



North-South Korea: The Path Toward Reconciliation

by Ralph A. Cossa

The Joint Declaration signed between North Korea leader Kim Jong-Il and South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung during the 13-15 June 2000 summit in Pyongyang is a truly historic document. It will, and should, require a complete reassessment of what is and is not possible regarding North-South reconciliation and eventual reunification. It exceeded the expectations of even the most optimistic forecasts and has satisfactorily addressed the top priority issue of both sides going into the summit. It does not, however, guarantee peace on the Peninsula; it merely opens the door to that possibility.

I was in Seoul when President Kim arrived in Pyongyang. Rumors were rampant the night before the trip that the arrival ceremony would be momentous and include a planeside meeting with Chairman Kim Jong-Il, but few believed that this would actually occur. Most officials, and virtually all reporters and pundits, were watching for the inevitable subtle (or not so subtle) slights; surely Kim Jong-Il would find some way of elevating himself above the visiting South Korean president. Instead, in a symbol of profound importance and seemingly sincere respect, there was the reclusive North Korean leader, smiling and warmly greeting President Kim and his entourage on the tarmac and then riding with his South Korean counterpart to his guest quarters. The obviously self-confident North Korean leader was friendly, even jovial, and articulate throughout the summit, contradicting many of the personal stereotypes placed on him by the South Korean (and American) intelligence community over the years.

South Koreans that I talked to, including even the most hardened skeptics, were universally impressed. The usually bustling city virtually came to a halt as people in the business district were glued to TV screens to watch the arrival ceremony; many were hugging one another and openly crying. For the first time in their lifetimes, reunification suddenly appeared possible. This was particularly touching for those original residents of the North who had longed to see separated family members with whom they had had virtually no contact since the Korean War. But no one I talked to that first day believed there would be early movement on this ROK number one priority issue. While family reunions once again seemed possible, it would be subjected to long, torturous negotiations; separated family visits would not come anytime soon. In fact, the South Korean government had taken great pains not to raise expectations on the family reunion issue prior to the summit.

As a result, the Joint Declaration pledge to "promptly resolve" the separated family issue, which seemed to set August 15 (National Liberation Day) as a target date, must be viewed, from the ROK domestic perspective, as the most tangible immediate benefit of the summit. Even if nothing else

had been accomplished, progress on this issue would have been sufficient to proclaim the summit a complete success.

As expected, the North's top priority, enhanced economic cooperation, was also achieved but, significantly, the promise for "development of the national economy" included a pledge to stimulate cooperation "in all fields," opening the door for greater social and cultural exchanges, as called for in President Kim Dae-Jung's "Sunshine Policy" toward the North. This raises hope that Kim Jong-Il has indeed made the decision to begin opening up his "hermit kingdom" to the outside world.

The two leaders also agreed "to resolve the question of reunification independently" and acknowledged that their respective proposals for a confederation or loose federation system provided a common element upon which to build toward eventual reunification. It also seems clear that when Koreans talk of reunification today, they are not talking about the creation of one central government or a common authority ruling North and South any time soon. It is more a "one Korean nation, two Korean states or governments" that is envisioned, at least for the immediate future. Peaceful coexistence between the two existing states appears to be the mutually accepted and desired first step in the reunification process.

Summit euphoria aside, it is important to remember that there is a long road ahead, even in achieving this more limited objective. The television coverage, so pervasive and affecting in the South, was highly restricted in the North. Media references to the Declaration as an unprecedented agreement between two "former enemies," while perhaps an accurate reflection of the atmosphere of reconciliation and cooperation surrounding the summit, are of course technically inaccurate. A state of war still exists between both sides and the Korean Peninsula remains one of the most heavily fortified and potentially dangerous places on earth.

In this regard, the Joint Declaration is also important for what it does not say. Nowhere in the document is there reference to "normalization of relations" or to the signing of a North-South Peace Treaty to formally bring the Korean War to a close. During separate meetings between President Kim and Kim Yong-Nam, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, the two reportedly discussed the possibility of opening representative offices in each other's capital, but this is still a long way from establishing formal diplomatic ties.

Discussions with North Korean representatives in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia following the Joint Declaration's release (at a Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific [CSCAP] North Pacific Working Group Meeting) were sobering. One North Korean paper included two pages of harsh criticism against the presence of U.S. forces in the South which, "in the interest of friendship and cooperation," were

not read aloud during the DPRK presentation. North Korean representatives continued to talk of the need for a U.S.-DPRK Peace Treaty, while acknowledging the need for and praising the recent efforts toward reconciliation and reunification between the two Koreas. The ROK view that the stage has now been set for a North-South Peace Treaty (countersigned by the U.S. and China as the other two Armistice signatories) was not validated by DPRK counterparts. Continued North Korean insistence on a separate peace treaty with the U.S., followed by the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Peninsula, is likely to remain a point of contention between the two sides.

Also missing from the Joint Declaration is any reference to the development of military confidence building measures or mutual and balanced force reductions between both sides. This is not surprising since these are highly sensitive, potentially contentious issues which can best be discussed once an atmosphere of cooperation and reconciliation has been better established. But until these security issues are dealt with, the Peninsula remains a very dangerous place.

Many Korean pundits, in the context of the summit, have alluded to the old Korean proverb that “a journey of a thousand miles must begin with the first step.” All would agree that a giant step forward has been taken with President Kim’s historic visit. Chairman Kim Jong-Il’s agreement to visit Seoul “at an appropriate time” will be an equally historic giant step, if and when it occurs. But there are still miles to go before either side can truly rest easy.

Ralph A. Cossa is Executive Director of Pacific Forum CSIS.