunity may exist to bring the country into the international community through processes of diplomatic communication, exchange, and engagement.

Kim’s summit diplomacy is likely to continue well into 2019 and beyond, building on the momentum acquired in 2018: he is expected to meet with Moon, Trump, and Xi again soon for talks on both nuclear and non-nuclear issues. There is no doubt that 2018 will be written and remembered in Korean history as the year of North Korea coming out of the hermit kingdom into the international community after decades of isolation. It will be interesting and important to watch the long-term effects of this process on North Korea, its neighbors, and the United States.