

The North Korean Détente: Peace Prospects on the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract

This paper conceptualizes the emerging détente within inter-Korean relations as evidence of tangible transformations within North Korea's domestic and foreign policy, establishing how this phenomenon represents a unique and conclusive opportunity for peace and engagement. It contextualizes the inter-Korean and Singapore summits as foundations for the détente, before expanding upon the nature of the détente through the contrasting objectives of North and South Korea, and the transitional nature of domestic affairs in North Korea. The article establishes the bona fide nature of North Korea's détente, as revealed by a direct connection between North Korea's international diplomatic gestures vis-à-vis transitional domestic circumstances; involving incremental economic modernization and political liberalization under a shift in focus within Kim Jong-un's *Byungjin Line* policy. This analysis departs from and orthodox Western interpretation of inter-Korean relations, providing a holistic analysis of inter-Korean affairs and North Korean domestic politics.

Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, Singapore Summit, Panmunjom Declaration, détente, *Byungjin Line*, Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in, inter-Korean

Introduction

Where North Korea's interactions with the international community has been continuously viewed with skepticism and derision by the West, Pyongyang's evolving diplomatic détente over the course of 2018 demonstrates a bona-fide departure from its identity as an international pariah, and represents the most significant opportunity for enduring peace and security in East Asia.

The starting point of this phenomenon can be traced to Kim Jong-un's 2018 New Year's Address,¹ which while praising national defense and North Korea's progress in nuclear weaponry, sought to include the increased need for self-reliance through collective innovations within

“science and technology” to modernize the national economy. Further, Kim Jong-un desired an improvement within inter-Korean relations through the context of *Minjok*; outlining improved diplomatic relations as a pressing matter of concern to all Korean people, and accepting South Korea’s invitation to participate in the 2018 Winter Olympics.² Where the speech presented Kim as a strong and self-confident leader, this declaration of victory served as a precursor for his policy shift in focus to the peaceful aspect of the *Byungjin* Line.³

North Korea’s subsequent change in attitude evidences a genuine shift in its foreign policy, one distinguished from previous cycles of extortion-and-reward—vis-à-vis the international community—in motive and substance, and which elicits the possibility for a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, the exponential pace of diplomatic engagement should not be ignored, with the hosting of several inter-Korean summits within the space of a year symbolizing a significant expansion of social and political ties, signaling an enduring détente, and representing the most coherent prospect for peace and reunification since 1953.

Table 1: List of Inter-Korean Summits

Summit	Dates	Days since last summit
2000 Inter-Korean Summit	June 13-15, 2000	NA
2007 Inter-Korean Summit	October 2-4, 2007	2665
April 2018 Inter-Korean Summit	April 27, 2018	3858
May 2018 Inter-Korean Summit	May 26, 2018	29
September 2018 Inter-Korean Summit	Sept 18-20, 2018	115

Source: English Yonhap News⁴

In advancing the contention that ongoing developments represent the most opportune circumstances for peace on the Korean Peninsula, the degree of change represented within North Korea’s 2018 rapprochement must be contextualized through the April Inter-Korean and Singapore summits as foundational frameworks for the ongoing détente. The contrasting interests of both North Korea and South Korea for political reconciliation will then be outlined, followed by several points of analysis which distinguish the current peace overtures from North Korea’s orthodox pattern of threats and engagement used to extract concessions.

Context

The foundational framework and anchor of North Korea's détente is discernible through the outcomes of the April 2018 Inter-Korean summit and the Singapore Summit. Where the April Summit is determined as a mending of inter-Korean relations with the new South Korean administration under President Moon Jae-in, this acted as a gateway towards North Korea's re-emergence on the international stage during the Singapore Summit.

These two events facilitated a comprehensive reset within North Korea's diplomatic relations, and authored a fundamental change within its foreign policy, with Kim Jong-un's diplomatic achievements providing him with the domestic political capital necessary to fully commit to the implementation of the economic aspects of his *Byungjin Line* policy, including the modernization of the economy and departure from the *Songun* policy.

It is anticipated that this pursuit of modernization will mandate further engagement with the international community, fueling a cycle of mutual trust conducive to the opening of North Korea and a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. To comprehend the multitude of changes incited by North Korea's détente thus requires a brief examination of the aforementioned Summits.

April Inter-Korean Summit

On April 27, 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un commenced peace dialogue at the Panmunjom Truce Village, marking the first instance of a North Korean leader crossing into the South since the Korean War armistice was signed in 1953. The casual crossing of the DMZ by both leaders elicited a renewed hope for peace and reconciliation, following years of strained relations under the Park Geun-hye administration.

The outcome of the summit was encompassed within the Panmunjom Declaration,⁵ a document which acts as a broad overview for subsequent Summit agreements in its commitment to humanitarian exchanges, nonaggression, and assorted peacebuilding activities between both nations.⁶ First, Article 1 sought to reference prior inter-Korean Summit agreements as a foundation for legitimacy, while calling for the creation of a joint liaison office, the resumption of family reunion programs, and establishment of infrastructure connections. Second, Article 2 specified the cessation of all hostile acts against each other, the formation of a

maritime peace zone in the West Sea, and bilateral military-level engagements. Finally, Article 3 reaffirmed the non-aggression pact agreed upon in 1992, advocates for complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and appeals for the signing of a formal treaty ending the Korean War.

Accordingly, subsequent references to the Panmunjom Declaration within both the Singapore Summit Joint Statement and Pyongyang Declaration⁷ provides that the U.S. and international community must temper their diplomatic expectations through the scope of bilateral agreements between North Korea and South Korea, stresses the importance of inter-Korean transparency and confidence building measures, and upholds the Panmunjom Declaration as the definitive to-do list for achieving a permanent piece regime.

