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KOREA UPDATE: Recycled Pledges of Nuclear Disarmament

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KEY POINTS:

1. **The Trump-Kim summit in Singapore featured mutual pledges to build a new relationship and set in motion a dialogue** between the US and North Korea that could reduce the threat of war on the Korean peninsula.
2. During the unprecedented meeting, **the two leaders signed a joint statement outlining Trump's commitment to provide "security guarantees" to the North and reaffirming Kim's commitment to work toward the "complete" denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.**
3. **The June 12 statement, however, left out significant details**, including specific steps towards abandonment of North Korea's nuclear programs and verification. **It did not clearly define "denuclearization."**
4. In a press conference following the meetings, **Trump announced that the US would suspend its annual joint military exercises with its ally, South Korea**, so long as productive US-DPRK talks are underway.
5. **Tasked with negotiating details, Secretary Pompeo and his team now face the difficult task of turning aspirations into firm commitments**, a process that will begin with quick consultations with South Korea, Japan, and China.

The First US-DPRK Summit

President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on June 12 held the first ever summit between a sitting American president and a leader of North Korea. During the unprecedented meeting in Singapore, **the two leaders signed a [joint statement](#) outlining Trump's commitment to provide "security guarantees" to the North and Kim's reaffirmation of his commitment to work toward the "complete" denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.** The statement also committed the countries to join efforts to build a "lasting and stable" peace regime on the peninsula and to recover and repatriate the remains of US prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action in the North. **To fully implement the agreement, both sides pledged to hold "follow-on negotiations"** led by Secretary of State Pompeo and a high-level North Korean official at the "earliest possible" date.

Ill-defined Pledges of Denuclearization

The **US-DPRK joint statement represented a symbolically important step** towards establishing new relations. However, much like the [Panmunjom Declaration](#) signed at the

April 27 inter-Korean summit, **the June 12 statement left out significant details**, including specific steps towards abandonment of North Korea's nuclear weapons programs, the verification process, and a timetable under which those steps would be taken. Most significantly, the document **failed to offer clarity as to the definition of "denuclearization."** There was no mention of the "complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization" – the oft-stated US goal for engaging in diplomacy with the North. The joint statement merely "reaffirm[ed]" Pyongyang's commitments under the Panmunjom Declaration "to work toward" complete denuclearization. In working group talks reportedly to be led by Amb. Sung Kim, we will see whether specific, matching actions by both sides will follow.

A Major US Concession?

In a [press conference](#) following a day of discussions with Kim, Trump exuded confidence in declaring the start of a "new chapter" in US-DPRK relations previously ridden by nearly seven decades of tensions and hostility. **Trump declared that Kim agreed to destroy a "major" missile engine test site**, which he said was agreed upon after the joint document was signed. Trump also made clear that economic sanctions against North Korea would remain in place until we are convinced North Korea is abandoning its nuclear weapons. (Note: it is evident that some countries' sanctions are already easing, and we can expect China and Southeast Asian nations to continue to ease off "maximum pressure" given the current atmosphere.) **Trump's most significant announcement was the suspension of "war games" the US conducts with its ally, South Korea**, so long as productive talks continue. He added that he found the exercises costly, "very provocative," and "inappropriate" in light of the diplomatic breakthrough achieved with Pyongyang.

Trump's announcement on the joint military exercises caught Seoul by surprise. South Korean President Moon Jae-in strongly praised the results of the summit, but his spokesman [added](#), "We need to try to understand what President Trump said" with regard to military exercises. He acknowledged that South Korea understood the need to pursue "various measures" to make progress in US-North Korea relations. **Japan was also unnerved by the surprise concession while China praised it** as a fulfillment of their call for a dual freeze of North Korea's nuclear and missile tests and US-ROK military exercises; the results of the intense diplomacy in Singapore left China comfortably engaged with North Korea and in a position to press for a larger scope for "denuclearization" that might include diminution of US presence in the western Pacific.

Secretary of State Pompeo is now [headed](#) to South Korea and China to meet with senior South Korean and Japanese officials in Seoul and Chinese officials in Beijing.

On the issue of verification, Trump offered few details as to how the process was going to be achieved but acknowledged it would involve American and international inspectors in the DPRK.

"The Beginning of an Arduous Process"

The Singapore summit represents a significant achievement in terms of its contribution to the relaxation of tensions in the region and reduction of the likelihood of war on the Korean peninsula. Although the joint statement produced at the meeting contained fewer specific commitments than the agreements that came before it, including the 1994 Agreed

Framework and the 2005 Six-Party Talks joint statement, **the document represents an aspirational joint effort to start a diplomatic process towards replacing nuclear confrontation with a “lasting and stable” peace regime.** The summit set some worthy goals, but Secretary Pompeo and his team now face the difficult task of turning aspirations into firm commitments.

Implementation Challenges Lie Ahead

Thought leaders in Japan, South Korea, and the US hope the Trump gamble pays off, but it is prudent to contemplate a future in which issues arise with regard to implementation. **It will be a challenge for the US to maintain pressure on North Korea through sanctions after relieving the pressure** with yesterday’s rhetoric and the expectations that the White House has set for the months ahead. Most countries in Asia will want to use trade and investment policies to contribute to stability, transparency, and predictability in the region.

If the US-North Korea implementation process falters, secondary sanctions against China loom large, as well as friction between the US and its friends and allies in Southeast Asia, most of whom were never comfortable with “maximum pressure” and some of whom maintain special relationships with North Korea (including the Thai, the Vietnamese, the Singaporean, the Burmese, and – to a lesser extent now – the Malaysians). It will take a lot to go back to maximum pressure; that is a good thing if Pyongyang is serious and we are on a path toward normalization of ties based on genuine denuclearization and non-proliferation policies. It is a very steep challenge if past is prologue, with Pyongyang having no intention of meeting the US definition of denuclearization.

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