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The Mirage of Kim-Moon-Trump (KMT) Summit Diplomacy

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While the period from 2017 to 2020 was an era of summit diplomacy among Chairman Kim Jong Un, President Moon Jae-in and President Donald Trump (K-M-T), today nuclear-tipped North Korean missiles are flying over our heads. The 27 letters between Trump and Kim disclosed in the Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward’s book, *Rage* (2020), only scratched the surface but nonetheless offered some perspectives about how U.S.-North Korea summit diplomacy unfolded. The present situation requires that we reflect upon and draw lessons from the mirage created by K-M-T summit diplomacy.

During the Trump administration, the South Korea-U.S. alliance suffered quite a bit of damage. President Trump ignored the fact that alliances are about shared values. He seemed to view the ROK-US alliance as a cost-benefit transaction. In the aftermath of the Korean War, South Korea’s per capita gross domestic product was \$67 dollars.¹ Had the United States viewed its alliances in transactional terms, it would have had no reason to sign a mutual defense treaty with such a poor country.

After President Trump toured Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek on his first visit to South Korea in November 2017—which South Korea had covered 90 percent of construction costs at \$9.7 billion²—USFK Commander General Vincent Brooks explained to him on the helicopter flight to Seoul that South Korea had spent \$460 billion on defense in the last 15 years and was about to purchase \$13.5 billion more in additional weapons. President Trump replied, “This is a rich country. Look at these high-rises. Look at the highway

infrastructure. Look at that train. Look at all of this. We're paying for all of this. They should be paying for everything."³ He added, "The military always tell you that the alliances with NATO and South Korea are the best bargain the United States makes but the military people are wrong ... It's a horrible bargain. We're protecting South Korea from North Korea and, they're making a fortune with televisions and ships and everything else ... We're suckers."⁴

During the four years from 2016 to 2019, the United States spent \$13.4 billion on its forces stationed in Korea,⁵ while South Korea contributed \$3.2 billion towards their presence.⁶ At the end of 2019, President Trump demanded that South Korea's annual defense cost-sharing contribution be increased fivefold to \$5 billion. On this, John Hamre, President of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), criticized President Trump by noting that "USFK are not mercenaries who defend South Korea in return for money," and that "the U.S. is stationing troops in South Korea for its own interests ... U.S. troops serve the purpose of defending the United States."⁷ It is worth recalling that South Korea signed a mutual defense treaty with the United States to prevent another North Korean invasion, while the United States signed it to use South Korea as a shield at the forefront of liberal democracy on the eastern tip of Eurasian continent against the expansion of communism.

According to a book by Washington Post journalists Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, titled *I Alone Can Fix It*, President Trump allegedly told his aides that if he were to be re-elected, "I'll blow up the U.S. alliance with South Korea."⁸ According to Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, President Trump said at a dinner with Republican governors in February 2020 that "South Koreans were terrible people."⁹ Conversely, President Trump said of Kim Jong Un, "He likes me. I like him. We get along."¹⁰ That is very disappointing.

When North Korea test-fired two intercontinental ballistic missiles in July 2017, President Trump threatened, "they [North Koreans] will be met with 'fire and fury' like the world has never seen,"¹¹ and reviewed military options against North Korea. When South Korean National Security Advisor Chung Eui-yong went to the White House and delivered Kim's

desire to meet President Trump in March 2018, President Trump made an impromptu decision to meet Kim in person. President Trump was more interested in commanding the media's attention than in yielding substantive outcomes from the summit with Kim. And Woodward recounts that President Trump loved the U.S. media's description of his forthcoming summit with Kim as "a breathtaking gamble." President Trump's approach to the summit produced assessments that he was "ratings-minded" and was indulged in "self-grandiosity."¹² Trump administration officials touted North Korea's lack of nuclear and missile tests as an accomplishment, but North Korea actually continued to develop its nuclear and missile programs and only refrained from additional provocations because President Trump was moving in Kim's preferred direction by doing things such as stopping ROK-U.S. combined military exercises.¹³ On April 1, 2022, the report by Panel of Experts on the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee on North Korea stated that "During the reporting period, the DPRK continued to maintain and develop its nuclear and ballistic missile programmes in violation of Security Council resolutions."¹⁴

