



The Korean Peninsula: Restoring the Peace Momentum by Ralph A. Cossa

Stop blowing up the balloons. Put away the ribbons and confetti. There is unlikely to be any major celebrations as we mark the first anniversary of the historic June 13-15, 2000 summit meeting in Pyongyang between ROK President Kim Dae-jung and DPRK Chairman Kim Jong-il. In the past 12 months, relations between North and South Korea have been like a roller coaster ride, first climbing to new heights and then experiencing a series of wild twists and turns and ups and downs. The security environment on the Korean Peninsula has gone from a seemingly hopeless stalemate to one with the best real promise of peace and stability since the end of the Korean War to its current state of near suspended animation -- the current condition caused by the suspension by Pyongyang of North-South high-level dialogue and the failure of Kim Jong-il to make his promised reciprocal visit to Seoul.

Some Koreans (North and South) have tried to pin the blame for the current lull on the Bush administration's emerging "hardline" policy toward North Korea. Kim Jong-il is even reported to have used the failure of Washington to complete its Korea policy review as an excuse for not setting a date for his long overdue visit to the South. That excuse disappeared with Washington's recent announcement that, after an excruciatingly (and I would add inexcusably) slow review process, it is now ready to engage Pyongyang in direct dialogue. But, even before this announcement, nothing the Bush administration had said or done since coming to power had indicated any lack of support for the North-South peace process or provided a credible excuse for the current lull in North-South dialogue.

It has been the long-standing position of North Korea, reiterated this week at the annual Asia Pacific Roundtable in Kuala Lumpur, that "the U.S. should not interfere in our people's reunification issue." The U.S., Pyongyang continues to argue, should sign a separate peace treaty with the North and then go home; it should not be involved in the intra-Korean dialogue process. Why then does Chairman Kim allegedly maintain that high-level North-South dialogue hinged on the U.S. actions? Could it be that he lacks the confidence and courage demonstrated by Kim Dae-jung in his historic journey North? Does Pyongyang's apparent stance represent yet another attempt to drive a wedge between the U.S. and ROK (by generating anti-U.S. feelings among Sunshine Policy supporters in the South)? Or, given the North's continued references to a separate peace treaty with the U.S., is this part of Kim Jong-il's broader strategy of trying to place Seoul in the secondary position vis-à-vis Peninsula peace talks? After all, the June 2000 Joint Statement between the two Korean leaders, historic and groundbreaking as it was, did not contain any reference to the word "peace." Is Kim Dae-jung's desire for some type of North-South Peace Declaration (not to be confused with a Peace Treaty) at the next summit also a

major contributing factor behind Kim Jong-il's reluctance to keep his word and visit the South? Only Pyongyang knows for sure.

The key question today, however, is how to restore and then sustain the previous peace momentum. The quickest way, of course, would be for North Korea simply to honor its previous commitments and resume the high-level dialogue process. (One hopeful sign is the apparent willingness of the two sides' foreign ministers to meet at the sidelines of the late July ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, although one would hope for some positive gestures before then.) More fundamentally, however, Pyongyang also has to acknowledge Seoul both as a legitimate dialogue partner on security issues and as its primary interlocutor when it comes to issues of peace on the Peninsula. In short, the ball remains in Pyongyang's court. It is up to Kim Jong-il to demonstrate his nation's willingness to get the peace process back on track.

Meanwhile, Washington's decision, finally, to reopen its dialogue removes Pyongyang's latest convenient excuse for avoiding dialogue with the South. Hopefully it will also help alleviate growing suspicions in Seoul (and elsewhere) that the U.S. has been avoiding dialogue with the North in order to justify its own forward military presence and its missile defense plans. Washington's failure, to date, to deal effectively with these suspicions and misperceptions was begging to have a negative impact on U.S.-ROK relations.

Washington's willingness to enter into a dialogue with Pyongyang on a variety of issues including missiles now that the review is completed should come as no surprise. President Bush himself stated that this would occur during his early March summit meeting with President Kim, a fact overlooked by those who choose to stress the U.S. president's "skepticism" regarding Pyongyang. Future dialogue will no doubt stress reciprocity and verification, but so did U.S. dialogue with the North during the Clinton administration -- recall that the U.S.-DPRK missile talks were suspended by the previous administration, reportedly because the North was not willing to put enough on the table to justify a presidential visit to Pyongyang.

There is no question that the extended process of the Bush administration completing its Korea policy review and delays in getting its Asia team fully on board had a negative impact on sustaining the Peninsula peace momentum and the decision finally to resume negotiations is both welcome and overdue. But, to return to my original point, it is direct North-South dialogue that is most critical to restoring and sustaining the momentum, and all this has ever required is for Pyongyang to agree once again to sit down and talk with its willing interlocutors in Seoul. Also required is Kim Jong-il's promised visit to the South.

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