The Singapore Summit

On June 12, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump convened with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un in Singapore for bilateral discussions regarding denuclearization and the establishment of formal diplomatic relations.⁸ The meeting marked a watershed moment for North Korea's political reconciliation with the West and the wider international community, being the first meeting between a sitting U.S. and North Korean leader since the conclusion of the 1953 Korean War, with its significance evoking parallel images of Nixon's 1972 visit to China and meeting with Mao Zedong.⁹

In its aftermath, skepticism abound of whether North Korea had genuinely departed from its pattern of belligerence in good faith. It was refuted that North Korea's commitment lacked substance and mirrored past diplomatic declarations, expressing its willingness to denuclearize absent of any concrete steps or timeline.¹⁰ Concerns were raised that the unconditional nature of the summit, and the absence of the North's commitment to Complete Irreversible and Verifiable Denuclearization (CVID) within the Joint Statement, provided the regime with international legitimacy and verified nuclear diplomacy as a viable means of achieving concessions.¹¹ The Israeli Foreign Ministry advanced that the U.S. and its treaty allies in East Asia stood doubtful over North Korea's sincerity, and that the road to real and substantive change will be "long and slow."¹² Indeed, North Korea's history of brazenly disregarding international agreements is extensive, having signed four international agreements

against the construction of nuclear weapons, followed by four agreements to relinquish such illegally acquired weaponry.¹³

However, the results of the summit and joint statement has elicited hope and optimism. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad urged the international community to “take advantage” of the new attitude shown by North Korea and not be cynical.¹⁴ In South Korea, President Moon hailed the summit as a historic moment for peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula, one which reduces the likelihood of armed conflict and which “will write a new chapter of peace and cooperation.”¹⁵

From this, the signing of the Singapore Summit Joint Statement¹⁶ signified both North Korea’s re-engagement with the international community, and a definitive reset of its diplomatic relations with the U.S.. This was evident from the joint commitment to forging a permanent peace regime on the Korea Peninsula, a written affirmation of North Korea’s commitment to denuclearization, and the return of POW/MIA remains from the Korean War. Accordingly, the statement acknowledging the need for trust and confidence building measures by addressing the legacies of the War, and the continued importance of South Korea to future negotiations through its direct reference to the Panmunjom Declaration.

South Korean Interests

The South Korean administration under President Moon Jae-in seeks to place his government in the “driver’s seat of the Korean Peninsula” as an indispensable mediator between the U.S. and North Korea,¹⁷ as the North’s intermediary with the international community, and as the key instigator for peace and prosperity across Northeast Asia.

The election of Moon Jae-in as President in 2017 marked a turning point in inter-Korean relations, which had been coloured by the more conservative and reciprocity-based approach enacted under presidents Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. Moon’s administration has been characterized by his pro-democratic policies and reconciliatory engagement with North Korea, one which seeks the continuation of the early-2000s Sunshine policy and serves as pivotal foundation for South Korea’s economic cooperation with neighboring East Asian countries under the “New Northern Policy.”¹⁸ Under this policy, regional peace and security will be achieved through globalization and interconnectivity, as represented through the formation of economic and infrastructure linkages between South Korea and Russia through the North in the form of railway

connections, gas pipelines, labour exchange and regional electricity grid integration.¹⁹

Despite the trepidation and doubts exhibited over the summit's supposed cancellation, following Trump's withdrawal letter of 24 May 2018,²⁰ President Moon and his administration expressed high hopes that the summit would proceed, with Moon's security chief Chung Eui-yong expressed the view to reporters that the U.S.-North Korea summit had a "99.99 percent chance" of occurring. Where Trump's unilateral decision left the two Korean's anxious for a means to resume inter-Korean dialogue with the political gains garnered from the Panmunjom summit seemingly in jeopardy,²¹ Kim Jong-un's decision to reach out to Moon and initiate a second secretive inter-Korean summit at Panmunjom²² illustrated the centrality of South Korea as the designated liaison between Washington and Pyongyang, demonstrated North Korea's desire for meaningful diplomatic engagement, and revealed that the path to peace will ultimately be determined by the two Koreas.

However, Moon's peaceful overtures to the North faces significant domestic hurdles. Civic groups in South Korea continue to deploy balloon campaigns near the DMZ, containing anti-Pyongyang leaflets and USB sticks containing foreign media, which float across the border. This act has long been interpreted by North Korea as "an act of war" and threatens to jeopardize the developing rapprochement with Pyongyang.²³ However, the South Korea authorities have been constrained in their attempts to restrict such activities, which are protected as freedom of speech and expression under the Korean constitution.²⁴

Furthermore, much of the South Korean government and the military establishment remains sufficiently cautious of North Korea. This is evidenced by the continued presence of THAAD on South Korean territory since 2017 in response to the North's ballistic missile tests,²⁵ effectively placing the country under the U.S. nuclear umbrella and inflaming tensions with China over the threat post to China's nuclear deterrence capabilities.²⁶

