

## Arcanum in the news

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### **SINGAPORE WAS JOHN BOLTON'S WORST NIGHTMARE**

If someone had deliberately designed an international event with the sole objective of giving John Bolton, America's hawkish White House national security advisor, maximum heartburn, they couldn't have done much better than the June 12 summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un.

The Singapore summit represented everything that Bolton has spent years railing against when it comes to U.S. policy toward North Korea. In countless articles, speeches, and television appearances, he's expended tens of thousands of words excoriating U.S. policymakers for repeatedly botching the effort to prevent the Kim dynasty from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Last week, in one of those delicious ironies that history occasionally serves up, Bolton himself was made party to precisely the kind of diplomatic spectacle that he'd spent much of his career denouncing. One wonders what was worse for Bolton: being pointedly excluded from Trump's high-profile Oval Office meeting with Kim's right-hand man, Kim Yong Chol, on June 1? Or being included in the Singapore proceedings as a silent bystander while his boss, the leader of the world's greatest liberal democracy, repeatedly heaped patently false, morally repugnant praise on a North Korean tyrant who oversees one of the planet's most extensive system of gulags?

Bolton has long viewed any effort to negotiate an agreement with North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program with profound skepticism. "The harsh reality is that Kim Jung Un and his predecessors were never going to be chit-chatted out of their nuclear-weapons program, which they have always regarded as essential to regime survival," he wrote just a year ago. "Neither persuasion nor coercion, nor any mix of the two, has succeeded before, and we have no reason to believe they will start succeeding now." Two months later, he underscored that, "More talks and sanctions will fail as they have for 25 years."

Bolton believed negotiations had invariably been manipulated by North Korea to serve its interests, not America's — buying time to advance its nuclear program, winning economic concessions, and enhancing its international standing. History had demonstrated, Bolton wrote, that proliferators like the North Koreans "exploit negotiations to gain the most precious asset: time to resolve the complex scientific and technological hurdles to making deliverable nuclear weapons." As for any agreements that might result from such talks, he argued last September that "North Korea has

repeatedly breached commitments to abandon its nuclear-weapons program, often made in return for handsome compensation.” And during the 2016 presidential campaign, Bolton presciently warned that Kim might try to break out of his isolation by offering a summit with the next U.S. president, be it Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, on the calculation that they could be enticed by the false allure of an early foreign-policy accomplishment.

Shortly before joining the Trump administration earlier this year, Bolton dismissed out of hand the diplomatic offensive that Kim launched at the beginning of 2018. He criticized South Korean President Moon Jae-in for playing into Kim’s “propaganda campaign” by “reflexively” accepting his invitation for an inter-Korean summit. Bolton lambasted the U.S. media’s coverage of Kim’s diplomatic outreach for its “near-uniform lack of historical memory” when it came to the North’s past nuclear duplicity and the “breathless excitement of something ‘new’ that might lead to a diplomatic resolution of North Korea’s nuclear threat.” Along similar lines, Bolton had earlier written that, “For those Westerners obsessed with finding conciliatory gestures by nuclear-aspirant authoritarian regimes like Iran and North Korea, the new tone is never hard to find.” In summing up what he saw as the endless gullibility of America’s North Korea policy, Bolton lamented that P.T. Barnum’s alleged phrase that “‘there’s a sucker born every minute’ ... may have been understating the problem.”

It’s hard to see how any administration could have long sustained Bolton’s absolutist opposition to negotiations in the face of a North Korean offer to talk – especially once Kim paused further nuclear and missile tests after having largely achieved his goal of being able to target the U.S. homeland with nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. But much of the rest of Bolton’s hard-nosed approach to diplomacy seemed to suffer no less a rout. Trump, of course, agreed to the summit more or less on the spot – reflexively, you might even say – within minutes of first receiving Kim’s invitation from a South Korean envoy. Just like that, and without demanding anything concrete in return on the core U.S. objective of denuclearization, Kim was granted an audience on equal footing with a U.S. president, something that both his father and grandfather had been denied. The pageantry and bonhomie of the summit itself (those flags!), with Trump combining the roles of master of ceremonies and chief character witness for the North Korean tyrant, only amplified the scope of Kim’s victory, a massive windfall of legitimization and global acceptance for the world’s leading pariah state.

And for what? For a vague statement of a few hundred words that – at least on its face – represented no advancement whatsoever on failed U.S. diplomatic efforts of the past 25 years to denuclearize the North. Indeed, if anything, the Trump-Kim statement was weaker than previous such documents. The September 2005 joint statement from the six-party talks at least included the word “verifiable” and committed North Korea to “abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs” as well as returning to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty and the International Atomic Energy Agency’s safeguards regime for inspections and verification.

So, what exactly was accomplished on the key issue of denuclearization during the several hours of face-to-face meetings that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had with Kim during his two visits to Pyongyang before the summit? Or during the lengthy meeting that he and Trump subsequently had in the Oval Office with Kim’s personal envoy? Or the week of talks that senior U.S. officials had in North Korea in the immediate days leading up to the Singapore meeting? Was it unreasonable to expect that they would be able to leverage Kim’s obvious eagerness for the summit to secure something qualitatively new on denuclearization? Something that clearly signaled that this time

would be different from the failed diplomacy of the past? Something that unambiguously demonstrated that Kim had in fact made the strategic decision to come clean and get rid of all his nuclear weapons and missiles? Apparently so – though, to be fair, both Trump and Pompeo hinted that Kim’s private commitments on denuclearization were more sweeping.

