

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

The Kim –Trump Summit in Singapore: North Korea's End Goals

By Bhubhinder Singh

Synopsis

North Korea's strong willingness to engage in active diplomacy has raised hopes for a 'new era of peace' on the Korean Peninsula. While many are wondering about Pyongyang's intentions, two goals are driving the regime: legitimacy and reunification.

Commentary

THOUGH ONLY five months into the year, 2018 will be remembered for North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's participation in several bilateral summits following years of isolation since assuming power in 2011, climaxing in his Singapore meeting with United States President Donald Trump next month.

On 25 March, Kim made a surprise visit to Beijing to meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping that served as an important 'reset' in the Beijing-Pyongyang alliance. This was followed by a successful inter-Korean summit on 27 April that led to a significant thawing of inter-Korean relations, even raising the possibility of a peace treaty replacing the armistice that brought an end to the Korean War in 1953. On 12 June, Kim's meeting with President Trump in Singapore could be decisive in committing North Korea (DPRK) to denuclearisation.

Unique Confluence of Factors

Despite the positive reactions from all sides, many questions remain. One such is what are the North Korean regime's intentions or end goals. It is posited here that Pyongyang's objectives are legitimacy and reunification. What explains Kim's decision to come out of isolation is the alignment of four main factors:

First, President Moon-Jae-in. Like the previous two left-leaning presidents during the

post-Cold War period (Kim Dae-jung and Roh Myu-hun), Moon supports engagement with North Korea. It was important for Moon to move away from the assertive policy pursued by the previous two conservative governments (Lee Myung-bak and Park Gun-hye) that had even called for regime change in Pyongyang.

Moon strongly believes engaging the North is critical in achieving stability on the Korean Peninsula. This approach manifested itself during the warm welcome extended to the North Korean leader's sister, Kim Yo Jong, during the Pyeongchang Olympics, and again to the North Korean leader himself during the inter-Korean summit.

Second, the accession of a non-mainstream Donald Trump as president of the United States was another important factor. His unpredictability and strong interest in achieving deals facilitated a meeting with the 'rogue' North Korean regime – something that was unthinkable for previous American administrations.

Growing Pressure of Sanctions

Third, North Korea's achievement of its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities was also critical in pushing the Kim regime to agree to the summits. This point was made clear in Kim Jong-un's New Year announcement that North Korea has reached the deterrence capability that secures the country from any threat, particularly the US.

The final factor relates to the impact of the extensive multilateral sanctions imposed on North Korea. Despite its long-standing approach of refusing to yield, the North Korean leader admitted that the impact of the sanctions on North Korea was the toughest in 2017. This was due to two expansions in the sanctions policy.

The first was the number of countries that participated in the sanctions against North Korea. The decision by China (North Korea's closest economic partner) and certain ASEAN countries to join the sanctions regime amplified the negative impact of the sanctions for North Korea.

The second was the widening areas on which sanctions were imposed. The sanctions expanded from activities related to the nuclear and ballistic missiles programmes to economic activities in general.

Kim's Legitimacy

In analysing the positive gestures and developments on the Korean Peninsula, it is posited here that North Korea's intentions are to gain legitimacy for the Kim regime internally and from the international community. As Kim is a young leader who conceivably has a long tenure ahead as the leader of North Korea, legitimacy is a critical goal.

Kim's decision to pursue an active diplomatic strategy could mean that he feels secure of his position internally both in political and military terms. His ability to participate in a range of bilateral summits that includes meetings with China and the US is a significant achievement that his predecessors have failed in before. Moreover, these

meetings also show the leader's ability to engage in tough negotiations to defend North Korea's interests.

Kim's performance in the summits with Chinese president Xi Jinping (China-DPRK) and South Korean president Moon (the inter-Korean summits), and willingness to meet the US President, displayed his statesmanship qualities and North Korea's willingness to negotiate to bring about peace in the Korean Peninsula. This approach has somewhat softened the negative perceptions held by the international community of the isolated country and the Pyongyang regime.

Korean Reunification

The second goal of the Kim regime is to achieve the reunification of the Korean Peninsula without the intervention of external parties. This was clearly stated in the Panmunjeom Declaration signed after the inter-Korean summit in April 2018. Both states committed to 'determining the destiny of the Korean nation on their own accord'.

Unlike South Korea, North Korea seems to strongly believe that Korean reunification should occur sooner rather than later. The legitimacy acquired from the bilateral summits contributes to North Korea's gaining an upper-hand in the reunification issue.

Kim's 'charm offensive' is directed at weakening the alliance between the US and South Korea (ROK) and their coordinated approach towards addressing the North Korean problem. If this is the case, the North would have a stronger negotiating position compared to its Southern neighbour simply owing to its ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities.

North Korea's position would become even stronger when Kim's strategy to pursue an economic reform programme to complement its relatively strong military comes to fruition. Through the bilateral summits with China, South Korea and the US, as well as with Japan in the near future, Kim's strategy could be to incrementally have the economic sanctions lifted, receive economic aid, and pursue bilateral economic initiatives so as to kick-start the moribund economic growth of North Korea.

Agenda for Trump-Kim Summit

If North Korea's diplomatic charm offensive is successful in its objectives, it could pave the way for the realisation of the North Korea-China vision of a unified Korea. In this vision, the role of the US would be relatively weaker than it is now, and China's influence would grow through the strengthening of China-ROK and China-DPRK relations.

As denuclearisation is the most pressing issue for now, it will dominate the US-DPRK discussions in Singapore. However, it would be important for the American president to discuss this issue within the larger long-term context of the Korean Peninsula. In the summit talks, Trump is expected to maintain American advantage in the reunification of the Korean Peninsula as well as vis-à-vis China's relations with the Korean Peninsula.

Bhubhinder Singh is Associate Professor and Coordinator, Regional Security Architecture Programme (RSAP), at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg