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## Singapore summit: Trump, Kim give peace a chance



The success of the meeting lies in the political rapprochement between two former Cold War enemies. It is a thaw that, if sustained, will bring benefits beyond the nuclear issue to both countries and to the region. Picture: AP

Cameron Stewart, The Australian, 12:00AM June 14, 2018

Of all the strange moments during the surreal summit in Singapore between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, few were odder than when the US President showed North Korea's supreme leader a propaganda video. The four-minute Hollywood-style video, made by the Americans, told Kim of the capitalist riches that his country could expect if he got rid of his nuclear weapons and embraced the West. It showed giant speedboats, stockmarkets, car factories, electricity grids, modern hospitals, fresh food and smiling people — everything that North Korea is short of.

“Two leaders, one destiny: A story about a special moment in time, when a man is presented with one chance that may never be repeated,” the voiceover in the video says. “What will he choose? To show vision and leadership? Or not.” Trump says he showed the video to Kim towards the end of their 4½-hour summit. “I think he loved it,” Trump said of the supreme leader, who no doubt admires a good propaganda video.

Much of the early analysis of the summit has focused only on whether Kim's promise to denuclearise the Korean peninsula represents a win for Trump or a rehash of past promises that were never kept. But the significance of this week's historic summit is broader than that.

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The subtext of Trump's video was also that if the Stalinist leader is genuine about changing the course of his country, then greater openness and a capitalist-style economy are where the future lies. In his two days in Singapore, Kim was confronted with the fruits of capitalism. He was taken on a night tour of the towering steel skyscrapers. Singaporean officials even took him up to the 57th-floor SkyBar in the Marina Bay Sands tower to see the city lit up at night — the stuff of dreams for Pyongyang, with its struggling electricity grids. The 34-year-old leader — who is not known to have travelled abroad before, beyond a stint in Switzerland as a student and two trips to China this year — took part in the summit at the luxurious colonial Capella Hotel on Sentosa Island. Trump even opened the door of his presidential limousine to let Kim look inside, as if to say: "One day, this too could be yours."

Whether any of this made an impression on Kim remains to be seen, but it doesn't hurt when the US is holding out the promise of untold riches for North Korea if it honours its pledge to denuclearise.

Already the thaw in relations between the two sides has yielded some non-security benefits. Kim agreed to return the remains of up to 6000 US — and likely some Australian — prisoners of war and those who went missing in action during the Korean War.

The detente with the US also will likely deter Kim from repeating some of his non-nuclear crimes, such as the 2014 hacking of Sony Pictures and the assassination of family members using nerve agents.

The judgment on whether the Trump-Kim summit was a success hinges almost entirely on a single question: Can Kim be believed? That cannot be answered right now and won't be clear for many months, if not several years.

The sceptics — who say Kim has played Trump, just as North Korea has played previous presidents by promising to get rid of its nukes but never doing so — have history on their side. They point out that in 1994 Pyongyang agreed to freeze its illegal plutonium weapons program and in 2005 the so-called six-party talks led to a breakthrough, with North Korea pledging to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs”. On each occasion, after extracting financial concessions from the West, North Korea reneged on the deal.

Scepticism is fuelled further by the fact the agreement signed by Kim and Trump goes no further than Pyongyang’s previous promises on denuclearisation. Overall, the Trump-Kim declaration was weaker than the 1992 inter-Korean agreement ... and six-party talk statements of 2005 and 2007,” says Bruce Klingner of Washington, DC, think tank the Heritage Foundation. “There was no mention of North Korea moving towards complete verifiable, irreversible destruction (of its weapons), as the administration had hinted at.”

The agreement also contained no detail about how or when denuclearisation might occur, although Trump did promise it would begin “very, very quickly”. “The summit joint statement lacks a great deal of detail on denuclearisation. There is no commitment to a declaration of weapons. There is no commitment to verification. There is no timeline,” says Victor Cha, Korean expert with Washington’s Centre for Strategic and International Studies. ‘He inherited the family business from his dad and grandfather. He is a total weirdo who would not be elected assistant dog catcher in any democracy’ “Until International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors are back in North Korea, suspending operations, sealing buildings and installing monitoring cameras, this summit has taken us off the crisis path but has not made us necessarily safer.”

In Washington, Trump’s deal with Kim has received a tepid response on Capitol Hill, with many leading Republicans asking why more was not demanded from Kim. Trump himself bears some blame for this perception, having initially oversold what he would demand and receive from the summit. “While I am glad the President and Kim Jong-un were able to meet, it is difficult to determine what of concrete nature has occurred,” says Senate foreign relations committee chairman Bob Corker. Florida senator Marco Rubio says he distrusts Kim and disagrees with Trump’s praise of him as “talented”. “I hope I’m wrong but I still believe they will never give up their nukes and ICBMs,” Rubio tweeted. “(Kim) is NOT a talented guy. He inherited the family

business from his dad and grandfather. He is a total weirdo who would not be elected assistant dog catcher in any democracy.”