Adding insult to injury was that, after having gotten an empty statement in return for the significant concession of a summit meeting with the president of the United States, Trump decided to grant Kim yet another unconditional giveaway. When Kim raised the North’s longstanding objection to U.S.-South Korean military exercises, Trump agreed immediately to suspend them without so much as a consultation with allies in either South Korea or Japan, much less the U.S. military. Worse yet, in announcing the decision, Trump parroted North Korean talking points, labeling the defensive exercises – long viewed as essential to U.S. deterrence – as “provocative” war games.

And if that weren’t enough, he also resurrected that staple suggestion from his presidential campaign of one day withdrawing all U.S. forces from the region, a development that would upend decades of U.S. strategy in Asia while fulfilling the most fervent geopolitical fantasies of both North Korea and China. While it’s true in theory that the decision on military exercises could be easily reversed should the North (yet again) show itself less than sincere in its denuclearization commitment, in practice it could prove far easier said than done – especially with a progressive government in Seoul, many of whose leaders have long looked for excuses to limit and constrain America’s military presence. Feeding the beast of U.S. retrenchment could carry real risks. Once the exercises are turned off, South Korean politics could make the job of getting them turned back on far more difficult than many now let on.

As for Bolton’s oft-expressed concern over the lack of historical memory when it comes to the North’s nuclear mendacity, and the tendency to interpret any conciliatory gesture, no matter how banal and lacking in substance, as an epoch-shattering breakthrough, Trump has proved Bolton’s point once again. Look no further than Trump’s fantastical declaration upon his return from Singapore: “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea.” Enough said.

If there’s a silver lining for Bolton’s worldview, it was Trump’s continued determination, at least for now, to hold the line on his maximum pressure campaign against the North. If there has been a uniquely important feature of Trump’s approach to North Korea, it’s been the administration’s extraordinary success in ratcheting up military and economic pressure – the latter on a global scale, including unprecedented cooperation from China. Trump and his team deserve enormous credit for building that sanctions architecture. Their refusal (so far) to begin dismantling it prematurely, before Kim has taken concrete steps that demonstrate a strategic commitment to denuclearizing his country, is the most important element distinguishing Trump’s current diplomatic gambit from the failed endeavors of his predecessors – who proved far too willing to surrender things of real value to the North in exchange for phony disarmament promises. Maintaining that leverage in the face of Kim’s charm offensive, and his inevitable efforts to string the United States along, is perhaps the greatest challenge that the administration will confront in the coming months.

It’s a challenge that in many ways has been made harder by the results of the Singapore meeting. Though decidedly short on substance when it comes to denuclearization, the summit was long on normalizing Kim’s status as a statesman. If Washington isn’t careful, that’s a surefire formula for the gradual erosion of sanctions enforcement by countries that

have never been particularly enthusiastic participants in Trump's maximum pressure campaign and that will be looking for any excuse to begin re-engaging with the North. China and the progressive government in South Korea probably top that list, but Russia and a number of states in Southeast Asia might not be far behind. Already, there have been troubling reports that economic activity with China has been on the increase in recent months, a trend that Trump seemed to confirm in Singapore.

The longer that Kim is able to use his charm offensive to drag out the diplomatic process with the United States, the more sanctions are likely to fray, the less leverage the United States will wield, and the harder it will be to resurrect the maximum pressure campaign. That's Kim's game. Washington should refuse to play it. Post-Singapore, the administration should insist that the North in relatively short order undertake a number of concrete steps that would unambiguously underscore its commitment to complete denuclearization – including a full declaration of the size, scope, and nature of its program and agreement on the rapid implementation of a robust inspection and verification regime, as well as steps to begin dismantling the program, including, perhaps, shipping several of its nuclear weapons out of the country. In the meantime, the United States should stand ready to vigorously defend the integrity of the existing sanctions regime, taking early action to penalize violators even while negotiations with North Korea continue.

It was, of course, Bolton's understanding of North Korea's history of manipulating diplomacy to buy time and undermine U.S. strategy that lay behind his controversial proposal in the weeks leading up to the summit for Kim to follow "the Libya model." That was widely viewed as a provocation that got Bolton into trouble because of Libya's subsequent association with violent regime change. It no doubt could have been handled more deftly. But at the core of Bolton's idea was the entirely legitimate U.S. need to see rapid, irreversible steps by nuclear rogue states to demonstrate unambiguously their commitment to disarmament.

Which leads to one more potentially hopeful sign from Singapore: At his press conference after the summit, Trump rather conspicuously mentioned that Bolton will remain involved in future diplomacy with the North. If true, that won't make the North Koreans happy. They've repeatedly made plain their antipathy to Bolton and clearly hoped that they'd succeeded in permanently marginalizing him when it comes to North Korea policy.

With Bolton playing bad cop, Pompeo's hand could be significantly strengthened in demanding early, concrete actions from Pyongyang. Of course, it all could be for naught if Trump decides that preserving his "success" in Singapore, especially in advance of November's midterm elections, takes precedence over pressing Kim too hard on denuclearization. But for now, at least, there may yet be reason to believe that Trump still appreciates that Bolton's brand of hard-nosed diplomacy could play an important role in neutralizing the North Korean nuclear threat.