

The Problem with Lamenting “Acceptance” of Kim Jong-un

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Global Research, June 19, 2018

[Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) 15 June
2018

Region: [Asia, USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Media Disinformation](#), [Military and WMD](#)

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*As one might expect of any event starring **Donald Trump**, reaction to the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore has been polarized. Republicans—the same people who condemned **Barack Obama** for visiting Cuba and **John Kerry** for meeting with Iranian leaders—[defended](#) Trump’s meeting with **Kim Jong-un**.*

“The way I look at it is when you’re talking, you’re not fighting,” said [Sen. John Cornyn](#), a Republican of Texas. “And I think in the interest of everybody involved, that avoiding military conflict is really important if we can — because obviously a lot of innocent people would die in the process.”

Meanwhile many Democrats accused Trump of making the United States look weak.

These reversals in party rhetoric were not the most striking aspect of summit commentary, however. Post-meeting criticisms from pundits, politicians, and experts were of two kinds. The first was perfectly reasonable; the second should trouble anyone with a genuine interest in arms control.

The first kind of criticism was that, Trump’s inflated rhetoric notwithstanding, the summit was actually a great big nothing burger. As national security columnist [Max Boot](#) put it in the *Washington Post*,

“The Singapore summit was a mesmerizing spectacle utterly lacking in substance. In other words, it was a perfect microcosm of the Trump presidency...The meeting really should have been held in Oakland, not Singapore, because there is no there there.” (In case you missed the literary allusion, Gertrude Stein famously said of Oakland, California, that “there’s no there there.”)

[Nicholas Kristof](#), writing in the *New York Times*, levelled a similar criticism in more measured prose:

“The most remarkable aspect of the joint statement was what it didn’t contain. There was nothing about North Korea freezing plutonium and uranium programs, nothing about destroying intercontinental ballistic missiles, nothing about allowing inspectors to return to nuclear sites, nothing about North Korea making a full declaration of its nuclear program, nothing about a timetable, nothing about verification, not even any clear pledge to permanently halt

testing of nuclear weapons or long-range missiles.”

Fair enough. The summit was more showbiz than arms control. It was not preceded, as would usually be the case, by months of painstaking, lawyerly negotiations between deputies to hammer out areas of agreement and disagreement, the latter to be resolved (if possible) by the two national leaders. Instead, it was largely a good-natured get-acquainted chat between two heads of state, accompanied by displays of mutual respect and followed by extravagant statements about denuclearization that are largely aspirational. Still, given that the two leaders in question were, just a few months ago, threatening to attack each other with weapons of mass destruction, this is clearly progress, even if it falls far short of an actual arms control agreement.

But it is the second kind of criticism that should really worry us. Here are some examples:

[Sen. Robert Menendez](#), a New Jersey Democrat, said as the summit was beginning that

“North Korea has already extracted concessions” in the form of Kim’s “long-sought legitimacy and acceptance on the global stage.”

[Alison Evans](#), a North Korea expert and risk consultant, said the

final communique “implicitly recognizes North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons state,” and “this lends North Korea, and specifically Kim, legitimacy at home and abroad.”

[Boot](#), meanwhile, also wrote that

“Kim won an invaluable propaganda windfall: Ruling one of the poorest and most despotic countries in the world (North Korea’s gross domestic product is smaller than Vermont’s), he was recognized as an equal by the leader of the world’s sole superpower.”

[Anne Applebaum](#), another *Washington Post* pundit, wrote that

“For Kim Jong Un, this moment is vindication. The wisdom of his nuclear policy has been confirmed: His tiny, poor, often hungry country, where hundreds of thousands have perished in concentration camps that differ little from those built by Stalin, has been treated as the equal of the United States of America.”

And the **[New York Times](#)** editorial board opined that

“Mr. Kim’s wins were obvious. He got what his father and grandfather never did—a meeting with an American president, the legitimacy of being treated as an equal as a nuclear power on the world stage, country flags standing side by side.”

Such comments are, for a start, myopic. They make it sound as if the summit was a zero-

sum prestige contest in which North Korea walked off with all the prize money. But the footage of the two smiling leaders represents a liability as well as a win for Kim. It may show that he is a player on the world stage, but for a regime that has built its legitimacy over decades around the notion that Americans are evil devils who cannot be trusted, such images also pose a danger. If Americans can be partners after all, what gives legitimacy to the hermit state and the iron-fisted discipline with which the Kim family has ruled? Remember: the Soviet regime was undone by glasnost, not decades of nuclear saber-rattling.

More to the point, criticisms of Trump for legitimizing Kim sound more like the complaints of old-money WASPS upset that nouveau riche people of color want to join their golf club than the statements of people seriously trying to solve the problems of nuclear proliferation or imminent war on the Korean Peninsula. They bring to mind comments made by American officials in response to nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in 1998. At that time, [Secretary of State Madeline Albright](#) said,

“it was clear that what the Indians and Pakistanis did was unacceptable, and that they are not now members of the nuclear club.” (If the tests showed anything, it was that, like it or not, India and Pakistan were indeed “members of the nuclear club.”)

Meanwhile former national security advisor [Robert McFarlane](#) wrote,

“we must make clear to the Indian government that it is today what it was two weeks ago: an arrogant, overreaching cabal that, by its devotion to the caste system, the political and cultural disenfranchisement of its people and its religious intolerance, is unworthy of membership in any club.”

Underlying such comments is a snotty assumption that nations are hierarchically ranked, that the United States is at the top of this hierarchy, and that it is beneath the dignity of the American president to be seen talking to certain kinds of people. From this perspective, maintaining status differentials is more important than avoiding nuclear war. For once, [Trump](#) got it right when he responded to a Time reporter who gave him a hard time for “a video that showed you and Kim Jong Un on equal footing.” He said,

“If I have to say I’m sitting on a stage with Chairman Kim and that gets us to save 30 million lives—it could be more than that—I’m willing to sit on a stage, I’m willing to travel to Singapore, very proudly.”

To state the obvious: with [10 to 20 nuclear weapons](#), North Korea is, whether we like it or not, now a member of the nuclear club. Any diplomatic strategy that treats North Korea the way it was 20 years ago, the way the United States wishes it still were, is an exercise in futility—unless the whole point is to put North Korea in what is no longer its place. American national security experts like to talk about being “realists.” It is not realistic to treat North Korea as if its nuclear weapons make no difference to its status.

[National Security Advisor John Bolton](#) wanted to treat North Korea like an unruly child, and the story the US media underplayed this week is that the Trump-Kim summit represented a stunning defeat for Bolton, who had done [everything in his power](#) to sabotage

the summit and enshrine either regime change or unilateral surrender of nuclear weapons as the principal US goal in North Korea. Maybe there will be another reversal of fortune in the epic struggle between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Bolton to dominate US policy toward Pyongyang, but for now, US and North Korean officials are talking for the first time in two decades. As Winston Churchill famously said, “to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.”

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