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Summit yields deal but no plan

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FULL TEXT

President Donald Trump wrapped up his improbable summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on Tuesday, vowing to "start a new history" with the nuclear-armed nation after signing a vaguely worded agreement that contained no concrete plan for disarmament.

Later, at a 65-minute news conference, Trump said he had agreed to North Korea's longtime demands to stop joint U.S. military exercises with South Korea. The war games have been a mainstay of the U.S. alliance with Seoul for decades.

Trump said halting the drills would save "a lot of money" and he called them "provocative," the complaint North Korea often made. He also said he hopes eventually to withdraw the 28,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, although not as part of the current agreement with Kim.

In only the second full solo news conference of his presidency, Trump said he had been awake for 25 hours -- he turns 72 on Thursday -- but that he was bullish about his day of diplomacy with the young autocrat from Pyongyang.

He lavished praise on Kim as a "great talent," denied concerns about treating him as an equal and painted a rosy picture of North Korea's potential future -- one laid out in an unusual propaganda-style video that the White House had prepared for the North Korean leader.

When asked why he trusted a ruler who had murdered family members and jailed thousands of political prisoners, Trump lauded Kim for taking over the regime at age 26, after his father died in 2011, and being "able to run it, and run it tough."

While Trump repeatedly portrayed his two-page agreement with Kim as "comprehensive," it contained little new except a commitment by both sides to continue diplomatic engagement, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo leading the U.S. side in future talks.

That is no small achievement considering that the two leaders were threatening each other with nuclear war last summer. But it was far less than the ambitious arms control deal Trump had mentioned achieving when he agreed to the summit in March.

The document instead reiterated the same vague North Korean commitment to denuclearize that Kim made after he met South Korea's president in April, but it offered no specifics of how or when any disarmament might take place.

"We will do it as fast as it can mechanically and physically be done," Trump said, adding it would "take a long time" to wind down the nuclear weapons program. Until recently, Trump had demanded Pyongyang quickly dismantle its vast nuclear infrastructure.

A person familiar with the working-level talks that set the final stage for Tuesday's summit said the U.S. team had pushed for a commitment from Kim to denuclearize by 2020, when the next U.S. presidential election will be underway.

North Korea's representatives balked at the demand for a deadline, the person said.

The signed agreement, which was released by the White House, says North Korea will "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." It does not offer the pledge of "complete, verifiable, irreversible

denuclearization" that Pompeo had insisted was the U.S. objective.

A verifiable and permanent disarmament agreement would require North Korea to allow international inspectors to enter and collect records, monitor sites and ensure it does not cheat. Pyongyang expelled United Nations nuclear inspectors nearly a decade ago and Tuesday's agreement does not mention bringing them back.

The agreement was weaker than the pledge North Korea made in 2005, during an ultimately unsuccessful bout of nuclear diplomacy, when it committed itself to "abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs." The regime instead tested its first nuclear device the following year. It has conducted five underground tests since then, most recently in September. It is believed to have assembled at least two dozen warheads.

In a largely symbolic U.S. gain, North Korea committed itself to the "immediate repatriation" of any remains it had identified of U.S. soldiers and prisoners of war from the Korean War, which ended 65 years ago. Trump said families had implored him for help on that painful issue.

Tuesday's pact doesn't mention North Korea's gruesome record of human rights abuses, including a vast prison camp system. Asked if he raised the issue, Trump said they discussed it "relatively briefly" because their talks were focused on nuclear weapons.

He suggested that human rights in North Korea, which the U.N. has accused of "systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations," did not differ greatly from other nations.

"I believe it's a rough situation over there, there's no question about it," he said. "It's rough in a lot of places by the way."

But Trump suggested that negative publicity about the death last year of Otto Warmbier, a college student from Ohio who was returned home in a coma from a North Korean prison, had helped pave the way for the diplomatic thaw.

"Otto did not die in vain," Trump said. "He had a lot to do with us being here."

Trump denied that he was lending legitimacy to the oppressive leader of a long-marginalized regime by standing shoulder to shoulder with him. He said sitting at the table with Kim wasn't a concession.

"I'll do whatever it takes to make the world a safer place," he said. "All I can say is they want to make a deal. That's what I do. My whole life has been deals. I'm great at it."

In Seoul, South Korean President Moon Jae-in heralded the agreement, saying, "It will be recorded as a historic event that has helped break down the last remaining Cold War legacy on Earth."

Moon's statement did not address Trump's decision to cancel joint military exercises, a crucial part of the close military alliance that emerged from the 1950-53 Korean War.

Independent analysts praised the continued diplomacy, but most found little to like in the agreement and Trump's concession on military exercises.

"It doesn't say anything," Joseph Yun, a former senior U.S. diplomat and special representative for North Korea policy, said on CNN.

Olivia Enos, a policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank, said the decision to suspend military exercises was "concerning" because they help project U.S. strength in the region.

"The joint military exercises ... is about more than just countering the North Korean threat," she said.

Ellen Tauscher, a former member of Congress from California who served as undersecretary of state for arms control in the Obama administration, tweeted that Trump was "conned" by Kim.

"China has to be thrilled with Kim's haul in Singapore," Tauscher said. She said Trump had agreed to end valuable military exercises in exchange "for promises by a lying despot of 'denuclearization' in (a) bilateral, unverifiable agreement."

Abraham M. Denmark, former deputy assistant secretary of Defense for East Asia, said Trump gave up the exercises "for little new and nothing in return."

Others also expressed hope. Nuclear disarmament "can and will come, if we focus on transforming a relationship that has been deeply hostile, unremittingly hostile," said John Delury, an associate professor at Yonsei University in Seoul and an expert on the Koreas and China.

To convince Kim to eventually give up his nuclear weapons, Trump said he played for him on an iPad a U.S. government-produced video that looked like a Hollywood movie trailer about an action hero.

"When a man is presented with a chance that may never be repeated, what will he choose?" a narrator said in the video, which was played at the press conference. "The world will be watching, listening, anticipating, hoping. Will this leader choose to advance his country ... be the hero of his people?"

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CAPTION: Photo: President Donald Trump shows a document as he sits with North Korea's Kim Jong Un on Tuesday in Singapore. EVAN VUCCI/AP ; Photo: People at a subway station in Pyongyang, North Korea, walk Tuesday past a display of government images from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's tour of Singapore. MINORU IWASAKI/AP ; Photo: President Donald Trump walks Tuesday with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un after their meeting in Singapore. KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY

CREDIT: By Victoria Kim, Noah Bierman and Matt Stiles, Los Angeles Times

DETAILS

Subject:	Agreements; Arms control & disarmament; Political prisoners; Presidents; Nuclear weapons; Armed forces; Foreign policy; Military exercises; Press conferences; Human rights
Location:	Denmark South Korea North Korea United States--US Ohio Singapore Korean Peninsula China California Los Angeles California East Asia
People:	Trump, Donald J Pompeo, Mike Delury, John Warmbier, Otto Frederick Tauscher, Ellen O Kim Jong Un Moon Jae-in
Company / organization:	Name: CNN; NAICS: 515210; Name: Los Angeles Times; NAICS: 511110; Name: Yonsei University; NAICS: 611310; Name: United Nations--UN; NAICS: 928120; Name: Congress; NAICS: 921120; Name: Heritage Foundation; NAICS: 541720
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