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The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: After the Singapore Summit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The historic 12 June Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore reflected the Trump administration's very personalized approach to diplomacy.
- President Trump's unilateral cancellation of US-South Korea military exercises aggravates concerns about US commitment to allies and security partners.
- The summit was a major diplomatic coup for Singapore, aided ASEAN and will reduce US pressure on Southeast Asian states to enforce sanctions against North Korea.
- In the six months prior to the 12 June summit, the Trump administration's engagement with Southeast Asia was limited.
- The prospect of a denuclearized Korea, and Korean reunification, bodes well for peace and stability in Northeast Asia but could also lead to a diminution of America's military presence in Asia which would remove a powerful check on China's bid for regional primacy.

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INTRODUCTION

President Donald Trump's second visit to Asia from 10 to 12 June was very different from his first one in November 2017.¹ The first was very long, determined by the schedules of APEC and ASEAN, not historic and portrayed as reaffirming decades-old continuities of US foreign policy in Asia. The second trip was very short, focussed only on US-North Korea relations, truly historic and only occurred because Donald Trump is president.

TRUMP FOREIGN POLICY

The 12 June summit highlighted the Trump administration's very personalized approach to foreign policy. The foreign policy of President Trump is very much the foreign policy of the Trump administration.

On 8 March, President Trump agreed to meet North Korea's leader, Chairman Kim Jong-un, during a meeting with South Korea's national security adviser, Chung Eui-yong, who made the request on behalf of Chairman Kim. The first meeting on the 12 June summit's half-day schedule was between President Trump and Chairman Kim with no officials in the room. The first direct contact between the leaders of the US and North Korea was as direct and personal as could be. The press conference that followed the signing of the joint statement was conducted by President Trump alone. Chairman Kim had already left the building. When asked what made this joint statement more credible than previous denuclearization agreements between the US and North Korea, President Trump answered,

*"All I can say is they want to make a deal. That's what I do. My whole life has been deals. I have done great at it. That's what I do. I know when somebody wants to deal and when somebody doesn't. A lot of politicians don't. That's not their thing. This could have been done a long time ago. I know for a fact. I feel very strongly. My instinct or ability or talent, they want to make it a deal."*²

The summit in Singapore exemplified the Trump administration's unstructured approach to foreign policy which results from this very personalized approach. It was Mr Chung, a South Korean official, not the White House or the State Department who announced that President Trump would soon meet with Chairman Kim. The three-month period between this surprise announcement and the summit left many who have dealt with North Korea perplexed as this did not leave sufficient time for the standard approach to summitry and joint statements.³ Supporters of President Trump noted that the standard approach had failed before and would not be needed this time.⁴ The brevity and generality of the joint statement, and President Trump's admission during his post-summit press conference that there was not enough time to include everything in the statement, suggest that those who were concerned had reason to be concerned.⁵

Echoing the planning for President Trump's attendance at the East Asia Summit (EAS) during his first trip to Asia, preparations for the 12 June summit in Singapore were disrupted and disruptive. The reasons for disruptions to the summit in Singapore were more troubling than the 2017 EAS ones.⁶ National Security Adviser John Bolton (a known North Korea hawk appointed after President Trump agreed to meet Chairman Kim) repeatedly offered Libya's disarmament as a model for an eventual US-North Korea denuclearization agreement. On 16 May, North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement

attacking Bolton’s remarks and threatening to pull out of the summit.⁷ On 17 May, President Trump denied that the Libya model was being considered for North Korea.⁸ On 21 May, Vice President Mike Pence offered the Libya model as a punitive outcome for North Korea if they did not cooperate.⁹ On 23 May, North Korea issued a statement attacking Pence’s comments and threatening to pull out of the Singapore summit.¹⁰ The next day, President Trump released a letter to North Korea announcing the summit’s cancellation.¹¹ Two days later, after a mollifying North Korean response to Trump’s letter,¹² the summit was back on.

