

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

**Singapore** | 2 July 2018

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## **The Trump-Kim Summit and Cross-Strait Relations**

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Taiwan and China's responses to the Trump-Kim Summit are markedly different.
- Taiwan regards the summit as the outcome of two parties willing to set aside their differences and prejudices to come to the table as equal partners with no preconditions.
- Taiwan has promoted the idea that the Trump-Kim Summit may open the way for talks between Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen and her Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping.
- China has dismissed the idea of a Tsai-Xi meeting by arguing that China and Taiwan belong to one China and that the relationship between the two is not tantamount to normal state-to-state relations.
- Beyond the Taiwan issue, China has claimed some credit for the Trump-Kim Summit.
- China sees the Trump-Kim Summit as having the potential to undercut the rationale for American troops in South Korea and weaken the US alliance with South Korea, with implications for US ties with other of its allies and partners in the region.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much attention has swirled around the recent spate of leaders' summits and meetings related to the Korean Peninsula, beginning with the Kim-Moon Summit and follow-up meeting (in April and May 2018 respectively), the meetings of Kim-Xi (who met thrice in March, May and June 2018) and Trump-Abe (in early June 2018), and the Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore on 12 June 2018. The one topic that has hogged the limelight has been the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula and the challenges involved in this process.

Yet what is less discussed has been the implications of the Trump-Kim Summit on cross-strait relations. The Trump-Kim Summit is historic as it brought the leaders of the United States and North Korea, which are still technically at war, together for the first time. This has revived suggestions in Taiwan on the possibility of a similar meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen in the interest of pursuing peace and of stability in cross-strait relations.<sup>1</sup>

Taiwan has always looked upon the United States as the country to help it to manoeuvre for international space vis-a-vis its giant neighbour China. This means maintaining the "status quo" in cross-strait relations, namely not going for outright independence or pursuing reunification based only on China's terms. However, Trump's sudden announcement of stopping war games with South Korea is also likely to raise concerns in Taiwan about the degree of US commitment to the region in general and to Taiwan in particular.<sup>2</sup> Trump's announcement apparently also caught US ally South Korea and his own Pentagon officials by surprise.<sup>3</sup>

China has welcomed the Trump-Kim Summit in terms of its historic significance of having the United States and North Korea, with more than half a century of confrontation between them, sitting down for talks. More importantly, China has been eager to claim credit for the summit by arguing that direct talks between the United States and North Korea as well as the US announcement of an end to war games with South Korea were developments that China had pushed for. At the same time, China has quickly dismissed the possibility of reaching out to Taiwan for a similar leaders' summit.

## TAIWAN'S REACTIONS TO THE TRUMP-KIM SUMMIT

Taiwan viewed the Trump-Kim Summit in the context of two parties willing to set aside their past differences and prejudices to come together for talks to promote peace and stability in the region in general and on the Korean Peninsula in particular. It has further sought to portray itself as a player ever ready to contribute to regional peace, stability and prosperity. Taiwan has further reaffirmed its commitment to collaborate with like-minded countries such as the United States to safeguard Taiwan's interests.

A day after the Trump-Kim Summit, at a regular meeting of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party to discuss the strategic impact of the summit, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen was reported to have strongly affirmed the fact that the United States and North

Korea were willing to set aside their past confrontation, pursue peaceful and rational dialogue, and make joint efforts to resolve tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in East Asia.

Tsai also reportedly said that Taiwan's National Security Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other related departments would continue to maintain close contact with countries of similar political philosophies in the region and jointly monitor the latest developments on the Korean Peninsula so as to ensure that Taiwan's interests were safeguarded in the event of any situational changes. She added that the Taiwanese government would work to secure more opportunities to collaborate with the international community to enable Taiwan to play a more important role in promoting regional peace, stability and prosperity.<sup>4</sup>

From the above remarks attributed to Tsai Ing-wen, what was left unsaid or implied is just as important as what was said. For instance, when Tsai mentioned that the United States and North Korea were willing to set aside their past confrontation, she was hinting that China and Taiwan should do likewise and pursue talks in the interest of cross-strait peace and stability.