Evan S. Medeiros, who served as President Obama's Asia policy advisor, said, "Kim will never give up his nukes," and that "Kim played Moon and is now playing Trump."¹⁵ After having three meetings with Kim, President Trump said in an interview with Bob Woodward, "You know what I did? I met (him). Big deal. It takes me two days. I gave up nothing. I didn't give up sanctions. I didn't give him anything."¹⁶ However, no sitting U.S. president prior to the Singapore Summit had ever met a North Korean leader in person and it was the Moon administration that made the meeting happen. Since 2018, President Trump and Chairman Kim met three times and what followed was the suspension of ROK-U.S. combined military exercises, not the denuclearization of North Korea.¹⁷ President Trump drew criticism from the international community that he had given the North Korean leadership the international standing and legitimacy it had long sought.

To have a summit, it is necessary to have preparations including analysis of the counterpart and some guarantee of tangible outcomes. It is hard to find such things in the Singapore Summit. It is illustrative that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) characterized Kim

as “cunning,” “crafty,” and “ultimately stupid,” but President Trump called him “smart” and “tough.”¹⁸

At the June 2018 Singapore Summit, President Trump and Chairman Kim announced they would work toward the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula but did not specify what steps North Korea would take. This was weaker than the September 19, 2005, Six-Party Talks Joint Statement in which North Korea pledged to remain “committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and to IAEA safeguards.”

Under the ambiguous Singapore statement, President Trump made a risky decision to downscale or altogether suspend South Korea-U.S. combined military exercises. Three months after the Singapore Summit, in September 2018, at a rally during the U.S. mid-term elections, President Trump told an audience that he “fell in love” with Kim.¹⁹ According to opinion surveys conducted by CNN after the 2018 Singapore Summit, 70% of U.S. respondents said North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons, suggesting that the American public knew more than President Trump about Kim’s intention.²⁰

President Trump and Chairman Kim exchanged letters and compliments, promising to implement the outcomes of the Singapore Summit. At the end of July 2018, Kim wrote President Trump a letter suggesting that the United States and North Korea should declare an end to the Korean War because hostilities ceased under the terms of the 1953 Armistice Agreement.²¹ As North Korea attempted to create the mood for the withdrawal of U.S. troops by adopting the end of war declaration, Victor Cha, Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), pointed out that “[the declaration] can raise questions in the United States about if there’s peace, why don’t we bring the troops home?”²²

During the second summit held in Hanoi in February 2019, eight months after the Singapore Summit, what did the United States expect, and what did Kim want as he made a 66-hour train journey to Hanoi? At the summit, President Trump demanded that North

Korea shut down its five nuclear facilities while Kim insisted on only closing the Yongbyon facility, calling it “our biggest,” which Trump rejected by saying, “Yeah, it’s also the oldest,” thus bringing the summit to a sudden end.²³

As the Hanoi Summit ended with ‘no deal,’ the bilateral negotiations between the United States and North Korea seemed to have ended. However, three months after Hanoi, at the G-20 Summit in Osaka, Japan, President Trump tweeted an open invitation to Kim, “If Chairman Kim of North Korea sees this, I would meet him at the Border/DMZ just to shake his hand and say Hello(?)!”²⁴ President Trump also sent a letter to Kim on June 29 in which he wrote “As you may have seen, I am travelling today from Osaka, Japan to the Republic of Korea, and since I will be so close to you I would like to invite you to meet me at the border tomorrow afternoon. I will be near the DMZ in the afternoon and propose a meeting at 3:30 at the Peace House on the southern side of the military demarcation line.”²⁵ At the Panmunjom meeting in the afternoon of June 30, President Trump reportedly did not want President Moon’s attendance.²⁶ President Moon had insisted on being present but the United States refused due to North Korean opposition. President Moon instead escorted President Trump and Chairman Kim to Freedom House at Panmunjom. President Trump crossed over the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) and took 20 steps into North Korean soil. He boasted that he was the first sitting U.S. president to step over the MDL and hung a photograph he took with Kim in the White House. At Freedom House, President Trump said to Chairman Kim, “if [you] didn’t show up, the press was going to make me look very bad. So, you made us both look good, and I appreciate it.”²⁷ Although President Trump said after the meeting that he and Kim agreed to designate teams and work out some deals “within weeks,” it took nearly four months to hold talks in Stockholm, Sweden, and the talks ended up falling apart.