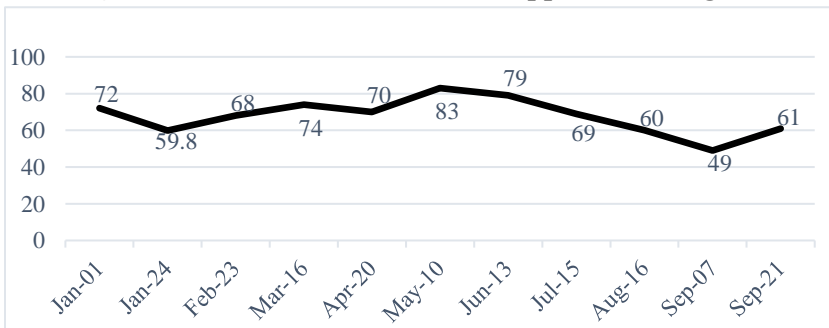
Trump's decision to indefinitely suspend several U.S.-South Korean military exchange program training exercises following the Singapore Summit,²⁷ and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's stated goal to achieve North Korean denuclearization by 2020,²⁸ has elicited concerns over the possibility of the complete and impending withdrawal of U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK). However, President Moon and his administration have stressed that the signing of a peace treaty would be

considered as a mutually exclusive issue. Washington has consistently maintained 28,500 troops in South Korea since April 2008, in line with then-President Lee Myung-bak and George Bush’s agreement. ²⁹ Moon’s administration has expressed that the USFK would remain central in the region as a mediator in “the military configuration of regional powers including China and Japan.”³⁰

Acknowledging developments in the aftermath of the April 2018 inter-Korean summit, the prospect of a North Korea détente and permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula represents an opportune moment for Moon to reinforce his domestic leadership over the next several years, thus ensuring the implementation of the New Northern Policy under his guidance and cementing his political legacy as one of South Korea’s great leaders.³¹

This assertion is supported by observing the variations within Moon’s Gallup Korea approval ratings throughout 2018. Notable peaks within his popularity are evident surrounding the various inter-Korean summits held in April, May and September. This has been exploited as a means of political gain within domestic politics, where local elections in South Korea held on June 13, following the Singapore summit, saw Moon’s ruling progressives dominate local elections; consolidating his political position with an approval rating sits at 79 percent. ³² This figure has been predicted to exceed 90 percent should relations with the North continue upon their current course.³³ This was also illustrated by the record low approval rating of 49 percent on September 7, preceding the rise to 61 percent approval immediately following the Pyongyang Summit on September 21.³⁴

Figure 1: President Moon Jae-in’s Approval Rating, 2018



Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.³⁵

Moon's push for closer relations with Pyongyang should be interpreted as a means of redirecting public's attention from burgeoning domestic issues; including a shrinking labor market, growing unemployment rate, and looming demographic crisis.³⁶ With the motivation for closer socio-political ties with the North established for President Moon and the Democratic Party of Korea, the longevity and support for North Korea's détente can be assured through to 2022.

North Korea's Interests

As a communist dictatorship it is established that North Korea's interests are inherently tied with those of Chairman Kim Jong-un; and revolve around the attainment of international legitimacy, the removal of economic sanctions, and the maintenance of domestic security.³⁷ However, where Kim Jong-un's primary interest encompasses regime survival, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons should not be construed as a core interest but as a convenient means of achieving regime survival, one which the regime may part with willingly should sufficient guarantees be provided.

The prevailing assumption by the U.S. that economic pressure brought Kim to the negotiating table is fanciful. Indeed, Pyongyang had signaled its willingness for a diplomatic solution through informal channels three years prior, long before intensified sanctions took effect under the "Maximum Pressure" policy.³⁸ At the time, U.S. insistence that Pyongyang unconditionally suspend nuclear and missile tests as a precondition to talks only delayed the diplomatic process for five years.³⁹ This enabled North Korea to refine its nuclear capacity and boost its bargaining leverage. Where Trump removed such preconditions, North Korea immediately indicated its willingness to engage in diplomatic dialogue.⁴⁰ The Singapore Summit demonstrated Kim's openness to dialogue and cooperation where North Korea's political system, and longevity of his regime, can be guaranteed.

Regardless, the simultaneous existence of a myriad of distinguishing factors concerning the 2018 North Korean rapprochement, compared to previous instances of North Korea's "bait-and-switch" cycle, must be acknowledged. Why North Korea presently seeks intensified engagement with the U.S. and the international community can be interpreted through two distinct avenues.

Firstly, a realist interpretation argues that the detrimental effects of international sanctions upon the North Korean economy,⁴¹ the growing

unsustainability of the long-held military-first policy of *Songun*,⁴² and the emergence of unprecedented domestic discontent⁴³ has forced Kim Jong-un to seek engagement with the international community to appease domestic criticism and safeguard the future of his regime. Research and reports from political analysts corroborate this contention, indicating that the average North Korean citizen is becoming increasingly conscious of the outside world and more difficult to control, and are thus less likely to tolerate the continued economic malaise. Where Kim Jong-un fails to anticipate this issue and fix the North Korean economy, the survival of his regime remains in doubt.⁴⁴

However, this contention is dubious as China remains a consistent economic supporter of North Korea; with both nations maintaining strong economic ties and engaging in routine trade activities across their common border,⁴⁵ despite North Korea being subject to the “heaviest sanctions on earth”.⁴⁶ Indeed, China will continue to support the North Korean regime to maintain its “buffer zone” against U.S. treaty ally South Korea, to avoid the possibility of North Korea becoming a failed state, and to safeguard against the possibility of a regime collapse and intensified instability on the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁷ This was demonstrated by Kim Jong-un’s recent visits to China, both before⁴⁸ and after⁴⁹ the Singapore Summit on June 12, to meet personally with President Xi Jinping to discuss denuclearization and sanctions. Consequently, North Korea’s threats to forgo the historic meeting between Kim and Trump in the follow-up to the Singapore summit⁵⁰ demonstrated an attempt to maximize its negotiating position by reminding South Korea that the North still ultimately holds leverage in inter-Korea relations,⁵¹ and exhibited confidence borne out of certainty within its domestic economy and assurance of Chinese support.

