



North Korea's Coming Out Party: A Potential "Win-Win" for All by Ralph A. Cossa

There has been considerable debate since last month's historic North-South Korea summit as to the meeting's impact on the Peninsula's neighbors and benefactors. Among the major powers, the conventional wisdom seems to be arguing that China fared best. However, I would argue that all four major powers have come out ahead and that the U.S., Japan, and even Russia may end up gaining relatively more in the long run. If managed carefully, the summit process can result in a multiple "win-win" outcome.

China. China has been – and should be given credit for being – an effective facilitator between the two Koreas. The secret meetings that helped set up the historic summit were hosted in Beijing and Kim Jong-il's highly publicized (after the fact) visit to Beijing demonstrated the continued "close as lips to teeth" relationship of these two allies. Beijing has, in fact, taken many steps over the past several years to position itself as a trusted friend of both North and South and its stock has clearly risen as a result of its presumed behind-the-scenes role both in helping to bring about the summit and in moderating the North's behavior.

If one accepts that China's long-range goal is to replace the U.S. as the security guarantor on the Peninsula, however, then the summit was not all good news for Beijing. Kim Dae-jung's post-summit comments on the continued need for a U.S. military presence on the Peninsula not only during the peace process but even after reconciliation or reunification serve Washington's long-term interests much more so than Beijing's. This is especially true if, as alleged, Kim Jong-il tacitly accepted this argument. (It also, of course, serves Seoul's long-term security interests and demonstrates the sense of continuity and consistency behind President Kim's long-stated security policy.)

United States. There were some in Washington (especially in the Pentagon) who initially appeared nervous, especially after reading the Joint Declaration's commitment "to resolve the question of reunification *independently*" [emphasis added]. There was concern that America's ROK allies would forget what has not changed; i.e., that the North still possesses the world's fourth largest military and does not yet seem prepared even to discuss military confidence building measures, much less force reductions or the signing of a North-South Peace Accord. President Kim's remarks since then reconfirming the U.S.-ROK alliance should have Washington resting more easily.

But the only thing worse than Seoul forgetting that not everything has changed is for Washington to pretend that nothing has changed. While officials in Seoul and Washington may see the rationale for a continued U.S. presence post-reunification, growing numbers of people and

politicians in both countries will be increasingly questioning that assumption. Both sides need to start building the public case for a continued security relationship today.

Simply stating that "we see no reason yet to adjust our force presence" or that "we plan to stay even after reunification" are not persuasive and could provide counterproductive. The U.S. should acknowledge that, as significant changes in the threat environment change, Washington will – in close coordination with its allies – adjust the force presence, downward or upward, accordingly," while also stressing that the U.S. is committed to providing security assurances "as long as the Korean people want the security relationship to continue." This approach provides a useful reminder that the U.S. is not forcing its presence upon the Peninsula but is there at the behest of, and on the behalf of, the Korean people. Then Washington, in close coordination with Seoul (and Tokyo) must convincingly make the case for continued engagement post-reconciliation or reunification, before less-informed public sentiment makes a continued American military presence unsustainable.

Japan. Kim Dae-jung has also continued his evangelical efforts at improving Japanese-Korean relations, encouraging Pyongyang to cooperate more fully with Tokyo and likewise encouraging Japanese Prime Minister Mori to plan a summit visit of his own in order to move the reconciliation process forward. The successful summit and Kim Dae-jung's public urgings in support of Japan-DPRK rapprochement can give Tokyo both the incentive and political cover it needs to move forward. (It could also create frictions between Seoul and Tokyo if not handled adeptly.) Tokyo was pleased and highly appreciative that President Kim raised Japan's concerns about North Korea's missile development plans during the summit and must be heartened (as is the U.S.) over Pyongyang's post-summit pledge to continue to freeze its missile test program. The path ahead will still be rocky, however.

Russia. Russia is also taking some dramatic steps to re-introduce itself into the Peninsula equation. President Putin's highly-publicized visit to Pyongyang while en route to the Okinawa G-8 summit demonstrated Putin's wish to be a player in East Asia politics – even if the decision to go to Pyongyang before his first ever official visits to Tokyo or Seoul indicates he may not have his diplomatic priorities in order. Russian foreign ministry officials with whom I have spoken in recent weeks have stressed the need for North Korea to feel secure in its dealings with the South and U.S. and have stressed that Russia, along with China, is best poised to provide these assurances.

The Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" notwithstanding, Russia appears concerned about North Korea's growing closeness with China, even though it is seemingly not prepared to match Chinese economic support to the still-bankrupt Kim

Jong-il regime. However, with Seoul (and presumably Washington and Tokyo) prepared to get out their own checkbooks, Russia apparently sees its own insertion into the equation as a low cost means of reminding the other major powers that Russia also has high stakes in the Peninsula game. Russia's renewed involvement also provides Pyongyang with renewed options and decreases its near-total security dependence on Beijing.

One final thought on Russia: as Putin makes his move to become more engaged in Peninsula affairs, this might be a good time for the U.S., ROK, and Japan to press Moscow to contribute to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) as well.

Coming Out Party Continues

Meanwhile, the next step in North Korea's coming out party takes place on July 26-27 in Bangkok when North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun takes his seat at the table at this year's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting and conducts side meetings with several of his counterparts. This will provide new opportunities for North Korea to interact with its regional neighbors and to continue its "charm offensive."

While North Korea's participation in the ARF ministerial meeting is welcomed, it remains to be seen how Paek's presence will affect the dialogue. In the past, ARF members have "expressed concern" about North Korea's missile program and other activities that could undermine peace and stability. In fact, Peninsula security has been one of the few hot topics that has made it to the ARF table. Beijing prevents any discussion on the region's most critical hot-spot – continuing cross-Strait tension between China and Taiwan – and generally avoids meaningful discussion on the number one multilateral point of contention in Southeast Asia – the South China Sea territorial dispute involving Beijing, Taiwan, and several of the ASEAN states. Meanwhile, India's presence at the meeting has tempered comments about nuclear concerns in South Asia as well. Should North Korea's presence in this consensus-driven organization result in Korean Peninsula security issues also being taken off the table, this high-level gathering will find itself with little of substance to discuss.

Nonetheless, many (myself included) would argue that the mere presence of all the ministers around the table is significant as a regional confidence building measure. In addition to promoting greater understanding, the ARF ministerial also makes possible direct contacts between senior officials that would otherwise prove difficult, if not impossible, to arrange.

For example, the ARF Ministerial will set the stage for a first ever official meeting between the DPRK Foreign Minister and the U.S. Secretary of State, provided that Secretary Albright attends the meeting as currently planned (Middle East peace talks could cause a last second cancellation). In addition, Paek's scheduled meeting with Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono – the highest level meeting ever between the two states – is seen as an ideal opportunity to get stalled Japan-DPRK normalization negotiations back on track. Meanwhile, Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy has announced that he will seize the opportunity to discuss current

impediments to the planned normalization of ties between Ottawa and Pyongyang. And, of course, the Bangkok meeting also provides an opportunity for continued high level direct interaction between North and South Korean officials.

Even in cases where a formal *tete-a-tete* is not arranged, Minister Paek will at least be seated around the same table with his regional counterparts, for the first time hearing their views first hand. As is the case in most multilateral forums, the opportunity for informal discussions and a frank off-the-record exchange of views is often the most important, if intangible, benefit emerging from the dialogue process.

The gathering of all the key Northeast Asia players at the ARF also provides an opportunity for further discussion of a possible sub-regional Northeast Asia Security Forum along the lines previously proposed by President Kim Dae-jung. Japanese and Russian leaders have also repeatedly called for formal, governmental-level six-party talks on Northeast Asia security issues. Such a forum could supplement or perhaps even replace the stalled Four-Party Talks involving the two Koreas, China, and the U.S. – the Four-Party Talks are primarily aimed at replacing the 1953 Armistice with a formal peace treaty, a task many hope the two Koreans will now handle directly.

I have previously argued that the ARF provides an opportune setting for sub-regional discussions on Northeast Asia security, and the presence of North Korea at this year's meeting makes it even more ideal. The biggest logistical hurdle to such a meeting has already been cleared; the six or eight ministers – I would add Mongolia and Canada to the mix – will already be assembled in Bangkok. Just as the ARF itself grew out of a luncheon discussion on security at the 1993 ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference, so too could the respective foreign ministers take the first step in establishing a Northeast Asian Security Dialogue merely by agreeing to sit together for informal discussions over breakfast or lunch during this year's ARF.

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