



THE NORTH-SOUTH SUMMIT: TESTING PYONGYANG'S SINCERITY

BY RALPH A. COSSA

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The upcoming summit meeting between South Korea President Moon Jae-in and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Un has been somewhat overshadowed by the anticipation (or anxiety) surrounding the follow-on impending Summit, in late May or early June, between Kim and US President Donald Trump. But the North-South Summit is important in its own right and will also serve as an important test of Pyongyang's sincerity leading into the US-North Korea Summit.

First, and most simply, form matters. The South already achieved a victory of sorts in persuading Kim to come to the South (or more technically to the southern part of the DMZ) for the meeting rather than having Moon become the third South Korean president to venture to Pyongyang without a reciprocal visit. More important, however, will be the titles being used. Pyongyang always refers to itself as the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea or DPRK. But it insists on referring to its neighbor as south Korea (with a small s) rather than as the Republic of Korea or ROK. If the DPRK refers to Moon as president of the Republic of Korea, it would signal a willingness (finally) to treat the government in Seoul as a sovereign equal with the same level of respect it demands.

What's on the Summit agenda will be another test. Seoul has announced its desire to discuss a peace treaty with Pyongyang to replace the 65-year old Armistice, and President Trump has given his "blessings" for Seoul to have such a discussion.

Pyongyang in the past has refused to discuss this topic directly with Seoul, insisting that since South Korea was not a signatory to the Armistice, it should not even have a seat at the table. Technically speaking, the Armistice was signed by military officers representing the US/United Nations Command and the Chinese and North Korean People's Armies – South Korea's leader at the time, Rhee Syngman, refused to have his general sign since he did not want to stop fighting the North. While Pyongyang usually insists that a peace accord should be signed between itself and Washington (sometimes even excluding Beijing), Washington's long-standing position has (rightfully) been that the South must not only also have a seat at the table but must have a leading role. The Four-Party Talks during the Clinton administration, aimed at replacing the Armistice with a peace treaty, broke down over this point. If the North is prepared to finally acknowledge Seoul's leading role in crafting a peace treaty to officially end the Korean War, this would be a significant policy shift and another important signal of Kim's sincerity.

While the North's long-term goal is likely the removal of US forces and accompanying nuclear umbrella, it seems to be primarily interested in the near-term with lifting US, UNSC, and ROK sanctions and the procurement of economic assistance. Kim Jong-Un, under his *Byungjin* policy, has promised his people both nuclear weapons and economic development. He has delivered on the first part; now he needs to show some progress on the latter. But what is he willing to give in return? The Moon administration has insisted that the topic of denuclearization will be on the table and that a commitment to giving up Kim's nuclear arsenal is required to move bilateral relations forward. In the

past, Pyongyang has steadfastly refused to even mention the term denuclearization in its dealings with the South, insisting that this is a topic reserved exclusively for Pyongyang and Washington. Will President Moon stick to his guns? More importantly, will Kim give in on this point and at least allow some reference to denuclearization to appear on the agenda and joint statement? This will be another important test of Kim's sincerity (and Moon's steadfastness). The bigger issue – each side's differing definition of what constitutes denuclearization – will need to be ironed out between Washington and Pyongyang, but acceptance of verifiable DPRK denuclearization as a goal must come first.

Another thing to watch for is any reference to a missile and/or nuclear freeze. The question is not so much will there be a freeze, but what will be frozen? Pyongyang has already announced a halt in missile and nuclear *testing*. But will Pyongyang accept the possibility of a freeze in its nuclear and missile *programs*? Halting tests was relatively easy to do (since Pyongyang had already announced that its current round of testing was complete) and easy to verify, but Kim Jong-Un has also said his focus now is not on testing but on an accelerated production of nuclear weapons and missiles. Agreeing to halt these programs, which would require intrusive inspection for verification purposes, would be another signal Pyongyang is serious. It's true that a halt in testing is an important first step. It helps stop things from getting worse. But, it is not sufficient to make things better. Senior ROK officials have told me that they will insist on a halt to programs, not just testing. Will Pyongyang agree to this objective?

Even if the only initial agreement is regarding testing, Pyongyang in the past has not only argued but has demonstrated its belief that a halt in testing does not apply to its satellite program. Recall the Obama administrations "freeze for aid" Leap Day Agreement quickly fell apart when Pyongyang then announced a satellite launch in direct violation of UNSC sanctions against any form of missile or rocket activity. Will Kim agree that a missile freeze includes a freeze in satellite launches? Or will he plan a satellite launch in the near future to test how

eager Seoul (and Washington) is to conduct talks. I fear the latter is more likely than the former.

Finally, President Moon has indicated that he would like this to be the first of a continuing series of summits between the two leaders. Will Kim agree to this and also agree that one of them should be in Seoul? Will he also agree to put military-to-military confidence building measures on the table? Opening a North-South hotline was an important first step but there is an endless list of additional steps the two militaries could take to further defuse tensions, including the scaling back of military exercises by both sides.

As a skeptic about Pyongyang's current peace offensive, I doubt that any of the above-referenced signals of sincerity will be sent. I hope I'm wrong!

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