Secondly, a structural interpretation may interpret this abrupt change in behavior by Kim Jong-un and the North Korean government in 2018 as an allusion to the developmental path undertaken by various Asian states. The notion “authoritarian developmentalism” describes a regime which explains the capacity of the East Asian Tiger economies and China to break out of a vicious cycle of poverty and instability, and to realize rapid socioeconomic development and prosperity. This applies to countries which possess authoritarian governments with a powerful and economically literate leader, which place development as a supreme national goal, which possess an elite technocrat group to support the leader and policy implementation, and which derived political legitimacy from successful development.⁵² These circumstances are conducive to

economic take-off from a low base, as only a state with such undemocratic characteristics can institute the massive and speedy resource mobilization required to initiate and sustain growth.

Kim Jong-un's intensifying diplomatic engagement with the international community may indicate North Korea's nascent desire for economic and political transformation, and a noted transition towards authoritarian developmentalism as Kim aspires to become a "normal" leader.⁵³ Since assuming office on December 17, 2011, Kim Jong-un's has initiated a series of purges which have resulted in the execution of in-excess of 340 people.⁵⁴ Immediately preceding the Singapore Summit, Kim Jong-un replaced three of North Korea's top military leaders with younger deputies, to sideline influential figures from Kim Jong-il's generation and consolidate power.⁵⁵ These actions may represent an attempt by Kim Jong-un to replace the aging leadership with younger technocrats willing to support his vision for the country.

Consequently, during his visit to Singapore leading up to the June 12 summit, Kim Jong-un took the opportunity to tour the cityscape and explore its various landmarks. This event drew a distinct relation to the previous visit of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping to Singapore in 1978, wherein Deng gleaned much from the developmental model of success achieved in the country. Deng's subsequent adoption of Singapore as a role model for China's reform and opening-up provided would prove instrumental in expediting its socioeconomic development within the following decades and ultimately contribute to China's reemergence as a great power.⁵⁶ Similarly, North Korea seeks to emulate the Singapore model, as Kim expressed his profound admiration of Singapore as a "clean and beautiful" city, while alluding to his desire for economic reforms and prosperity in North Korea, with state media stating Kim's hope of learning much from the "good knowledge and experience" of the modern city state.⁵⁷

A genuine rapprochement?

When considering the common interests of both Korea's - as outlined within the 2018 Panmunjom declaration - in pursuing a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula and acknowledging the profound watershed moment represented by the Singapore summit, the following points of information stand as indication of the differentiated character of North Korea's 2018 rapprochement; points which evidence an unmistakable and bona fide shift in Pyongyang's foreign policy.

Flow of Information

The normally isolated citizens North Korean are becoming increasingly interconnected with the outside world. For decades the regime has maintained stability through absolute control over the flow of information flowing in and out of the country. However, the advent of digital communications threatens this control, as the fluidity of ongoing trade with China in consumer goods provides the opportunity for North Korean's to observe and communicate with the outside world through international SIM cards and pop culture media.⁵⁸ Most surprising however has been recent changes in the flow of information which manifestly influences the lives of ordinary people, initiated by the decisions and initiatives of the North Korean government and state media, and manifesting upon the livelihood, culture and practices of its citizens.

Within newspaper print, the North Korean state media has continuously published unedited images and content contrasting with its routine propaganda and rhetoric when discussing international events. This was demonstrated in newspapers covering the April 2018 inter-Korean summit, which contained pictures of Moon Jae-in shaking and holding hands with Kim Jong-un, and enjoying "candid and open-hearted exchange of views" on issues incidental to "ensuring peace on the Korean Peninsula and the denuclearization of the peninsula."⁵⁹ Additionally, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's meeting with the North Korean leader was also covered in a more impartial manner,⁶⁰ while Kim's visit to Singapore saw the front pages of the *Rodong Sinmun*'s official newspaper feature photographs illustrating the modern Singapore skyline, Kim's meeting with Singaporean leaders, his evening tour of the city state,⁶¹ and his handshake with President Trump.⁶²

On television, the North Korean state media issued domestic reports for the April inter-Korean Summit and the Singapore Summit with an unprecedented degree of speed, level of detail and openness previously unseen.⁶³ While the inter-Korean summit was not covered live in North Korea, the KNCA and Korean Central Television conveyed the expression of "complete denuclearization" without delay,⁶⁴ while the airing of special reports and documentaries after the summit underlined its importance to the government upon the domestic audience.⁶⁵ This aligned with North Korean orthodox coverage of state events, wherein citizens are normally only informed around 24 hours following the event. Similarly, the Singapore Summit saw citizens notified only the following morning,⁶⁶ with reports referring to Kim and Trump as "the two top leaders" while

praising the talks as “epoch-making.”⁶⁷ Incidentally, citizens residing near the border with China may have received instantaneous notice of the Trump-Kim meeting through Chinese television and radio signals or sources.⁶⁸

However, it must be cautioned that the North Korean state media coverage of recent developments had been carefully altered and edited to suit the leaderships approval for mass consumption. The result has been the packaging of both the inter-Korean and Singapore summits as direct successes brought about by Chairman Kim Jong-un, a half-truth which aims to bolster Kim’s leadership image, and one which most North Koreans will willingly accept after years of continuous exposure to government propaganda.⁶⁹

Beyond state media, the North Korean government has implemented sufficient and notable changes which impact upon the everyday lives of citizens, in a manner which indicates a marked shift in the foreign policy and attitude of the government, and which has increasingly tied the country to external developments.

