

Historic handshake — on Trump-Kim summit

The historic summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore is an affirmation of the power of diplomacy. Until a few months ago, the two countries had been trading nuclear threats, as the North raced along with its nuclear weapons programme. Now, as Mr. Trump shook hands with Mr. Kim, who had once said the U.S. President was “mentally deranged”, it was a reminder of Richard Nixon’s ground-breaking 1972 visit to Beijing. Through the day, both Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim were keen on casting the “comprehensive” meet in a positive light. The two whimsical leaders deserve full credit for this thaw in relations, given the decades of hostility and the quick diplomacy that pulled the Korean peninsula back from the brink of war. It all began with the new South Korean President Moon Jae-in’s expansive outreach to the North. Mr. Kim reciprocated by sending athletes to the Winter Olympics in South Korea in February. As the relationship between the Koreas improved rapidly, Mr. Kim invited the U.S. President for a meeting. Mr. Trump accepted at once, surprising America’s allies and rivals. However, it was not certain whether the meet would take place. Mr. Trump once called it off after threats and counter-threats escalated. But the appetite for rapprochement was clearly greater on both sides, and the rendezvous was back on track.

In the brief joint statement after their meeting, Mr. Kim iterated his “firm and unwavering commitment to complete denuclearisation” of the Korean Peninsula, while Mr. Trump offered security guarantees to the North. Mr. Kim had earlier promised to denuclearise the peninsula in return for security assurances, while Mr. Trump had promised that the North would be welcomed into the international community as a respectable member and be allowed to prosper economically. The two leaders have put these demands and promises into a document that could guide future diplomatic engagement. Mr. Trump also announced that he would end the regular American “war games” with South Korea, a concession to the North. While the summit itself was a big success given the distance both countries covered in a relatively short span of time, it is too early to say whether Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim can pull off a Nixon-Mao type breakthrough. The joint statement provided few specifics on how denuclearisation can take place or how North Korea’s steps to dismantle its arsenal will be monitored. There are no deadlines mentioned. There is no reference to China, North Korea’s only ally. There has been no word on whether the two will establish formal diplomatic ties. Besides, being unpredictable and impulsive, Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim must also stare down hardline elements in their respective administrations. This bold beginning must not be wasted.

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