This action-reaction escalation suggests that there was no effective communications strategy within the Trump administration for this very sensitive summit. Conflicting comments from Trump administration officials over other vital foreign policy issues including trade measures against China suggest that the disrupted planning for the summit in Singapore was neither an isolated problem nor a clever negotiating tactic.

ALLIED CONCERNS

During the 2016 presidential election campaign, Donald Trump, to the consternation of US allies and security partners globally, appeared to reject the post-war US grand strategy of forward defence.¹³ He frequently accused allies of free-riding and questioned the utility of these alliances. During his first overseas trip in May 2017, at the NATO Summit, President Trump berated fellow members for not paying enough for collective defence and did not endorse the mutual aid clause of the North Atlantic Treaty, which has been enacted only once in response to the September 11 2001 terrorist attacks in the US.

President Trump’s unilateral decision announced during the 12 June post-summit press conference to indefinitely cancel US-South Korea military exercises, and his rationale for their cancellation, aggravated US allies and security partners globally and particularly in East Asia. When asked to provide details on the security guarantees he committed to provide to North Korea in the joint statement, President Trump replied:

“We will stop the war games which cost us a tremendous amount of money. Unless and until we see the future negotiation is not going along as it should. But we’ll be saving a tremendous amount of money. Plus, I think it’s very provocative.”

In a further clarification in response to a later question, President linked combined military exercises with South Korea to US trade concerns (according to the United States Trade Representative Office, the US had a US\$27.7 billion trade in goods deficit with South Korea in 2016) as he stated:

“Yeah, we have done exercises for a long period of time, working with South Korea. And we call them ‘war games’ I call them ‘war games’. And they’re tremendously expensive. The amount of money we spend on that is incredible. And South Korea contributes, not 100 per cent, which is certainly a subject that we have to talk to them about also. And that has to do with the military expense and also the trade.”

President Trump adopted the North Korean language that US-South Korea military exercises are “war games” and “very provocative.” This despite decades of US and South

Korean assurances that their combined exercises are defensive in nature, a security guarantee for South Korea and contribute to regional security.

President Trump's cancellation appeared to catch US allies in East Asia unawares. On 12 June, South Korea's Blue House stated that "at this point, we need to find out the precise meaning or intentions of President Trump's remarks".¹⁴ On 14 June, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop went further stating that, "I think the United States needs to clarify what was actually meant. ... So I would not be taking my foot off the throat of North Korea until I saw very concrete steps that this time they were genuine."¹⁵ On 15 June, Japanese Defence Minister Itsunori Onodera urged the "United States and South Korea to continue military drills to maintain deterrence in Northeast Asia."¹⁶

THE SUMMIT AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

The optics and outcomes of the summit for Southeast Asia, and Singapore in particular, were largely positive in the short-term. As for the medium to long-term consequences, however, a mixed picture emerges depending on how US-North Korea relations develop and the resulting impact on the security dynamics of Northeast Asia.

A Major Win for Brand Singapore

The decision to hold the summit in Singapore, and the meeting's flawless execution, was a major diplomatic coup for the city-state and demonstrated once again that the country punches above its weight in global affairs.

Singapore appears to have been the favoured choice for both the US and North Korea because it has diplomatic relations with both countries and is perceived by Washington and Pyongyang to be a neutral party. Singapore, which has a successful track record in hosting major international events, was also able to provide the security, hotel, meeting and media facilities, as well as an attractive backdrop. As Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan noted, the summit was an affirmation of Singapore's "independent, principled, fair and honest diplomacy".¹⁷

Hosting the event cost Singapore S\$16.3 million (US\$12 million), including providing security and media facilities and the cost of hotel accommodation for the North Korean delegation. However, according to one estimate, the summit generated S\$767 million (US\$563 million) for the Singapore economy in tourism, retail and media exposure.¹⁸ More importantly, as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated on his Facebook page, Singapore's contribution to achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula was in the country's "profound interests".¹⁹

ASEAN Benefits

Singapore hosted the historic summit at the same time as it occupied the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN. This meant that ASEAN and its claims to Centrality benefitted from the summit in Singapore even if the ten-member organization did not play a role in the meeting.