In the end, Trump’s agreement with Kim — the simple promise to denuclearise — was the bare minimum the President could have got away with while still credibly calling the summit a success. But although sceptics may have history on their side, history can change — and there is more cause for optimism this time than in the past. The Trump-Kim summit, the first between a sitting US president and a North Korean leader, was the most public and dramatic thaw in relations with the US in North Korea’s history.

Kim did something that his father and his grandfather would never have contemplated: speaking publicly, with the eyes of the world on him. His message — that the past should be left behind and a new future of “major change” was upon his country — is also a radical departure from anything his forebears would have said.

The nature of Kim’s public declaration to the world makes it that much harder, but certainly not impossible, simply to abandon his promise to dismantle his nuclear weapons.

Trump’s agreement with Kim is cleverly staggered to ensure the dictator gets rewarded in stages, depending on the progress of the disarmament process. Trump has been criticised by some for his decision to suspend immediately US-South Korean military exercises on the grounds that they are “provocative” to North Korea.

The decision appeared to catch both the South Korean and the US military by surprise, and has raised concerns in Seoul that it will undermine South Korea’s defences.

But Trump clearly saw this move as a necessary down payment, a sign of goodwill to secure the summit with Kim and entice him to act quickly on starting the disarmament process. Trump has held out the possibility of other carrots, but not until Kim demonstrates genuine progress on denuclearisation.

If Kim stalls on his pledge, the President can simply resume the exercises.

The next carrot Trump has held out for Kim is the removal of some or all of the 32,000 US troops stationed in South Korea. “I’d like to be able to bring them back home, but that’s not part of the equation right now,” the President said. “At some point I hope it will be, but not right now.”

The final and biggest carrot Trump has dangled is the lifting of crippling economic sanctions on North Korea. These, he said, would be lifted only when denuclearisation has proceeded to the point that nuclear weapons are “not a factor” — in other words, when they can’t be used against any country. These are powerful enticements for Kim, but the rewards will remain out of reach until he starts disarming.

Even so, the summit was a resounding success for the North Korean leader. “For this summit in Singapore, Kim wanted to achieve global legitimacy and to begin a negotiation process with the Trump administration that will lead to sanctions relief while giving as little away as possible. Kim has wildly succeeded in meeting these goals,” says Cha. “He has achieved what his father and grandfather couldn’t achieve: command an audience with the president of the United States without giving anything away. “Kim has achieved a level of international prestige that the North has long sought. He was out and about in Singapore before meeting with Trump, even taking selfies, while being treated like a rock star everywhere he went. North Korean camera operators accompanied him, filming every move for propaganda back home.”

So, what comes next?

For the disarmament process to even start, Kim needs to provide a full declaration to the US of his nuclear weapons and facilities — something North Korea has never done. “Practically speaking, the negotiations cannot move forward unless the United States knows what it is negotiating over in terms of WMD (weapons of mass destruction) and missiles,” Cha says.

Trump has spoken of future meetings with Kim including possibly in the White House. But the hard grunt work of moving negotiations forward is likely to be overseen by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Although Trump insists Kim will begin work on denuclearisation immediately, he acknowledges the process could take at least 15 years.

Many have questioned the US President’s decision to roll the dice with Kim, and to flatter and deal with such a ruthless dictator on the world stage. But the alternative was surely much worse. Only six months ago, both leaders were hurling personal insults at each other and threatening to rain fire and fury. Meanwhile, Kim exploded his country’s first hydrogen bomb and tested the

first long-range missile capable of striking the US mainland. The status quo was becoming increasingly dangerous for the US, Australia and the region.

Even Trump admits he may eventually be wrong to have placed his trust in Kim, an iron-fisted dictator who has jailed and killed North Korean citizens and even family members to stay in power. "You never know, right? You never know," says Trump.

He could go down as the latest US president to fall for North Korea's old two-card trick. But if not, this week's Singapore summit may be the defining moment of Trump's presidency. Until he is proved wrong, the Singapore summit should be lauded as a success, if only because the world is safer now that it was when Kim was exploding nuclear bombs and firing missiles.

And if Trump is right and Kim is telling the truth, then the world really did change this week for the better. "Despite its many flaws, the Singapore summit represents the start of a diplomatic process that takes us away from the brink of nuclear war that we were potentially headed toward only six months ago," Cha says. "North Korea is the land of lousy options, and while the Singapore summit's outcome is not great, it is less bad than the path to war."

Cameron Stewart is also US contributor for Sky News Australia.