Firstly, the government has acted to remove anti-American propaganda and souvenirs from major tourist destination shops throughout the country, which have instead been replaced on more positive themes centered around reunification. Anti-American propaganda had also been removed from noted locations of significance, including along Kim Il-sung square.⁷⁰ This move indicates an increasingly reconciliatory and optimistic character of the North Korean leadership following the June 12 Singapore Summit, one which the government wishes to imbue upon its citizens in contrast to its anti-U.S. propaganda and fearmongering.

Second, following the Singapore Summit, North Korea moved to indefinitely suspend their annual anti-U.S. rally marking the start of the Korean War on June 25. This routine event involves the mass gathering and rally of around 100,000 Pyongyang residents, serving as the start to a month of events premised upon anti-U.S. and Korean War-focused events designed to strengthen nationalism and unity, which concluded on July 27, when North Korea celebrates the national holiday “Victory in the Fatherland Liberation War.”⁷¹ Accordingly, the North’s decision to forgo the events this year reflects upon the government’s changing sentiment towards the U.S., Korean reunification, and the formation of a permanent peace regime. Ordinary citizens involved within this event would logically attribute its cancellation as an indication of North Korea’s improving relations with the international community.

Third, following the success of the April 2018 Inter-Korean summit, North Korea decided to shift its time zone back in alignment with South Korea's. The origins of this difference in time zones can be traced back to the North Korean's government transition from its set time zone of GMT +9 to its own specific time zone set 30 minutes back on August 15, 2015, which was done to mark its liberation from Japan at the end of the Second World War.⁷² However, on May 4, 2018, North Korea aligned its time zone with South Korea in a display of unity, and as "the first practical step" towards Korean reunification.⁷³ Changes within a country's time zone and time keeping systems invariably carries long-reaching logistical, financial and commercial consequences which disrupt the productivity of its citizens, generate confusion, interfere with transportation infrastructure, and impede the flow of goods and services.⁷⁴ The decision of Pyongyang to align its time should thus be interpreted as a significant good faith gesture, one which has implications for every person living in North Korea, and which demonstrates to all its citizens the government's bona fide desire for reunification and diplomacy.

Fourth, the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly promulgated a decree of July 12, implementing a general amnesty from August 1 onward, in the lead-up to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK. The context of such an amnesty was described as protecting "the independent and creative life of the popular masses" and sought to target those who had "been convicted of the crimes against the country and people."⁷⁵ While such amnesties are interpreted as routine, with one conducted in 2015 to mark the 70th anniversary of Korean liberation from Japan, and the 2018 text being identical to that of the 2015 amnesty, the significance of such must be derived through its connection to the theme of the 70th anniversary of the DPRK. As such, the 2018 amnesty was aimed at consolidating social unity and boosting grassroots loyalty for Kim Jong-un amid a changing geopolitical environment.⁷⁶

The Father Son Antithesis

Following upon the notion that Kim Jong-un's first several years of authoritarian rule has been a transitory stage within an inevitable progression towards economic development, Kim Jong-un's upbringing and personality has contributed to his unique style of leadership and diplomatic rapport from that of his father and grandfather.

Between 1993 to 2000 Kim Jong-un attended studies in Switzerland, receiving a distinctly western education, having learned English and

German, while indulging in western pop culture and consumer goods through his love of basketball, action movies, and Nike fashion.⁷⁷ His experiences abroad no doubt contributed to his approachable and communicative demeanor displayed throughout his meetings with Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump, where Kim partook in personal conversations, with both leaders while speaking in a straightforward and concise manner.⁷⁸

Kim Jong-un's number of trips abroad by air have notably increased exponentially following his first ever trip as a foreign dignitary and head of state since 2011 to China in March of 2018.⁷⁹ Since then Kim has visited China twice more, and South Korea and Singapore once. Kim's decision to visit China in March marked the first instance of a North Korean leader publicly going abroad by air since his grandfather Kim Il Sung visited the Soviet Union in 1986. Additionally, the frequency of Kim Jong-un's trips contrasts greatly with his father Kim Jong-il, whom never flew abroad again after 1965.⁸⁰ This pattern demonstrates a growing confidence by Kim Jong-un within his leadership and control over the government, a distinctly global and modern outlook on diplomacy for North Korean leaders, and a bona fide desire to redeem his reputation as a normal leader who meets international standards.⁸¹

Ideologically, Kim Jong-un has further distinguished himself from previous North Korean leaders. Both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il were defined by their support for the military first Song-gun policy, and the "self-reliance" *Juche* ideology. Kim Il Sung's conception of Song-gun arose out of the Korean independence movement against Japan in the 20th century, one wherein giving priority to arms and the military was deemed fundamental on the road towards national liberation through revolutionary action.⁸² Accordingly, Kim Jong-il continued this line in fully realizing Song-gun during the first session of the 10th Supreme People's Assembly in September 1998, when he established the National Defence Commission as the highest governing institution of the country. Both leaders interpreted a strong military as central in deterring U.S.-South Korean aggression, as conscription being required to socialize its citizens to safeguard the Kim dynasty, and for the Pyongyang to use threats to limit U.S.-South Korean options.⁸³

Further, both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong-il advanced independence in politics (through the achievement of self-determination for the Korean people), self-sufficiency in the economy, and self-reliance in national defence within the form of the *Juche* ideology.⁸⁴ The ideology was

conceived by Kim Il Sung a Korean Workers Party (KWP) congress in 1955, seeking to ensure party unity and preserve the one-man rule system through a “Monolithic System of Thought”. Kim Jong-il would continue to reinforce *Juche* as the state ideology and develop subordinate concepts and policies which would trace their roots to the one-man rule basis of *Juche*.⁸⁵