In his congratulatory message to Trump, Prime Minister Lee said he looked forward to meeting the President again in November when he is due to make a state visit to Singapore in conjunction with the 13th EAS. The likelihood of the president attending the 13th EAS has likely been bolstered by Singapore’s hosting of the summit and the next EAS in November. Trump’s full participation in the EAS—his attendance at the 12th EAS in November 2017 was cut short—would further reinforce the notion of ASEAN Centrality.

However, his presence cannot be guaranteed. The EAS is scheduled to take place only a few days after the US mid-term elections on 6 November when all 435 seats in the House of Representatives and 35 seats in the Senate will be contested. If Trump’s Republican Party loses control of the House, and does badly in the Senate elections, Trump may be forced to cancel his trip to Singapore to deal with the political fallout.

Intermittent Focus on Southeast Asia

President Trump’s presence in Singapore not only shone a global spotlight on the city-state, but by extension on Southeast Asia. This was a positive outcome for the region as the Trump administration’s attention to Southeast Asia over the past six months has been quite limited. Since Trump visited Vietnam and the Philippines in November 2017, he has talked on the phone with only two Southeast Asian leaders (Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc and Singapore Prime Minister Lee) and met with one (Prime Minister Lee before the summit took place) (see Table 1).

Table 1: President Trump’s Telephone Calls and Meetings with World Leaders (15 November 2017-15 June 2018)

<i>Telephone Calls with Foreign Leaders</i>	<i>Meetings with Foreign Leaders</i>
21 with Middle Eastern leaders	9 with Middle Eastern leaders (all in US)
40 with European leaders	8 with European leaders (all in US)
19 with Northeast Asian leaders	4 with Northeast Asian leaders (3 in US, 1 in Singapore)
7 with North American leaders	No bilateral meetings
4 with Latin American leaders	1 meeting (with President of Argentina in US)
2 with Southeast Asian leaders (Vietnam, 14 February, Singapore, 11 May)	1 meeting (with Prime Minister of Singapore in Singapore, 11 June)
1 phone call with a Central Asian leader	2 meetings with Central Asian leaders (both in US)
0 phone calls with African leaders	2 meetings with African leaders (both in US)
0 phone calls with Oceania leaders	1 meeting with Oceania leaders (in US)
1 phone call with Indian prime minister	0 meetings with South Asian leaders
	G-7 summit meeting (in Canada)
	1 meeting with NATO Secretary General (in USA)
	1 meeting with UN Secretary General (in US)
Total: 95 phone calls	Total: 31 meetings (28 in US)

Source: The White House, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements> .

America's most senior diplomats have also been largely absent from the region. After a trip to Myanmar following the EAS in November 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson did not visit Southeast Asia again before President Trump fired him via Twitter on 13 March 2018. His successor, Mike Pompeo, has yet to visit the region outside of the summit in Singapore. However, Pompeo is expected to visit Singapore again in late July/early August for the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and EAS Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Defence Secretary Jim Mattis' engagement with the region has been much better. Mattis travelled to Indonesia and Vietnam in January 2018, and Singapore in early June to deliver a speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue. Since taking office in January 2017, Mattis has visited Southeast Asia four times; his first trip to China only took place in late June 2018.

The Trump administration's limited engagement with Southeast Asia underscores that its Asia policy continues to prioritize challenges in Northeast Asia, especially the Korean Peninsula and relations with China. With negotiations set to begin between the US and North Korea, and a trade war with China looming, this situation is unlikely to change.

Short, Medium and Long-Term Consequences for Southeast Asia

The lowering of tensions on the Korean Peninsula, and the marked improvement in US-North Korea relations in the wake of the summit, represents a positive outcome for Southeast Asia in the short term.

In 2017, as the hostile rhetoric between President Trump and Chairman Kim ratcheted up, Southeast Asian countries came under increasing pressure from Washington to tighten their adherence to the UN sanctions regime against North Korea. While Singapore and Malaysia—where Kim's half-brother Kim Jong-nam was assassinated by North Korean operatives at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in February 2017—complied, other Southeast Asian countries were less enthusiastic. For decades, many Southeast Asian countries have carried on profitable, albeit small-scale, trade relations with North Korea and a tightening of sanctions would have curtailed that lucrative trade. Now that US-DPRK tensions have cooled, Washington is likely to ease the pressure on Southeast Asian governments.