In fact, several weeks ago, in the aftermath of the Kim-Moon Summit in April 2018, Tsai was much more explicit when she said that she was willing to engage in substantive dialogue with Xi Jinping.<sup>5</sup> She further urged China to adopt a new and different thinking on its relations with Taiwan.<sup>6</sup>

What Tsai was saying was that she would like China to refrain from setting any preconditions for talks, especially its insistence that she recognises the 1992 Consensus, which essentially refers to a tacit understanding between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party that there is only one China, with each side having its own interpretation of what one China means. For Tsai, recognising the 1992 Consensus would be politically costly for her and her party. Hence, Tsai has so far only said that she respected the historical fact that in 1992 there was a certain common understanding reached, but this falls short of China's expectations.<sup>7</sup>

Separately, a senior member of a Taiwanese think-tank closely affiliated to the ruling party posited that current developments on the world stage provided an opportune moment for a Tsai-Xi meeting. This is because there was a possibility that the Trump administration, which is more supportive of Taiwan, could beat Xi to it or steal the political limelight by first proposing a Trump-Tsai meeting. In the member's view, China would be "fearful" of such an outcome and would want to ensure that Xi meets Tsai first before Trump meets Tsai.<sup>8</sup>

One message implicit in Tsai's remarks is that Taiwan will work with other countries of similar political philosophies, i.e. the United States, to counter what Taiwan regards as China's unilateral efforts to change the status quo in cross-strait relations.<sup>9</sup> This intention was unequivocally stated when Tsai met with the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT)

Chairman James Moriarty on the occasion of the formal opening of the new premises of the AIT in Taipei in June 2018.<sup>10</sup>

Tsai had told Moriarty that Taiwan was “committed to engaging the United States in defence and security cooperation so that the two sides can work together to ensure regional peace and stability”. Tsai further said that “China’s recent offensive to suppress Taiwan’s diplomatic presence and frequent military actions underscore a unilateral attempt to change the status quo of peace and stability” and that such actions have “increased tension in the region”.<sup>11</sup>

Publicly, Taiwan appears to be in solidarity with the United States by standing up to China’s aggressive moves. There has so far been no official indication that Taiwan is concerned about Trump and America’s resolve to follow through on its commitments to Taiwan and the region.

Individual Taiwanese observers have had mixed views on the US announcement to end war games with South Korea and the possibility of an eventual troop withdrawal from South Korea. There is a view that even if the US were to stop war games with South Korea, this would not automatically be in China’s favour in terms of enabling it to expand its presence in the region, because other forms of US-Korea military training is expected to continue. Moreover, within the US establishment, there are those who hold the view that Trump had made too big a concession without securing anything substantive from North Korea in return.<sup>12</sup>

Others have expressed concerns over the possibility of the United States eventually withdrawing its troops from South Korea if this was a pre-condition for North Korea to deliver on its denuclearisation promise down the road. If this happens, it would provide an “excellent opportunity” for China to fill up the void created and expand its influence in Northeast Asia, thereby posing a “huge threat” to the stability of the region and security of South Korea and Japan. Furthermore, China’s military expansion in the East China Sea, South China Sea and Taiwan Strait would make the entire region “exclusively China’s domain”.<sup>13</sup>

## **CHINA’S RESPONSE**

China’s response to the Trump-Kim Summit is markedly different from Taiwan’s in three aspects. The first difference is that while Taiwan has largely been reactive to the Trump-Kim Summit by welcoming its positive contribution to peace and stability, China has been proactive in claiming credit for the outcome of the summit. For one thing, China has pointed out that the Trump-Kim Summit was something that China had always advocated, namely the need for the United States and North Korea to engage in direct talks with each other.

China has pointed out that Trump’s announcement of halting war games with South Korea is the materialisation of China “suspension for suspension” initiative which calls on the

United States and South Korea to suspend large-scale military exercises in return for North Korea suspending its nuclear and ballistic missile programme. It views the situation on the Korean Peninsula as now moving in the direction of the “dual track” approach it had also advocated which calls for parallel efforts to explore denuclearisation while pursuing peace on the peninsula.<sup>14</sup> In fact, China’s State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed that China had played a unique and important role on the Korean Peninsula and that China would continue to play such a role.<sup>15</sup>

China has even suggested the necessary next steps. A *Global Times* (GT) article argued that it was now time to pull the curtains down on American troops stationed in South Korea which Trump had said was not a matter of discussion at the moment. The article lauded China for its earlier visionary call for the withdrawal of all foreign troops on the Korean Peninsula immediately after the end of the Korean War, and it pointed out further that China completed its troop withdrawal by 1958.