Conversely, Kim Jong-un’s ideological outlook has been defined by the *Byungjin* (“parallel progress”) Line, in seeking to the parallel development of both economic and military progress together. This policy was announced at the KWP Central Committee Plenum on March 31, 2013, directly aimed at ending the Song-gun era and eroding the *Juche* principles of self-reliance.⁸⁶ The policy comprises three major components including cautious market-oriented economic reforms, the development of a full-scale nuclear strike force, and the maintenance of strict domestic surveillance and control systems.⁸⁷ Where comparisons have been drawn to Kim Il Sung’s iteration of the “*Byungjin Line*” in 1962, it has become increasingly evident that Kim Jong-un’s conception leans towards developing the economy instead of prioritizing resources toward the defense sector.⁸⁸

Consolidation of Political Authority

Where Kim Jong-un seeks the implementation of authoritarian developmentalism, as part of an incremental process towards economic prosperity and social stability, the 2018 rapprochement marks the cumulation of Kim’s power consolidation efforts since 2011.

During his early years Kim Jong-un has been the target of several attempts to replace him by a North Korean military establishment seeking to maintain the Song-gun policy, advocating a military-first approach with emergency control, and the reduced role of the cabinet in state governance.⁸⁹ This prompted the execution of in-excess of 340 people between 2011 to 2016, and the replacement of senior officers as a means of maintaining discipline and ensuring the supremacy of the KWP as the central governing body.⁹⁰

The fragility of the North Korean state apparatus up to 2017 was supported by Western allusions to the possibility of dismantling the regime by offering both Kim Jong-un the promise of immunity from international criminal prosecution, and financial incentives for the ruling elite, to preclude the looming social chaos and general insurrection.⁹¹

However, since assuming power, Kim has sought to gradually extend a policy of party centered rule, encompassing a balanced role between the party, cabinet and military.⁹² This was illustrated within the reorganization of the Central Military Commission, a KWP organ coordinating party organizations in the KPA,⁹³ during the 5th Session of the 13th Supreme People’s Assembly to where only 5 of its 13 members possessed a military background.⁹⁴

Further, the North Korean General Political Bureau was audited following the determination of an “impure attitude” by the KWP leadership in 2017 for the first time in 20 years, with the military organization’s director—Vice Marshal Hwang Pyong-so—and his deputies “punished.” The Bureau oversees the political life of the Korean People’s Army (KPA), monitoring the loyalty of its officers.⁹⁵

While concerns persist that Kim’s détente may have isolated and antagonized the military, the opposite appears to be the case throughout 2018. Where the April inter-Korean Summit exhibited the absence of economic experts within the North Korean delegation, the inclusion of 3 top leaders of the KPA evidenced visual evidence of support from the highest echelons of the KPA for Kim’s diplomatic overtures.⁹⁶ This continued support of the KPA was also evident during the June 12 Singapore Summit, with the Minister of the People’s Armed Forces General No Kwang-chol present on the North Korean delegation and observed saluting President Trump.⁹⁷

Table 2: High-Ranking Party and Military Officials Executed under Kim Jong-un

Year	Number Executed	Notes
2012	3	
2013	30	
2014	40	
2015	60	
2016	7	
2017	7	Hiatus from mid-January to November 2
2018	4	

Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources -Appendix B

Records indicate an exponential increase in the annual number of executions of high-ranking KWP and KPA officials during the first 5-

years of Kim Jong-un's rule, with the number peaking at 60 in 2015 before a significant lull since 2016.⁹⁸ These figures however contrast directly with those of Kim Jong-Il, whom during his first 3 years between 1997 and 2000 purged up to 2,000 officials.⁹⁹ Firstly, the contrasting volume of executions and purges conducted by Kim Jong-un versus his father demonstrates a more practical approach to governance, restrained use of political coercion, and a reduced degree of institutional dissent. Secondly, the peak and decline in the number of annual purges by Kim Jong-un should be interpreted as an indication of growing-pains, and the gradual acceptance of Kim's leadership along with increased sociopolitical stability.

Accordingly, Kim Jong-un has systematically strengthened his grip upon domestic affairs through the implementation of an effective security reporting system which has sown fear, uncertainty and doubt amongst any potential conspirators or agitators.¹⁰⁰ Kim's motive behind his constant change in leadership positions is twofold. Firstly, Kim seeks to sideline influential figures from his father's era, in a bid to strengthen his control over the regime, introduce young-blood, and deter any possible traitors. Secondly, by constantly purging and shuffling military leaders, Kim is attempting to impart a sense of anxiety, through which he will induce loyalty.¹⁰¹

On the grassroots level, Kim Jong-un's diplomatic success has left many North Korean citizens in awe and optimism regarding their country's future. North Koreans questioned by the international press expressed the sentiment that "radical change" was underway within North Korea, and that Kim Jong-un's achievements evidenced that he possessed "brilliant wisdom" and "outstanding political ability."¹⁰² Indeed, with Kim having the Singapore Summit and sitting down as an equal with the U.S. President, he managed to achieve a major propaganda victory which both his father and grandfather sought for but never realized.¹⁰³ The general acclaim lauded upon by his citizens has thus provided Kim Jong-un with the political capital necessary to proceed with further economic reforms in the form of the "New Strategic Line."

