



North Korea Offer to Resume Dialogue a Welcome but Insufficient Gesture

by Ralph A. Cossa

North Korea's surprise offer to resume high-level dialogue with the South, announced via a Sept. 2 Radio Pyongyang broadcast, is subject to many interpretations - here's mine.

It is no coincidence that the North Korean offer - attributed to Im Dong-ok of the North's Committee for Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland and directed to the South's beleaguered Unification Minister Lim Dong-won - came on the eve of Chinese President Jiang Zemin's first visit to Pyongyang and, more important, the night before Lim faced a no-confidence vote in the South Korean legislature.

On the one hand, Pyongyang's announcement sets the stage for Jiang's visit, since the Chinese leader has been outspoken in his support for the South's policy of engagement with the North. The Chinese Foreign Ministry had indicated that Jiang would call for a resumption of North-South dialogue during his visit, which he in fact did. Had North Korean leader Kim Jong-il really wanted to enhance his Chinese colleague's international credentials, however, the North's offer to resume talks would have come during and right after the Jiang visit. Doing it in advance makes it seem more like a DPRK decision rather than a kowtow; it demonstrates that Kim Jong-il remains his own man.

However, the most likely reason for the timing reflects the (belated) recognition by Kim Jong-il of just how fragile the South's Sunshine Policy has become. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung has been under increasing domestic criticism for his seemingly one-way relationship with the North. This was underscored when the ruling Millennium Democratic Party's coalition partner, the United Liberal Democrats, announced that it would join with opposition forces and support the no-confidence vote against Minister Lim, which all saw as a no-confidence vote toward the Sunshine Policy as well. (Lim, a chief architect of the South's Sunshine Policy, was the behind-the-scenes negotiator of ROK President Kim Dae-jung's historic visit to Pyongyang last year.)

Pyongyang's action not only demonstrates its tendency for brinkmanship politics, but also its inability to recognize when the brink has been reached. Had the offer to resume talks been made a week or two ago, it would have likely deflated the no-confidence effort. By waiting until the night before, Pyongyang's action was seen as a crass attempt to influence ROK domestic politics and thus proved counterproductive - the no-confidence vote was approved by a 148 -119 majority. While the vote is non-binding and Pyongyang's willingness to resume talks, if seen to fruition, could help justify Kim Dae-jung's actions in the unlikely event that he decides to retain the visionary Minister Lim, it nonetheless sends a strong message to President Kim (and to

North Korea) that "enough is enough." If the North is not prepared to be more forthcoming, in deeds as well as words, then future supportive gestures (and handouts) from Seoul appear increasingly unlikely. The resumption of high-level dialogue, unilaterally suspended by Pyongyang in March, is certainly welcome. The offer should be accepted by Seoul and praised by Washington. But it is hardly enough. More important will be a recognition by Pyongyang that Seoul is the appropriate interlocutor when it comes to discussing peace on the Peninsula - the North continues to insist that such talks can only be held with Washington, even as it continues to refuse Secretary of State Powell's offer to resume U.S.-DPRK negotiation "any time and anywhere, without preconditions."

The real test of North Korea's sincerity will be Kim Jong-il's willingness to set a date for his promised visit to the South and his willingness to sign a North-South Declaration of Peace (not to be confused with a still to be negotiated formal Peace Treaty) during his visit. Kim Dae-jung should specifically address this expectation, not as a precondition to the resumption of other dialogue, but as the only real litmus test of Kim Jong-il's sincerity ... and both Washington and Beijing should echo this call.

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