The GT article said that over the past 60 years (counting from 1958), the United States had in contrast strengthened its military presence in South Korea. The article pointed out that discussions on the issue of American troops and related deployments such as America’s nuclear security umbrella and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system (commonly known as THAAD) could not be avoided and would need to be addressed to ensure that there was follow-up success to the Trump-Kim Summit.<sup>16</sup>

The second difference is that China has made a call for UN sanctions on North Korea to be eased while Taiwan has been understandably mum about this. China has argued that UN sanctions ought to be eased in line with moves taken by North Korea to abide by relevant UN resolutions. China qualified that sanctions should not be an end in itself and that a political settlement ought to be what countries eventually work towards.

The third difference is that while Taiwan has indicated that it is ready for talks with China on an equal footing and with no preconditions attached, China has been quick to squash any linkage between the Trump-Kim Summit and a possible Xi-Tsai encounter. A day after the summit, Ma Xiaoguang, spokesperson for China’s Taiwan Affairs Office, said that the Taiwan issue is purely an internal Chinese affair and that its nature is entirely different from North Korea-US relations.<sup>17</sup> In other words, Taiwan and China both belong to one China and China-Taiwan relations are not normal state-to-state relations.

At the same press conference, Ma Xiaoguang drew a reference to the summit meeting between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou in November 2015 in Singapore. He said that this historic meeting was made possible on the basis of the two leaders’ commitment to the 1992 Consensus and opposition to Taiwan’s independence. Ma said that since the Democratic Progressive Party assumed office, it had refused to recognise the one-China principle under the 1992 Consensus, thereby undermining the political foundation for peaceful development of cross-strait relations.<sup>18</sup>

In China's view, any improvement in cross-strait relations would depend on President Tsai Ing-wen and the Democratic Progressive Party acknowledging the 1992 Consensus. Unless and until this 1992 Consensus is recognised, China can be expected to step up all-round pressure on Taiwan to force it to yield to China's approach in cross-strait relations.

## **WAY FORWARD**

Unlike Taiwan, China has refused to entertain the idea that the Trump-Kim Summit will translate into positive dynamics for cross-strait relations. To China, Taiwan is an internal matter and the ball is in Tsai Ing-wen's court to recognise the 1992 Consensus. Tsai, however, cannot do this without incurring political costs. Therefore, cross-strait relations look set to remain difficult, even tense.

Beyond the Taiwan issue, China has welcomed the Trump-Kim Summit because it sets in motion developments that could potentially generate positive outcomes for China such as denuclearising North Korea, easing UN sanctions, reforming the North Korean economy, reducing America's rationale to maintain a military presence in South Korea, and weakening the US military alliance with South Korea. China will most likely continue to play an important role in the unfolding developments on the Korean Peninsula including efforts to establish a peace mechanism in line with its dual track approach.<sup>19</sup>

In this game, Taiwan's options are limited. On the one hand, it has said that it is committed to strengthening its ties with the United States including on defence and security matters. This is because the general hardening of attitude in Washington D.C. towards China has translated into developments that appear to favour Taiwan such as the strengthening of US-Taiwan defence interactions under the National Defence Authorisation Act, Trump's signing of the Taiwan Travel Act that allows reciprocal visits by high-level officials of the United States and Taiwan, and the approval by the US State Department for American companies to sell submarine technology to Taiwan. Taiwan has publicly welcomed such US support for Taiwan.

On the other hand, Taiwan, for all its rhetoric about working with countries that share similar political philosophies, is acutely aware of the dangers of overplaying the US card vis-à-vis China. One of the key questions that is certainly on the minds of Tsai and the Democratic Progressive Party is whether the United States would be able to stay the course in terms of its stated commitments to Taiwan given Trump's mercurial personality and penchant to make spot decisions without prior consultations with American allies or friends, including Taiwan.

Also, Trump is already approaching the halfway mark of his first term. Even if he wins a second term ending 2025, President Xi Jinping is expected to be at the helm in China for a longer time span. Under Xi, China has stepped up the tempo of restricting Taiwan's international space and bringing Taiwan under its fold. While Tsai still occasionally talks about maintaining the status quo, China is no longer enamoured with this term. Tsai and her

administration will therefore need to be even more adept at managing relations with not only China but also the United States.

<sup>1</sup> The idea of a Xi-Tsai meeting/summit is not new and has been floated way before the Trump-Kim Summit. See “‘Jinte hui’ neng weihe ‘Xicai hui’ jiu buneng?” (Kim-Trump Summit possible why can’t Xi-Tsai Summit be possible?), *Mingpao*, 12 March 2018 and “Guotaiban: ‘Xi-Tsai hui’ bu jubei qifen he tiaojian (Taiwan Affairs Office: the atmosphere and conditions for a ‘Xi-Tsai Summit’ are not there), *Lianhe Zaobao*, 10 May 2017.

