



U.S.-North Korea: Right Decision, but for the Wrong Reason by Ralph A. Cossa

The White House's decision not to include a visit to North Korea in President Clinton's current trip to Asia due to lack of progress in U.S.-DPRK missile talks is the right one, even if it is being done for the wrong reason. While U.S. efforts to eliminate North Korea's potential missile threat are important, there are more significant issues to be resolved before a Presidential trip is warranted, including an assessment of the impact such a visit would have on North-South reconciliation efforts. Absent greater forward progress in intra-Korean relations and some genuine reciprocity toward Seoul on the part of Pyongyang, a U.S. presidential visit could easily prove counter-productive to U.S.-Republic of Korea efforts to promote peace on the Korean Peninsula. It could also put undue pressure on Tokyo to rush its own normalization process with Pyongyang. As a result, suggestions that Clinton may still try to squeeze a trip in before January 20th are disturbing.

North Korea's international coming out has proceeded at a remarkable pace since the historic June 2000 summit meeting in Pyongyang between ROK President Kim Dae-jung and North Korea's supreme leader Kim Jong-il. Most of the progress, as it should be, has been in North-South relations, including the symbolically significant meeting between both sides' defense ministers in South Korea in September. However, last month's meeting between North Korea's top-ranked military leader, National Defense Commission first vice chairman Jo Myong-rok, and President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright's follow-on visit to Pyongyang have signaled welcomed progress in traditionally tense U.S.-DPRK relations as well.

I supported the overall intent of Secretary Albright's late October trip to Pyongyang, although the handling of the hastily-prepared trip was inexcusable – she was apparently duped into attending a massive celebration of the 55th Anniversary of the Korean Worker's Party. Nonetheless, Mrs. Albright reportedly spelled out directly to Chairman Kim the steps his regime needs to take to remove itself from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and to start the process of normalization of relations with the U.S. There is just no substitute for this type of face-to-face diplomacy.

But, as U.S. diplomatic efforts proceed, Washington needs to keep its eye on the ultimate objective – peace and stability on the Peninsula – which is best brought about by peaceful coexistence between North and South today and by peaceful reunification over time. This is a process in which Seoul must continue to be – and to be perceived by Pyongyang as being – in the driver's seat.

There are already signs that the all-important North-South process is slowing, especially as the South starts looking

beyond symbolism for some substantive signals of North Korean sincerity. There is growing concern in Seoul that too much progress too soon on U.S.-DPRK relations will cause the more important South-North process to be sidetracked. At best, there are concerns that Pyongyang cannot focus sufficient diplomatic attention simultaneously on Seoul and Washington and that its current preoccupation with U.S.-DPRK relations will cause ROK President Kim Dae-jung's outreach policies to suffer accordingly. Less charitable analysts would argue that it has been Pyongyang's intention all along to cut a deal with Washington and that its overtures toward Seoul were merely a means of getting Washington's attention.

Pyongyang's continued insistence on dealing almost exclusively with Washington on security-related issues underlines this point. Even the much-heralded North-South Defense Ministers' meeting was, in reality, more about economics than security. All that North Korean Defense Minister Kim Il-chol was willing to discuss was an opening of a rail and road economic corridor through the demilitarized zone. (Even here, the North insisted on a face-to-face meeting with U.S. military officials to ensure that the ROK had the "authority" to proceed.) Attempts by ROK Defense Minister Cho Seong-tae to discuss other security topics, such as a military hotline (originally a DPRK proposal) or other military confidence building measures (CBMs), were soundly rebuffed.

The key word one hears today in Seoul is reciprocity. There is a growing belief that rapprochement has been a one way street. One case in point was the ROK government's unilateral release of imprisoned North Korean spies and sympathizers in early September. There was a clear expectation that this gesture would be reciprocated; to date, it has not. More important, the North seems to be dragging its feet on the divided families exchange program and on CBM discussions.

Significantly, while Kim Jong-il has agreed in principle to visit the South, no date has been set. Kim reportedly commented recently that there was no need for him to conduct foreign visits since everyone is eager to come see him. So far he is right. Russian President Vladimir Putin quickly followed in Kim Dae-jung's footsteps and Japanese Prime Minister Mori has been falling over himself trying to get a similar invitation to visit Pyongyang. (Several senior Chinese officials have also made the trip but here, at least, they were preceded by the Dear Leader's trip to Beijing last May.)

There is no reason for President Clinton to rush to join this parade, at least not before there is some significant progress both in U.S.-DPRK and North-South relations. Simply put, no U.S. president should visit Pyongyang until Kim Jong-il has lived up to his agreement to visit Seoul. Further preconditions should include substantive North-South dialogue on military CBMs and an acknowledgment, long overdue, that the primary

signatory to any Peninsula Peace Agreement should be the Seoul government (and not Washington, as Pyongyang continues to insist).

It would make more sense for the first visit between North Korea's supreme leader and any U.S. President – be it Mr. Clinton or his successor (and I am neither wise enough nor foolish enough to predict who that might be) – to take place in a more neutral setting, such as some future Asia Pacific Economic Council (APEC) or United Nations meeting.

Following the APEC Leaders' Meeting in Brunei, President Clinton will be conducting an historic visit to Vietnam. This trip is completely appropriate, given Hanoi's years of positive interaction within ASEAN and significant progress in U.S.-Vietnam relations, including the recent signing of a Bilateral Trade Agreement that demonstrates Hanoi's commitment to at least modest economic liberalization. However, U.S.-DPRK relations have a long way to go before they reach this stage, and one essential step along this path is meaningful parallel progress in the North's relations with South Korea as well. One of the real successes of the Clinton administration's North Korea policy has been its steadfastness in insisting that Pyongyang deal directly with Seoul; a hasty or premature Presidential visit to North Korea runs the risk of undermining this accomplishment.

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