

# Singapore summit was about ending the war

## Comment

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The time fits the man. This is as true of President Trump as it is of Kim Jong-un. Kim is a Millennial, with a Western perspective, a strategic outlook and astute advisers. Trump is a leader who follows his instincts, who believes in the adage that first thoughts are best thoughts, who will not be restrained by State Department and Pentagon orthodoxy. We should not underestimate the significance of the Singapore summit. It is another step towards a changing world order in the Asia Pacific.

Contrary to popular perception, the main issue at the Singapore summit was never denuclearisation. Denuclearisation was a given. Pyongyang made its position clear on March 6 in the official statement released through the office of the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in. That statement declared that North Korea would have no need for nuclear weapons if its security were guaranteed and the US military threat removed. Its position was reiterated in the Panmunjom Declaration (with President Moon) on April 27.

The Singapore Joint Statement (with President Trump) "reaffirmed" North Korea's commitment to "work toward complete denuclearisation of the Korean

peninsula". This commitment was only the third of the four stipulations in the Joint Statement. And the proposition was not new. It was a reaffirmation. "Complete denuclearisation" will now be a process; it is no longer a question of principle.

The fundamental issue of principle on which the summit turned was the willingness of the United States to transform relations, to end the state of war and to bring about peace on the peninsula. Pyongyang was prepared to trade its status as a nuclear state in order to achieve peace and security. The unprecedented acceleration in North Korea's nuclear and missile program in 2016 and 2017 – despite the known certainty of increased sanctions – was designed to put it in this very position: to achieve, once and for all, the peace that has eluded it since the ceasefire in 1953.

A measure of Pyongyang's determination is that official statements reiterating the need to conclude a peace treaty have been issued on five separate occasions since Kim Jong-un assumed office. Nothing matters more to Kim.

He knows that without peace, there can be no security, without security, there can be no lasting prosperity; and without prosperity, there can be no stability. That is why the first stipulation in the Singapore Joint Statement emphasised the objective of "peace

Kim Jong-un knows that without peace there can be no security, lasting prosperity or stability. PHOTO: AP



and prosperity"; and the second referred to a "peace regime". National economic development has become Kim's primary goal. In 2012, he abandoned his father's "military first" policy in favour of the parallel development of the economy and nuclear weapons. In April this year he officially abandoned nuclear weapons in favour of economic improvement alone. But prosperity requires peace and security.

Until now, Washington has been the problem. For 65 years, it has demonstrated no apparent interest in bringing the state of war to an end – even though the temporary 1953 armistice was predicated on subsequent good faith negotiations to resolve the political issues by a peace treaty. Washington reneged at the outset. It walked away from the Geneva conference in 1954 and would not even consider the peace treaty that the conference was intended to resolve. In 1957 it unilaterally abrogated the armistice when it introduced nuclear weapons on to South Korean soil. In 1974 it ignored Kim Il-sung's letter to Congress requesting a peace treaty. And under George W. Bush, it failed to live up to its pledge in the 1994 Agreed Framework to "move towards full normalisation of political and economic relations".

North Koreans have a long memory and Kim's regime knows the history. President Trump is now prepared to do what his predecessors have failed to do. His lengthy press conference after the summit

revealed his intention to end the war. He acknowledged that "while the armistice was agreed, the war never ended" and that "we can have hope it will soon end", adding for emphasis "and it soon will". When asked if he touched on the issue of a peace treaty, he answered "Of course". And he ended the press conference by saying that he would like to involve China and South Korea, who were belligerents in the war, as signatories to a peace treaty. These are momentous shifts.

If a peace treaty eventuates, it will bring about the dismantling of the formal military architecture of the war. That should include the highly fortified DMZ, the outdated United Nations Command and probably also the subsequently created Combined Forces Command. It should eventually mean the phased withdrawal from South Korea of the relatively small remaining contingent of 28,500 US troops. It would require Washington to return to Seoul wartime OPCON (operational control) of the vast 600,000-strong South Korean military force, to which the Pentagon has clung since 1950. However, it does not imply the dissolution of the US-ROK alliance, which continues indefinitely until terminated by either party on 12 months' notice.

The separate issue of some form of reunification of the peninsula is a distant and uncertain prospect. But if North Korea denuclearises, if security is restored to the peninsula by a formal peace treaty and if the United States pulls back, the two Koreas may take their own course. The world, and Washington in particular, should let them.

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