

# Four scenarios for Korean peninsula's future

**Narushige Michishita**

For The Straits Times

US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met in Singapore and signed a joint statement on Tuesday. The two leaders agreed on denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and the establishment of “new US-DPRK relations”.

What should we expect for the future of the Korean peninsula? There are at least four possible scenarios: one positive, two bad, and one potentially tricky.

## Scenario One

Pyongyang will start taking steps towards denuclearisation, leading to a gradual improvement in ties between the United States and North Korea along the way.

Mr Kim, Chairman of North Korea's State Affairs Commission, undertakes necessary economic reforms, driven by a genuine desire to build up his country's economy and improve his people's lot.

Mr Trump can claim success for his bold approach, breaking from the orthodoxies of his predecessors. North Korea will not abandon all of its nuclear weapons, but will do just enough to satisfy Mr Trump, especially in the run-up to the US presidential election in 2020.

The denuclearisation process will probably slow down after the polls. But by then the pressure will be off Mr Trump as, owing to term limits, he does not have to worry about facing another presidential election.

In this scenario, Pyongyang will seek to improve relations with its neighbours, especially Japan, in order to obtain financial and technical assistance. Pyongyang has already suggested that there are two Japanese abductees whom they might be able to send back. This will help smoothen things with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has pressed hard for the release of Japanese kidnapped and detained by North Korea.

## Scenario Two

This is a military crisis scenario in which North Korea resorts to delaying tactics as in the past, and refuses to denuclearise quickly and comprehensively enough.

The US will become upset and start considering military options again, including a “bloody nose” limited attack against North Korea.

Ironically, the military option has become more realistic and useful than in the past after Mr Kim's recent peace overtures.

Before his summit meetings with South Korean President Moon Jae In and Chinese President Xi Jinping, many people held the view that Mr Kim was cast from the mould of crazy despots liable to overreact in response to pressure; it follows then that military action, however limited, would lead to mutual disaster because he might react irrationally and disproportionately.

However, now that we are more assured that Mr Kim is a rational actor, we can also more safely assume that he will not lash out and launch a suicidal all-out war even if the US takes limited military action to destroy key nuclear and missile facilities without attempting to undermine his regime.

If Mr Trump's opponents start attacking him for having played into North Korea's hands and for being “weak” in the heat of the campaign ahead of the 2020 presidential election, that might push him to use force against North Korea in order to bolster popular support, at least in the short run. It could also divert the American people's attention away from other domestic political scandals that are likely to be weaponised in the hustings.

## Scenario Three

The third scenario is a “bad peace” scenario in which the US will reduce its security commitment to South Korea, and the Korean peninsula will become unstable over time.

At the Singapore summit, Mr Trump promised to suspend military exercises that the US and South Korea conducted jointly. He seems to have made this promise without consulting his South Korean allies. Without the joint military exercises, US-South Korea combined forces will not be able to remain ready and effective.

Mr Trump and Mr Kim also discussed the building of “a lasting and robust peace regime”. This sounds good, but in the North Korean lexicon, “peace regime” means dismantlement of the security mechanism that the US and South Korea have established based on the United Nations security resolution adopted

during the Korean War.

It is instructive that General Kim Yong Chol, who is responsible for the sinking of a South Korean naval corvette and the shelling of a South Korean island in 2010, was sitting next to Chairman Kim at the summit meeting. We are not sure what he might do when he sees the US-South Korea alliance weakened and stumbling.

## Scenario Four

Finally, the fourth tricky scenario is what I call the “Gorbachev scenario”, in which Mr Kim attempts to substantially improve his country's socio-economic situation, but ends up destabilising the country.

Why might he want to go for such major reforms? Mr Kim is a young and ambitious leader. His desire to make his country great again is palpable. Unlike his father, he has been showing the world footage of North Korea's ballistic missile launches, massive firepower exercises, and his beautiful wife. He studied in Switzerland, knows the outside world, and does not want to see his country looked down on.

However, North Korea is not an easy country to reform.

**Ostensibly, the Singapore summit was about denuclearisation of North Korea. But Mr Trump used the opportunity to start bargaining with one of the US' allies – South Korea. He has more than once expressed unhappiness that South Korea is a security free-rider and is benefiting unfairly from its free trade agreement with the US... With his strong hints at the post-summit press conference about a possible downgrading of US security commitments to South Korea, he has given himself the upper hand in negotiating with his South Korean allies.**

Socio-economic change can bring about political change. On June 12, 1987, then US President Ronald Reagan asked Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall. Mr Gorbachev tore down not only the wall but also his country.

What's the likelihood of each scenario happening?

I would give 35 per cent to the first, 25 per cent to the second, 35 per cent to the “bad peace” scenario, and 5 per cent to the Gorbachev scenario.

## SOUTH KOREA'S DILEMMA

Ostensibly, the Singapore summit was about denuclearisation of North Korea. But Mr Trump used the opportunity to start bargaining with one of the US' allies – South Korea. Mr Trump has more than once expressed unhappiness that South Korea is a security free-rider and is benefiting unfairly from its free trade agreement (FTA) with the US. He wants the government in Seoul to pay more for the US forces stationed in South Korea, and wants to reshape the US-South Korea FTA for terms more favourable to the US.

With his strong hints at the post-summit press conference about a possible downgrading of US security commitments to South Korea, he has given himself the upper hand in negotiating with his South Korean allies.

South Korea is in a difficult position. As it was President Moon who helped set up the US-North Korea summit and assured Mr Trump that Mr Kim sincerely desired denuclearisation and peace, Mr Trump could easily counter any objections to a review of the military alliance with the argument that he was simply taking Mr Moon's advice to reduce tensions on the peninsula.

The surprise decision by Mr Trump to reassess US security commitments to South Korea will have domestic implications as well: South Korea will become more divided between the liberals, who support the ongoing peace process, and the conservatives, who accuse Mr Moon of playing into the hands of Mr Trump and Mr Kim.

## IMPLEMENTATION IS KEY

What is most important ultimately is implementation.

There is a lot of work following up on the Singapore summit's joint statement. What is put on the table in the pledge to denuclearise is a major endeavour on its own.

The process of denuclearisation is highly technical, complex and painstaking. A big part of it involves intelligence gathering, and the information that the US has is not perfect.

For all the flaws and limitations of what emerged from the Trump-Kim summit, we must make the best use of this opportunity. It will not be an easy road ahead but for its goals to be achieved, we will have to be patient, determined and optimistically cautious.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Narushige Michishita is director of the Security and International Studies Programme at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo. He is also the author of North Korea's Military-Diplomatic Campaigns, 1966-2008.