During the time of K-M-T summit diplomacy, the Moon administration rushed to complete the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) without securing reconnaissance capabilities to monitor North Korean moves, interceptors, and precision strike weapons. It

pressed ahead with declaring an end to the Korean War which had been proposed by Kim to remove U.S. troops from Korea.

On September 22, 2018 at the 73rd UN General Assembly, President Moon Jae-in de facto represented North Korea's position by stating that "On September 9, in the ceremony marking the 70th anniversary of its foundation, Chairman Kim expressed its commitment to peace and prosperity instead of boasting its nuclear capabilities."²⁸ And three days later, during the meeting at Council on Foreign Relations, President Moon said "Kim Jong Un is young, very candid and polite, treating the elders with respect ... I believe that Kim Jong Un is sincere and he will abandon nuclear weapons in exchange of economic development." Bloomberg News criticized President Moon for becoming Kim Jong Un's top spokesman.²⁹ This characterization of Kim Jong Un is hard to understand since he is the grandson of Kim Il Sung, who invaded South Korea and massacred millions of innocent people, and even today himself continues to put more than 20 million North Koreans under political oppression and economic poverty.

In March 2018, then-National Security Advisor and later Foreign Minister Chung Eui-yong debriefed the press after his visit to Pyongyang as a special envoy. He said, North Korea "made it clear that if its security were to be guaranteed, there will no reason for the country to possess nuclear weapons." During his press conference at the White House after sharing the results of his meeting in Pyongyang with President Trump, Ambassador Chung said, "I told President Trump that, in our meeting, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said he is committed to denuclearization. Kim pledged that North Korea will refrain from any further nuclear or missile tests."³⁰

During Ambassador Chung's visit to Pyongyang, Kim allegedly told the South Korean delegation that "North Korea would refrain from the use of not only nuclear weapons, but also conventional ones." And he added "how can I use nuclear weapons against my compatriot South Koreans?" If the Moon administration felt assured by this pledge, it fell prey to the Stockholm Syndrome, "contested illness that hostages develop psychological

bond with their captors during captivity, and accordingly taking the side of their captor.” The wishful thinking that appeasement may one day lead to peace is the Korean version of Stockholm syndrome. Rather than trying to break free of captivity, South Korea is relying on the favor of its North Korean captor.³¹

It is time to reflect on whether South Korea, in the course of its messenger role between Pyongyang and Washington, exaggerated or distorted North Korea’s position on denuclearization or made a mistake causing misunderstanding. North Korea made it clear that the withdrawal of the U.S. troops should precede denuclearization. It is questionable whether Ambassador Chung accurately conveyed to the United States North Korea’s demand for the withdrawal of the U.S. troops as precondition for denuclearization. It must be scrutinized whether the Moon administration, in want of the Singapore summit, did not fully and accurately explain the aspects of North Korean demands Washington would find problematic. The contents of three phone call conversations Kim allegedly had with the Moon administration during his 66-hour train journey to Hanoi must also be revealed.³²

What does North Korea actually think when it deals with South Korea? It claims that the United States is an “imperialist power” that makes military threats, and that because the South is a “U.S. puppet,” its society must be ‘liberated’ from imperialist control. It also argues that securing conventional forces and a nuclear deterrent are defensive means to protect against the threats of “U.S. imperialism.” Although it is imperative for the North Korean regime to exhibit accomplishments to justify its three-generation hereditary system from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il and to Kim Jong-Un, there have thus far been no visible accomplishments while North Korean people remain gripped by poverty and oppression. For Kim, the existence of a free and prosperous South Korea is a political threat and the stability of his regime can only be assured after bringing South Korea to submission by nuclear weapons and achieving reunification by force.