Nuclear testing has reached the end of its utility

Kim Jong-un's declaration of April 21, 2018, that North Korea "no longer needs" to continue with its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons testing, that it was "not necessary" for the government to conduct any additional testing, and that the country "will join international efforts

to halt nuclear tests altogether,” evidences Kim’s confidence in his nuclear arsenal, and desire to move beyond “nuclear blackmail” as a sustainable foreign policy strategy in pursuing economic development.¹⁰⁴

Pyongyang may be deemed to have sufficiently fulfilled all several branches of the nuclear triad; given its ICBM capabilities,¹⁰⁵ possession of strategic nuclear-capable strategic bombers,¹⁰⁶ and development of submarine-launched ballistic missiles.¹⁰⁷ Achievement of this milestone marks a new phase in interactions with the North within two meanings.

Firstly, Pyongyang has repeatedly clarified that North Korea would remain disinterested in engaging in diplomacy with the U.S. until it had developed ICMB technology capable of reaching the U.S. and demonstrating that “the DPRK has a reliable defensive and offensive capability to counter any aggression.”¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, the North Korea’s 2018 rapprochement indicates to the international community that the country possess a nuclear force, which has sufficiently convinced its military and political leadership, which is capable of deterring any U.S. or South Korean acts of aggression.

Secondly, where Kim Jong-un’s *Byungjin Line* policy of 2013 called for the development of a full-scale nuclear strike force, North Korea’s achievement of this objective as of 2018 marks a watershed moment within the country’s shift toward a more economically focused policy. Consequently, at a plenary meeting of top officials in the KWP on April 20, 2018, Kim officially ended the *Byungjin Line* policy, which had that had prioritised military and nuclear development as a platform for economic development. In its place, Kim emphasized his passion for economic and scientific development under the “New Strategic Line”, which sought to achieve self-reliance in line with the Juche ideology by “building a self-supporting economic power.”¹⁰⁹

This was illustrated during Kim’s visit to Singapore wherein he expressed his appreciation for the “clean and beautiful” modern city state, and sought to learn from the lessons which precipitated Singapore’s rapid development as one of the Four Asian Tiger economies.¹¹⁰ In the aftermath of the Singapore Summit, Kim’s July 2018 visit to textile and chemical fiber factories in Sinuiju, and comments stressing the need for achieving a high-level of “modernization,” indicates an ardent commitment to achieving the tenets of the New Strategic Line.¹¹¹

Additionally, Kim Jong-un’s commitment to denuclearization was exhibited within his fulfillment of his April 29, 2018 promise to dismantle a “northern” nuclear test site in full view of international experts and

journalists.¹¹² On May 25, 2018, the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site was seemingly permanently dismantled, as the last of its 3 remaining tunnels were closed off by North Korea.¹¹³ This was followed by reports of North Korea razing one of its missile test stands at the Iha-ri Driver Training and Test Facility, involved in the production of the Pukguksong-2 (KN-15) medium-range ballistic missile, on June 6, 2018 ahead of the Singapore Summit, and in line with Article 4 of the Panmunjom Declaration.¹¹⁴

This methodical dismantling of the North's nuclear industrial complex was translated into practical military terms, with the increasingly muted display of its nuclear arsenal in deference to its conventional military forces.¹¹⁵ Where the February 8th parade marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the KPA centered around the display of its Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 ICBMs,¹¹⁶ the September 9th parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK did not involve any ICMBs on display - instead devoting half of the event to civilian efforts within the economy showcasing nurses, student, and construction workers.¹¹⁷

Exercise Caution

However, it must be acknowledged that Pyongyang's decision to dismantle the Punggye-ri test site may not indicate its bona-fide intent to denuclearize, as reports by Chinese scientists revealed that the underground nuclear test facility was rendered largely unusable by Pyongyang's last recorded nuclear test – being North Korea's first test of a thermonuclear device - on September 2017. Consensus has emerged that any subsequent nuclear test at the site would result in an environmental catastrophe, with the anticipated collapse the mountain projecting irradiated dust and nuclear fallout into the atmosphere and across Northeast Asia.¹¹⁸

Further, Kim Jong-un's announcement of the "New Strategic Line" at the KWP Plenum in April 2018, and commitment to suspend nuclear and ICMB tests, did not reference prohibitions on anti-ship ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles or short-range ballistic missiles. In an apparent attempt to placate the military establishment in his pursuit of economic reforms under the New Strategic Line, the moratorium allows North Korea to distract the international community while focusing upon the development of conventional weaponry, anti-access/area-denial capabilities, and operational readiness.¹¹⁹

Reports have emerged of infrastructure improvements at prominent North Korean nuclear and missile production facilities, which draw into question the certainty North Korea's commitment to dismantling its nuclear arsenal. Satellite imagery on June 21, 2018 indicated that infrastructure improvements had been made to the plutonium production and experimental light water reactors at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Centre.¹²⁰ Expansions and infrastructure improvements were also reported as occurring between April to June 2018 at a missile production facility in the city of Hamhung, which manufactures engines, airframes and nozzles for the Pukguksong series of solid-fuel ballistic missiles.¹²¹

Summary

Where evidence indicates that Pyongyang has adopted a renewed and genuine commitment towards denuclearization and economic prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, the increased flow of information to North Korean citizens, disposition of Kim Jong-un, his domestic policies and consolidation of control over the state apparatus, and declared suspension of nuclear weapons testing, represents the most opportune circumstance for regional peace to date.

