

Left- Horizons

Singapore summit achieves little

“Reality TV”, “surreal”, “a new future” or even “the most important summit of the century”. You pay your money and you take your choice!

We are inclined towards the first two of these descriptions. Although the Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore has been celebrated by the popular press as a huge event, in reality, it has been little more than a circus aimed at bolstering the prestige of both leaders. For the moment, Trump has switched off his rhetoric, which promised “fire and fury like the world has never seen” against North Korea. Now, he is full of praise for Kim.

Without a doubt, it is Kim Jong Un who has made the greatest gains by the summit, such as they are. Donald Trump, in his shallowness, his indecisiveness and his over-arching egotism is a perfect representation of the decay and decline of US capitalism: a global superpower without direction, aim or strategy. The USA may still be the strongest military power on the planet – and by a long way – but its star is on the wane, economically and diplomatically, as it gives way to the accelerating rise of a Chinese superpower. Trump’s aim in holding the summit was mainly to boost his domestic popularity as a ‘great statesman’ and ‘peace-maker’. When the dust settles, it will be clear that he has gained nothing except vague commitments, while Kim has out-foxed him.

Before the talks were held, American diplomats were talking about “CVID” – complete, verifiable,

irreversible denuclearisation of North Korea, but this is far from what was achieved in this one single meeting. Kim has promised to “work towards” the complete de-nuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, which in effect means no more than more talks. Moreover, it is likely that the talking will go on for months, if not years.

Indeed, Trump is already being criticised at home and abroad for his ‘leniency’ in dealing with Kim. His offer to suspend military exercises with South Korea – on the excuse of their ‘expense’ – was probably done without any consultation with South Korea. Having already alienated himself from the other main leaders of the capitalist West, by his off-hand and insulting attitude to the leaders of Canada and the other G7 heads of government, he has now rubbed up the wrong way the leaders of Japan and South Korea, who both had reason to fear North Korean missile technology.

“North Korea emboldened”

Andrei Lankov, an expert on North Korea at the Kookmin University in Seoul, judged the statement of the two leaders coming out of Singapore as having “zero” practical value. “North Korea will be emboldened,” he added, “and the US got nothing.” A former CIA North Korea expert, Bruce Klingner, suggested that the joint statement was “disappointing” since the four main components of it had already been included in other documents signed between the USA and Pyongyang. Back in

Washington, Democratic Senator Mark Warner sounded what will be a prelude to a lot more criticism. It was clear, he said, “that Kim Jong Un walked away from Singapore with exactly what he wanted – the pomp, circumstance and prestige of a meeting with the president of the United States – while making no specific commitments in return.” (*Financial Times*, June 13)

Terrorised and impoverished North Koreans

Kim has indeed got exactly what he wanted. He is the leader of a vile and despotic regime, inherited through his father and grandfather. North Korea, a “Peoples’ Democratic Republic” only in name, is a monstrous regime held together by the military, supplemented by a huge system of informants and secret police. Kim’s only concern is to stay in power over his terrorised and impoverished people. He will accept economic development and sees an increased living standard for his 26 million population as useful, but only if he is guaranteed to remain at the top. Having seen what happened to Colonel Gaddafi of Libya and Saddam Hussein of Iraq, he will not accept even a hint of a suggestion of ‘regime change’. Indeed, it was the ham-handed statement, by Trump’s National Security Adviser, John Bolton, that the US favoured a ‘Libyan solution’ which nearly scuppered the summit two weeks ago.

North Korea now has a nuclear capability. Even if this nuclear arsenal was to partly dismantled, it is unlikely to be completely eliminated. What is more likely is that it would be partly hidden away from ‘observers’. As for the rocket-delivery technology – it was the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles that could potentially reach the USA that really concentrated minds in the White House – here too, the know-how, once it is obtained, cannot be removed.

Kim, therefore, in making promises about “de-nuclearisation” is not sacrificing anything. His commitment to “work towards” de-nuclearisation really means very little. Even if it were to happen, which is unlikely in the long run, it would not be done quickly, smoothly or easily.

For the Chinese government – the elephant in the room in Singapore – Kim has always been something

of a nuisance, but he is ‘their’ nuisance. To the Chinese, Kim is a guarantee that the 30,000 American troops in South Korea are kept well away from their own border. They too know their history and they will be aware that the unification of Germany in 1989 quickly resulted in the eastward march of NATO towards the Russian border. The Chinese do not want Korean unification on American terms, something that would bring US troops up to their frontier.

For Kim Jong Un, the Singapore summit has been a win-win game. If the USA drops sanctions, so much the better. But if Trump has another tantrum over any perceived tardiness in ‘denuclearisation’, Kim will still have won, because whatever happens now it is likely that that the Chinese and Russians will use Singapore as their green light to increase trade with North Korea. At the very least, therefore, Kim will have given up nothing while significantly increasing the prospect of more trade with his near neighbours.

The real drivers of history

In reality, great question of war and peace are not determined by circuses like this, or by handfuls of individuals acting, as it were ‘above’ society. It is social movements: class struggles, upheavals and revolutions that are the great drivers of history. Donald Trump the man: a shallow, misogynistic, billionaire, tax-dodger, represents the very *worst* features of American capitalist culture, so we can only look forward to a resurrection of the *best* parts of American social history – its magnificent labour and trade union traditions. Likewise, Kim Jong Un, a ruthless despot, signifies the past. It is not for nothing that he desperately fears an infection learning, knowledge, information and free discussion among his own people. That is an infection from which he cannot inoculate himself in the long run. It will not be the Kims and the Trumps of the world who settle the matter of peace in the Korean peninsula or anywhere else, for that matter. It will be the workers of those countries, who, as Marx put it, have a world to win and nothing to lose but their chains.

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