Knowing that he needed to separate the United States from South Korea to accomplish the goal of unification under communist flag, Kim exploited President Trump’s fondness for

self-grandiosity.³³ Four months after the collapse of the Hanoi Summit, President Trump wrote Kim a letter in June 2019 saying that they had shared “a unique style and a special relationship”³⁴ and could end the hostile relationship between their two countries.³⁵ After the Panmunjom meeting in July, President Trump wrote Kim another letter that included 22 photographs they had taken at Panmunjom. A month later, Kim wrote President Trump his longest letter, which in journalist Bob Woodward’s assessment had a tone of disappointment. In the letter, Kim complained that South Korea-U.S. combined military exercises had not fully stopped, stating, “Now and in the future, South Korean military cannot be my enemy.”³⁶ On April 1, 2022, South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook said that the country’s military has the “ability and readiness to conduct a precision strike against the launch site and command and support facilities if there is a clear sign of [North Korean] missile launch.”³⁷ Next day, in response to South Korean Defense Minister Suh Wook’s comment, Kim Yo-Jong, Deputy Department Director of the Publicity and Information Department of the Workers' Party of Korea, warned that North Korea is a nuclear armed state and South Korea without nuclear weapons is no match by stating that Defense Minister Suh Wook “dare mentioned the preemptive strike at a nuclear weapons state, in his senseless bluster.”³⁸ Two days later, she threatened South Korea in her statement that says “The South Korean military will have to face a miserable fate little short of total destruction and ruin.”³⁹

At a confirmation hearing held at the South Korean National Assembly a month after Kim announced the development of tactical nuclear weapons and a nuclear-powered submarines in January 2021, Ambassador Chung, then-minister nominee, said, “Kim Jong Un is still committed to denuclearization.”⁴⁰ In March 2022, at a session of the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee of the National Assembly, Foreign Minister Chung said, “if an answer can simply be ‘yes or no,’ how simple and good would the world be,”⁴¹ in effect he misleads the people with sophistry watching a fire across the river.

In 2021, the Biden administration entered office and in May 2022, a new government will take office in Seoul. In the South Korea-U.S. leaders' joint statement of May 2021, the Biden administration announced that it would "begin a new chapter" in the partnership.

Given that South Korean President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol pledged to transform the South Korea-U.S. alliance into "a comprehensive strategic alliance," South Korea and the United States are expected to be more closely aligned than ever. The issue is that they will have to overcome a crisis of trust in their relationship produced over the past years and put their partnership back on a solid rock.

Amid increasing nuclear threats from North Korea, public support in South Korea and the United States for the relationship is crucial for maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula. The attitudes of citizens in South Korea and the United States toward each other's countries remain positive. According to a March 2021 opinion survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, South Koreans viewed the United States most favorably of all nations, and according to the same institute's July 2021 survey, 63% of U.S. respondents said they supported defending South Korea in the event of a North Korean invasion.