One scenario which may eventuate from North Korea's 2018 rapprochement is the formation of a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. This would take the form of a peace treaty formalized by the United Nations, and ratified by North Korea, China, the United States, and South Korea.¹²² The effect of which would end the state of war between the parties and create a state of peace which would raise the legal bar for the use of force.¹²³ Additionally, the maximum pressure policy institute by the U.S. may renege upon its maximum pressure policy,¹²⁴ removing severe international sanctions presently in place on North Korea.¹²⁵ This in turn provides the country the required resources and capital required to pursue the authoritarian developmentalism through Kim Jong-un's New Strategic Line, and ultimately achieve peace and prosperity across Northeast Asia.

Conversely, the possibility exists that this political maneuver does not necessarily indicate abandonment of the Song-gun policy. North Korea has repeatedly made promises to denuclearize over the past 30 years with various U.S. administrations, only to use denuclearization as a bargaining chip in times of domestic crisis as a means of exacting concessions from the international community.¹²⁶ The current rapprochement may also be

complicated by the disjointed nature of communication between North Korea, the U.S. and South Korea; with Trump's decision to unilaterally cancel the planned U.S.-North Korea Summit on May 25, 2018¹²⁷ causing Moon Jae-in much distress,¹²⁸ and leading Kim to request a direct and urgent meeting with Moon Jae-in.¹²⁹ Indeed, the miscommunication between Kim and Trump as to North Korea's commitment to complete denuclearization, as opposed to CVID, is expected to cause further issues in future negotiations.

Within reason, it appears that North Korea will continue upon its commitment to economic development under the New Strategic Line, with Kim Jong-un cycling ministers through leaders within the KPA high command and seeking close economic links with South Korea.¹³⁰ China is also expected to involve itself within the context of any future negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea, seeking to persuade the U.S. to adopt a systematic carrot and stick approach which rewards North Korea for every step it takes towards CVID.¹³¹ Likewise, South Korea will continue to play a significant role in negotiations between the parties, as outlined within Article 3 of the Singapore Summit Joint Statement which referenced the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration.¹³²

Finally, the development of stable relations through the ongoing détente presents significant opportunities for economic engagement with North Korea. Kim Jong-un may leverage his accrued political capital and control to engage with the international community, allowing him to pursue the next steps within the process of developmental authoritarianism domestically. First, the equal distribution of agricultural land to encourage small-scale intensive farming and boost output. Second, trade protectionism to shield nascent domestic industries from foreign competition, while building up select companies likely to succeed in key export sectors. Third, firm control over the financial system which facilitates the provision of cheap capital by the government on favored manufacturers.¹³³

Already, tourism to North Korea is expected to intensify as Kim Jong-un focuses upon the development of the Wonsan tourism zone,¹³⁴ while negotiations over the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial complex with South Korea is also being considered.¹³⁵ On June 26, 2018, both Korea's conducted negotiations regarding inter-Korean railway lines, and agreed jointly to study measures to improve the North 's outdated rail system for compatibility with the South's,¹³⁶ which is expected to form part of an anticipated USD \$35 billion plan for a high-speed railway line through

North Korea.¹³⁷ The North also possess an abundance of natural resources which may be used to fuel its economic development, with undersea oil and gas deposits in the Yellow Sea,¹³⁸ and an estimated USD \$6 to \$10 trillion of untapped mineral resources throughout North Korea.¹³⁹

The North Korea's rapprochement of 2018 can be portrayed as a unique opportunity for diplomacy, arising through the logical progression of domestic circumstances. The détente should thus be interpreted as the first step in a long and iterative process of trust and confidence building measures, which will contribute to the restoration of a permanent and lasting peace regime within the land of the morning calm, and prove conducive to broader peace and prosperity across East Asia.

Appendix A: President Moon Jae-in Approval Ratings, 2018

Gallup Korea Poll - Moon Jae-in Approval Rating 2018		
Date	Percent Approval	Source
January 1	72%	<i>The Hankyoreh</i> , January 27, 2018. ¹⁴⁰
January 24	59.8%	As above
February 23	68%	Yonhap, February 23, 2018. ¹⁴¹
March 16	74%	Yonhap, March 16, 2018. ¹⁴²
April 20	70%	Jiyeun Lee, Bloomberg, April 23, 2018. ¹⁴³
May 10	83%	Thomas Maresca, <i>USA Today</i> , May 11, 2018. ¹⁴⁴
June 13	79%	KBS, June 15, 2018. ¹⁴⁵
July 15	69%	<i>The Hankyoreh</i> , July 15, 2018. ¹⁴⁶
August 16	60%	Yonhap, August 17, 2018. ¹⁴⁷
September 7	49%	Bloomberg, September 7, 2018. ¹⁴⁸
September 21	61%	AFP, <i>The Straits Times</i> , September 21, 2018. ¹⁴⁹

Appendix B: Party and Military Officials Purged and Executed, 2017 and 2018

Title	Names	Number	Month
Deputy-level ministers under Kim Won-hong	Not Available	5	Jan 2017
Political commissar of an anti-aircraft artillery unit	Not Available	1	Nov 2017
Bureau 131 - Training Unity Guidance Head	Not Available	1	Dec 2017
Korea Kungang Group Executives	Not Available	2	Apr 2018
General Staff Operations Department - Colonel	Not Available	1	May 2018
KPA Services Inspection Division Director - Lieutenant General	Hyon Ju-son	1	Jun 2018

Source: Developed by the author from multiple sources.¹⁵⁰

The definition of “Purge” herein employed includes only those executed, or suspected to have been executed, by the state apparatus. The record considers only “High-ranking” people; limited to politicians, high-ranking military officials, and those whom administer an aspect of North Korea’s military-industrial complex central to national security.

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