



North-South Summit: Cause for Cautious Optimism

by Ralph A. Cossa

All eyes will be focused next week on Pyongyang for the historic June 12-14 summit between ROK President Kim Dae-Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il. Last week's surprise visit to Beijing by the reclusive North Korean leader – reportedly his first trip outside the hermit kingdom in 17 years – has added to the drama. But, while these events provide cause for cautious optimism, the wave of exuberance sweeping over the Korean Peninsula seems premature.

A quick review of the not too distant past can help put current events in perspective. Last year at this time, a maritime border confrontation was shaping up off the peninsula's west coast which culminated in the sinking of a North Korean ship. War drums were beating loudly and the rhetoric was intense. Meanwhile, the standoff between Washington and Pyongyang over halting DPRK missile tests was heating up, with the North adamant about pursuing its sovereign right to develop, test, and deploy long-range missiles. The U.S. inspection of the suspect nuclear site at Kumchang-ri (in return for a resumption of food aid) did little to reduce suspicions about the North's nuclear intentions, and the visit to Pyongyang by former Secretary of Defense William Perry left Perry, among others, pessimistic about Pyongyang's willingness to respond favorably to a combined U.S.-ROK-Japanese formula for enhanced cooperation. Perry's Plan B, enhanced deterrence, seemed more likely. Meanwhile, the accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by U.S. forces last May made Sino-U.S. collaboration on Peninsula issues doubtful as well.

The situation has, of course, changed dramatically. Today, North-South cooperation is more reminiscent of 1991/1992, when the two sides negotiated a yet to be implemented Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchange and Cooperation with a companion Joint Declaration on a Non-Nuclear Korean Peninsula, amid summit discussions. The fact that this earlier promising period of reconciliation proved so fragile should be a sobering reminder of the challenges that lie ahead.

Summit Meeting. A variety of factors contributed to the agreement to conduct the long-awaited summit, not the least of which has been the North Korean diplomatic "charm offensive" which has seen Pyongyang establish, re-establish, or markedly improve relations with a host of nations worldwide. Yet the primary credit must go to President Kim Dae-Jung's so-called "Sunshine Policy" and his politically courageous, persistent efforts to reach out to the North. Kim's balanced approach – he has pledged that South Korea does not intend to absorb North Korea and will actively promote exchanges and cooperation, even while asserting that the ROK will not tolerate armed provocations of any kind – provided

North Korea with its best (and seemingly safest) opportunity to date to engage the South cautiously.

The sense of euphoria in the South notwithstanding, the summit is not the moral equivalent of the crumbling of the Berlin Wall; it more closely resembles the early days of the Helsinki Process, which began the long and difficult road to German reunification. Many twists and turns lie ahead as the difficult task of North-South trust building gets underway. It remains unclear whether Pyongyang's willingness to reach out to the South represents a shift in tactics or a more fundamental change in North Korean thinking. One can find evidence to support either point of view, but conclusive proof remains lacking. Hopefully, new signs will emerge from the summit supporting the more positive interpretation.

Some would argue that the mere fact that the meeting is being held makes it a success. But, there are other measures of success which could further demonstrate both side's commitment to genuine rapprochement, including: agreement on an early reciprocal visit by Kim Jong-Il to Seoul; a joint commitment to the development of meaningful confidence and trust building measures; serious discussion about first steps toward mutual and balanced military force reductions, if not nationwide then at least in the immediate vicinity of the demilitarized zone; the implementation of the long-delayed reunion of divided families program aimed at bringing together families separated since the Korean War; and finally, a pledge to work toward implementation of the 1991/92 agreements, which have been conspicuous by their absence from discussions thus far. The ultimate signs of success – a North-South Peace Treaty and cross-diplomatic recognition – appear to still be a long way down the road.

Kim Jong-Il Visit to Beijing. Kim Jong-Il's secretive visit to Beijing last week (May 29-31, 2000) – which both sides attempted (unsuccessfully) to conceal and refused to confirm until after the reclusive leader was safely back in Pyongyang – is widely-assessed as being summit-related. One U.S. official has called the trip a symbolic attempt to confer stature upon the North Korean leader prior to his visit with Kim Dae-Jung. Official PRC and DPRK insights into the visit have been limited, however, with both sides simply announcing that they had reached consensus on all major issues of common concern. This visit underscores China's interest in playing a significant role of influence on the Korean Peninsula.

If consensus was reached on the adoption of the Chinese model of economic reform by Pyongyang, this would represent a genuine commitment to fundamental economic reform. Chinese interlocutors for months now have been signaling that such a change was imminent. For "socialism with *juche* characteristics" to be successful, however, foreign economic investment and assistance will be required and

South Korea is the most logical source. This, combined with the need to keep the current generous flow of assistance flowing in, could help explain Kim Jong-Il's willingness to court the South. Meanwhile, Kim Jong Il's admission that "[China's] policy of opening up to the outside world is correct" could be the stage-setter for a limited and no doubt more tightly controlled attempt to follow the Chinese example.

One suspects that security-related topics were also on the agenda. Kim Jong-Il and Chinese President Jiang Zemin share a common desire for U.S. forces eventually to leave the Peninsula, at least by the time of reunification and preferably before. Pyongyang insists that the U.S. forces leave now, but surely must understand that this extreme bargaining position will continue to be completely unacceptable to Seoul and Washington. I suspect that China continues to provide moral support to this DPRK position nonetheless.

I would hope that Chinese security guarantees to North Korea were also discussed, in order to provide a safety net under which Pyongyang can feel secure in entering into talks. Given the strictly defensive nature of the U.S.-ROK alliance, it is no doubt difficult for many in the West to believe that North Korea genuinely fears a U.S. attack. However, from Pyongyang's perspective, events like Iraq and Kosovo provide cause for concern. Without American security guarantees, South Korea's leadership would be hesitant to enter into direct dialogue with the North. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that Pyongyang would like a similar security blanket and this can most credibly (perhaps only) be given by Beijing.

Rather than unrealistically seeking a withdrawal of U.S. forces, North Korea and China should be discussing the provision by Beijing of similar security guarantees to the North, in order to create a sense of security conducive to dialogue and ultimately to successive step-by-step mutual force reductions. Given China's close proximity, this can be accomplished without the basing of Chinese forces in the North.

As an interesting aside, for years now, North Koreans have been calling for a “one nation, one country, two states, two governments” formula for a North-South Confederation. However, North Korean presentations at two meetings held after Kim Jong-Il’s visit, made reference instead to “one nation, one state, two systems, two governments.” This sounds like a bit of Chinese editing to me. China certainly does not want to endorse a policy that varies from its demands to Taiwan.

U.S.-ROK-Japan Cooperation. Growing trilateral cooperation among the ROK, U.S., and Japan also appears to have helped bring about the North-South Summit. The so-called Perry Process – the drive to develop a coordinated U.S., ROK, Japan policy toward North Korea – made it clear to Pyongyang that it could not cut a separate deal with the U.S. when it came to peace on the Peninsula. Dr. Perry’s aforementioned trip to Pyongyang reinforced this message, while the establishment of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) institutionalized the three-way cooperative process and reduced Pyongyang’s ability to play one side off against the others. This may have contributed, at least in a modest way, to the North’s decision to finally deal directly with the South.

Whatever Pyongyang’s motives, the summit seems likely to be a positive, cordial event with more than *pro forma* meetings of the two Kims. The meeting will hopefully usher in a new era of increased cooperation and tension reduction measures; actions that will not guarantee but could at least set the stage for North-South reconciliation and eventual reunification . . . *IF* North Korea is truly ready and willing and feels secure enough to engage fully in the peace process.

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