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Door opens for North Korea's Kim

By Charles E. Morrison
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If the purpose was to get acquainted, outline intentions and set a stage for real negotiations, the Donald Trump-Kim Jong Un Singapore summit was a success. Both leaders desperately wanted it to be. Both hoped to make history and to achieve breakthroughs that had eluded their predecessors. And despite the maneuvering ahead of time, both were determined not to let skeptics in their own countries derail or even delay the meeting.

Both leaders had painted themselves into corners. The United States had placed maximum pressure in getting international sanctions, but sanctions have never forced another country to change course on what it considers a national security priority.

The military options might have destroyed North Korea's nuclear capability and society, but they carried tremendous risks, especially for the millions of Koreans and foreigners living within range of North Korea artillery.

Kim's testing programs had steadily lost international support, his only putative ally (China) was unhappy, and the sanctions were probably taking a serious toll on an economy that has been modestly growing with an aspiring middle class.

The only way out was to talk, but will the new courses run in parallel? The jury is out on whether the longer-term outcomes of denuclearization, reform and reconciliation can be achieved. The thinness of the communique and its regurgitation of previous commitments, language and activities suggests there remains a deep gulf in understanding how denuclearization should proceed and the timetables for action. The two countries' professional negotiators have an enormous task ahead to narrow this gulf and develop an agreed, incremental roadmap of actions and timetables.

It is possible, and indeed many analysts think almost likely, that the process will break down, creating disappointment, recriminations and renewed threats and crises. Nonetheless, the summit was worth having, if only to try a new, more top-down approach.

It is doubtful, given the way foreign policy is being handled in both countries, that any negotiations at the professional level could have made much progress without a summit and political commitments. The personal rapport, however artificial it may seem, may kick-start a process that changes the course of North Korea's relations with the outside world.

This was the first leader encounter, and the statement was likely deliberately kept vague to avoid the most uncomfortable issues and help establish a level of rapport. Much now depends on intention and will of the young North Korean leader.

There are some grounds for hope. He is a much younger and partly-foreign-educated Korean leader, and he faces a more powerful set of pressures and incentives than his father or grandfather. If Kim has truly made a strategic decision in favor of the economy and denuclearization, it is internally risky.

Many rightly doubt his ability to change the basis of regime legitimacy. Trump appears to have instinctively understood Kim's need for political cover and was willing to give it in the form of the prestige of the meeting, over-the-top personal praise, and some limited, reversible up-front concessions. The U.S. obviously decided not to let particular verbiage, such as hoary formulation of "complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization" become an obstacle to discussions. It back-pedaled for now on some uncomfortable issues, including human rights.

It is only this year that Kim has come onto the international stage, meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping and South Korean President Moon Jae-in twice each, and now President Trump. Kim clearly wants to play with the big boys in their club. But to do so, his government will need to join virtually all other countries in returning to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation regime, abandoning the outrageous international behavior that has ranged from assassinations in foreign countries to cyber-warfare, and moving in positive directions on the economy and human rights.

The door to the club has been opened. Will, or even can, Kim walk through?

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