- ¹ Bank of Korea, "GDP Per Capita, 1953," <https://ecos.bok.or.kr/flex/EasySearch.jsp>.
- ² Congressional Research Service, "U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Issues for Congress," *In Focus* (March 14, 2022), p. 2.
- ³ Bob Woodward, *Rage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), p. 85.
- ⁴ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 186.
- ⁵ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Burden Sharing: Benefits and Costs Associated with the U.S. Military Presence in Japan and South Korea* (March 2021), pp. 43-44.
- ⁶ Statistics Korea, "E-National Statistics, Status of Shared Defense Costs," https://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=1712.
- ⁷ "US forces in Korea not mercenaries: US think tank," *The Korea Herald* (November 27, 2020). <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20191127000648>.
- ⁸ Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix It – Large Print Version* (New York: Random House, 2021), pp. 503-504. When Trump's top aides, including Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, told him that shredding the alliance with South Korea would be politically dangerous, he said, "We'll do it in the second term."
- ⁹ Larry Hogan, "Fighting alone: I'm a GOP governor. Why didn't Trump help my state with coronavirus testing?" *The Washington Post* (June 16, 2020). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/07/16/larry-hogan-trump-coronavirus/>.
- ¹⁰ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 183.
- ¹¹ "Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.," *The New York Times* (August 8, 2017).
- ¹² Woodward, *Rage*, p. 179 and 181.
- ¹³ "In surprise summit concession, Trump says he will halt Korea war games," *Reuters* (June 12, 2018).
- ¹⁴ Final Report of the Panel of Experts submitted pursuant to resolution 2569 (2021), United Nations Security Council 1718 Sanctions Committee (DPRK), March 1, 2022.
- ¹⁵ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 92.
- ¹⁶ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 92.
- ¹⁷ "The Troubled ROK-U.S. Alliance," The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, *Issue Brief* 2022-02 (January 21, 2022), p.10.
- ¹⁸ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 183.
- ¹⁹ "President Donald Trump on Kim Jong Un: 'We fell in love' over 'beautiful letters,'" *USA Today* (Sep 30, 2018). <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2018/09/30/trump-north-koreas-kim-love-beautiful-letters/1478834002/>.
- ²⁰ "How to Understand North Korea's Demand for the Withdrawal of ROK-U.S. 'hostile policy'," The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, *Issue Brief* (January 20, 2022), p. 4.
- ²¹ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 172.
- ²² "The Troubled ROK-U.S. Alliance," The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, *Issue Brief* 2022-02 (January 21, 2022) p. 12.
- ²³ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 175.
- ²⁴ "In a tweet, Trump appears to invite Kim Jong Un to meet him at the Korean demilitarized zone," *The Washington Post* (June 28, 2019).
- ²⁵ "Kim Jong Un felt annoyed by Moon Jae-in trying to intervene between himself and Trump," *Sisajournal*, (April 12, 2022), p. 17.
- ²⁶ [단독] "美北 판문점 회동때, 트럼프도 김정은도文帝행 원치 않았다"[Neither Trump nor Kim Jong Un Wanted Company of Moon at U.S.-D.P.R.K Panmunjom Meeting], *조선일보* [Chosun Ilbo] (June 22, 2020).
- ²⁷ "Trump Steps Into North Korea and Agrees with Kim Jong-un to Resume Talks," *The New York Times* (June 30, 2019).
- ²⁸ "Address by President Moon Jae-in of the Republic of Korea at the 73rd Session of the United Nations General Assembly," *Cheong Wa Dae* (September 26, 2018). <https://english1.president.go.kr/briefingspeeches/speeches/73>
- ²⁹ "South Korea's Moon Becomes Kim Jong Un's Top Spokesman at UN," *Bloomberg* (September 26, 2018)
- ³⁰ "정의용 수석특사 방북 결과 언론발표," [Special Envoy Chung Eui Yong's Press Conference after visit to Pyongyang], *대한민국 정책브리핑* [Republic of Korea Policy Briefing] (2018. 03. 16). <https://www.korea.kr/news/blueHouseView.do?newsId=148848672>.

³¹ "The Troubled ROK-U.S. Alliance," The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, *Issue Brief* 2022-02 (January 21, 2022) p. 13.

³² "하노이 '훈수'에 불만 ... 김여정, 청와대에 '배신자' 말폭탄," [Disgruntled with backseat gaming at Hanoi, Kim Yo Jung characterized Cheongwadae as 'traitor'" *중앙일보* [JoongAng Ilbo] (June 25, 2020).

³³ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 181.

³⁴ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 177.

³⁵ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 172.

³⁶ Woodward, *Rage*, p. 180.

³⁷ "Of grass, winds and principles," *Korea JoongAng Daily* (April 6, 2022).

³⁸ "Press Statement of Kim Yo-Jong, Vice Department Director of CC, WPK," *Korea Central News Agency* (April 3, 2022)

³⁹ "Press Statement of Vice Department Director of C.C., WPK Kim Yo Jong," *The Rodongshinmun*, April 5, 2022.

⁴⁰ "정의용 '김정은 비핵화 의지' 강조에 ... 미 '아무런 증거 없다' 반박," [Chung Eui Yong emphasizes 'Kim's commitment to denuclearization' while U.S. rebuts 'no evidence'], *조선일보* [Chosun Ilbo] (2021. 02. 07).

⁴¹ "'문 정부 평화프로세스 사망' 국힘 공세 ... 정의용 "'실패' 아냐," [Chung grilled by People Power Party for Moon's Korean Peace Process and said it's not failure], *연합뉴스* [Yonhap News Agency] (2022. 03. 28).