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North Korea must not be allowed to deceive again

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Donald Trump said he “developed a very special bond” with Kim Jong-un at their historic Singapore summit and the North Korean leader said the “world will see a major change” as the pair signed an agreement after the talks. The US President claims their deal was better than anybody predicted and he even enthusiastically embraced the idea of inviting Kim to the White House.

Their document — given the status merely of “joint statement” — commits North Korea to “work toward the complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula” while pledging both nations to building a new relationship that will pursue “peace and prosperity”. In return the US will “provide security guarantees”. The intentions are clear but the details are missing.

While we welcome this progress — especially on the back of bellicose and reciprocated threats just six months ago — we must be sceptical and cautious, remembering the hermit kingdom has made similar promises previously.

Nothing can disguise the difficulty and complexity of the challenge that confronts both sides in giving effect to a deal. Transforming North Korea from a nuclear-armed totalitarian state that poses a real danger not only to regional but also to world peace, to a nation pledged to complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantling of its nuclear capacity is not going to be easy. It will demand wholehearted international support, especially from China, which has done so much to sustain the Kim dynasty in power and cushion it against the impact of sanctions. There is no precedent for the extraordinary scenes witnessed in Singapore. But there is an obvious need to retreat to realism.

Previous US presidents including Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, in their different ways, all reached understandings with Pyongyang, only to be let down even when — as Mr Clinton and Mr Bush both did — they offered substantial financial inducements to reward the regime and rescue the country from its impoverishment. Nothing, however, turned out to be enough for the rulers in Pyongyang to abandon aggressive militarism. Kim clearly has been prepared to move further than his father, Kim Jong-il, but the pressure on him to fulfil the undertakings he has made must remain unrelenting and, in that, China has a critical role to play. Understandably, Kim will want sanctions lifted. But there must be no question of that happening until we see tangible dismantling of nuclear arms.

It is, however, not just Kim's formidable nuclear capacity that is at stake; since it was established by his grandfather Kim Il-sung, North Korea has developed a powerful army that is now almost a million strong and has an estimated 15,000 cannons and rocket launchers burrowed into the mountains facing South Korea, constantly primed to lay waste to the skyscrapers of Seoul, a city of 10 million people. For the deal reached in Singapore to deliver true peace, such militarism, too, must be confronted. It is therefore imperative for Mr Trump to resist early demands and temptations to reduce the 32,000-strong troop deployment that the US maintains in South Korea.

As Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said, it would be extremely unhelpful to Western interests if Mr Trump were to withdraw US forces prematurely from South Korea or Japan, which needs to be assured of ongoing protection given that its constitution limits its military capacity and does not allow it to build nuclear weapons. South Korea's leftist president Moon Jae-in, who can claim credit for some of the groundwork that led to the summit, is keen to see a cut in US forces. So is China, and so, too, is Kim. The process of achieving the complete denuclearisation of North Korea has a long way to go, however, before that should even be considered.

Much as Beijing may like it to be, the progress made in Singapore must not be the beginning of any process that leads to a diminution in Washington's commitment to northeast Asia. Pyongyang's demand, along with Beijing's, has always been that the US should pull out of South Korea. Since he assumed office in Seoul a year ago, Mr Moon has been increasingly supportive of this view. It is one that Mr Trump must not embrace. There can be no question but that yesterday's events represent enormous progress; late last year the leaders were referring to each other as the "Little Rocket Man" and the "dotard" as they publicly threatened to lay waste to each other's countries.

But a sober response is appropriate along with recognition there is still a long way to go. Nothing should be done to relieve the pressure on North Korea prematurely — pressure that, so far, has brought it to the negotiating table, prepared to give the free world what is best for world peace.

The warnings of Mr Abe, the West's best friend in northeast Asia, must be heeded. Despite Mr Trump's triumph, pressure must remain on Kim and Beijing must play its part. History tells us Pyongyang broke clear promises to eschew nuclear weapons. North Korea must not be allowed to backslide again.