Six months ago, the US and North Korea appeared on the brink of armed conflict. While a major war would unlikely to have involved any Southeast Asian country directly, the consequences of a conflict on the Korean Peninsula—possibly involving China and the use of nuclear weapons—would have been incalculable for Southeast Asia given that the regional security environment is extricably tied to Northeast Asia and the high-levels of economic interdependence between the two regions.

However, if Pyongyang follows through on its (admittedly vague) pledges made in the joint statement and dismantles its nuclear weapons programme, and North and South Korea move towards reunification, this could lead—as President Trump himself presaged in his rambling post-summit press conference—to the withdrawal of US forces from South Korea and a weakening of the US-Japan alliance. A diminution of the US military presence in Northeast Asia would remove a powerful check on China's ambitions to become Asia's paramount power—a prospect few countries in Southeast Asia would welcome.

Obviously such a seismic geopolitical shift could take decades to eventuate. But the 2018 Trump-Kim Summit in Singapore may well be regarded by future historians as a tipping point in the power transition between America and China in the Indo-Pacific region.

¹ This is the fourth in the series of *ISEAS Perspective* articles on the Trump administration and Southeast Asia. See the authors' "The Impending Trump Administration and Southeast Asia", *ISEAS Perspective* #63/2016 (21 November 2016), "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Limited Engagement So Far", *ISEAS Perspective* #27/2017 (27 April 2017) and "The Trump Administration and Southeast Asia: Enhanced Engagement", *ISEAS Perspective* #87/2017 (23 November 2017).

² For a transcript of the press conference, see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-conference-president-trump/>

³ For one example of this concern, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-carnival-ride-trumps-renewed-fixation-on-a-june-12-summit-date-sends-officials-scrambling/2018/05/29/3dab12bc-635a-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7_story.html?utm_term=.2e0ef631ac9d

⁴ For one example of this "reverse diplomacy" argument, see <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-vanburen-northkorea-commentary/commentary-whatever-happens-next-the-trump-kim-summit-is-a-win-idUSKBN1J82A4>

⁵ The summit joint statement is available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-agreement-text/trump-and-kims-joint-statement-idUSKBN1J80IU>

⁶ For more details on the disrupted planning for the EAS, see https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_87.pdf

⁷ <https://qz.com/1279247/full-text-north-korea-calls-john-bolton-repugnant-and-threatens-to-bail-on-summit-with-trump/>

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/05/16/whats-this-libya-model-north-korea-is-so-angry-about/?utm_term=.fc49d808e3e6

⁹ <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2018/05/21/vp-mike-pence-on-russia-probe-alleged-campaign-surveillance.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/full-statement-by-north-koreas-vice-foreign-minister-and-nuclear-negotiator-choe-son>

¹¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/letter-chairman-kim-jong-un/>

¹² <https://qz.com/1288902/full-text-north-korea-responds-to-donald-trump-canceling-his-summit-with-kim-jong-un/>

¹³ For more on the security concerns in East Asia stoked by Donald Trump's presidential campaign and period as president-elect see

https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_63.pdf

¹⁴ Cited in <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa-southkorea/south-korea-says-it-needs-to-analyze-trumps-intentions-on-an-end-to-joint-war-games-idUSKBN1J810G>

¹⁵ Cited in <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/julie-bishop-warns-dont-lift-foot-off-north-koreas-throat/news-story/9fb2f075ffbb356f7167fb8ef91b51cc>

¹⁶ Cited in https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20180619_19/

¹⁷ Cited in <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/trump-kim-summit-event-presents-enormous-opportunity-for-singapore-says-vivian>

¹⁸ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-may-have-gained-over-700m-in-exposure-as-host-analyst>

¹⁹ Cited in <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/trump-kim-summit-will-cost-about-20-million-to-host-says-pm-lee>

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