<sup>2</sup> The Trump-Kim summit produced surprises such as in Trump’s sudden announcement that the United States would stop “war games” with South Korea which he described as “provocative” and “extremely expensive”. Trump even went further by saying that he was ready to bring home the 32,000 US soldiers stationed in South Korea at some future point although this issue was not part of the equation in current talks with Kim. See “President Trump News Conference on U.S.-North Korea Summit”, C-Span, 12 June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> “Pentagon and Seoul surprised by Trump pledge to halt military exercises”, *New York Times*, 12 June 2018 and “Chuanpu tu xuanbu dasuan ting junyan nanhan shenshen xunqiu liqing (Trump’s sudden announcement of intent to stop military exercises South Korea carefully seeking clarifications), The Central News Agency (Taiwan), 12 June 2018.

<sup>4</sup> “Tsai Ing-wen kan jinte hui: gaodu kending meichao fangxia duili (Tsai Ing-wen’s views on Trump-Kim Summit: highly affirm US-North Korea setting aside their confrontation), *NowNews* (Taiwan), 13 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Tsai repeated her willingness to sit down for talks with Xi in her latest interview with *AFP* but added that she would want to meet Xi on an equal footing and with no political pre-conditions. See “Taiwan’s Tsai urges world to stand up to China: AFP interview”, *AFP*, 25 June 2018.

<sup>6</sup> “Tsai Ing-wen: ‘hen yuanyi’ yu Xi Jinping duihua (Tsai Ing-wen: “very willing” to have talks with Xi Jinping”, *Radio Free Asia*, 27 April 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Tsai said this in her inaugural address as the first female president of Taiwan in May 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Discussion with representatives from the Foundation on Asia-Pacific Peace Studies (Taiwan) in June 2018. Whether such a meeting will take place is debatable but it shows that there are voices from Taiwan that are advocating such a possibility.

<sup>9</sup> Such unilateral actions include what Taiwan regards as China stepping up its military exercises and manoeuvres around Taiwan, its campaign to constrain Taiwan’s diplomatic space and other actions/initiatives that undermine the long-term political and socio-economic vibrancy or stability of Taiwan. See “Unable to charm Taiwan into reunification, China moves to subvert island’s democracy”, *Radio Free Asia*, 25 May 2018 and “Nearly 80 percent of Taiwanese say China is unfriendly”, *Taipei Times*, 5 May 2018.

<sup>10</sup> The formal opening of the AIT new premises occurred on 12 June 2018, on the same day of the Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore.

<sup>11</sup> “President Tsai meets American Institute in Taiwan Chairman James Moriarty”, Taiwan’s Office of the President, 13 June 2018.

<sup>12</sup> “Meihan niting lianhe junyan re guanzhu you zhuzhang zhongfang zhuangda yatai liliang (America and South Korea’s plan to stop joint military exercises has attracted attention and how this will enable China to strengthen its presence in Asia-Pacific), *Radio Free Asia*, 13 June 2018.

<sup>13</sup> “Liberty Times: What comes after the Trump-Kim summit?”, *Focus Taiwan*, 18 June 2018.

<sup>14</sup> “Foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang’s regular press conference”, China’s foreign ministry, 12 June 2018.

<sup>15</sup> “Wang Yi huiying jintehui: zuozai yiqi pingdeng duihua jiushi chuangzhao xinde lishi (Wang Yi’s response to Trump-Kim Summit: sitting down for talks on an equal basis is history in the making), *Fenghuangwang*, 12 June 2018.

<sup>16</sup> “Chen Fengjun: zhuhan meijun wenti gai luoxia weimule (Chen Fengjun: Time to draw the curtains down on the issue of American troops in South Korea), *Global Times* (Chinese), 12 June 2018.

<sup>17</sup> “China says U.S.-North Korea summit offers no lesson for Taiwan ties”, *Reuters*, 13 June 2018.

<sup>18</sup> “Guotaiban liuyue shisanri lixing xinwen fabu hui (Taiwan Affairs Office June 13 regular press conference), *Xinhuanet*, 13 June 2018.

<sup>19</sup> In 1953, China was among the three signatories apart from the United States and North Korea that signed the armistice agreement.

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