



Korean Peninsula: Missed Opportunities

by Ralph A. Cossa

North Korea never misses an opportunity to miss an opportunity. The latest example occurred earlier this month when Pyongyang precipitated yet another breakdown in the on again, off again North-South dialogue process, thus dealing a staggering, if not fatal blow to ROK President Kim Dae-jung's beleaguered Sunshine Policy of engagement with the North. North Korea's actions will likely further reduce hopes for a resumption of U.S.-DPRK dialogue as well and could cause many of Pyongyang's other Western interlocutors to rethink the wisdom of strengthening their own ties with the unpredictable Hermit Kingdom.

As recently as two months ago, the North-South dialogue process seemed to have gained new life. Pyongyang agreed in early September, after a self-induced six month hiatus, to resume high-level dialogue with the South. Many saw this gesture as a transparent (and unsuccessful) attempt to influence ROK domestic politics - the offer came the night before the Sunshine Policy's chief architect, Minister of Reunification Lim Dong-won, faced (and lost) a no confidence vote. Nonetheless, the resumed talks (held in Seoul on September 15-18) appeared promising, as new objectives were set and promises were made regarding future meetings and proposed joint efforts.

However, at the recently-concluded sixth round of ministerial-level talks, the North once again went out of its way to undermine the dialogue process and, with it, the hopes and dreams of President Kim Dae-jung. Most cruelly, the North pulled the rug out from under what was to be the fourth family exchange program, which brings together relatives divided since the Korean War for brief (and tightly controlled) visits.

From a South Korean perspective, the exchange program was one of the most important breakthroughs achieved during the historic North-South summit meeting between Kim Dae-jung and North Korean paramount leader Kim Jong-il in June 2000. Tens of thousands of elderly ROK residents have been lining up for a chance to visit long lost kin and for many, time is rapidly running out - of the 200 chosen by lottery for the long-delayed fourth exchange visit, more than a dozen have already died as the North continues to renege on its promise.

Pyongyang "postponed" the scheduled October 16-18 exchange visits, claiming that conditions would not be right for such family meetings (or for future high level talks in the South) until the ROK takes its forces off of their 9/11 alert - the fact that the alert was already in place when North Korean delegates visited Seoul on September 15 and agreed to a resumption of dialogue and family exchanges makes this argument highly disingenuous.

At a recent conference on "Korea and the Search for Peace in Northeast Asia" in Kyoto, many North Korea specialists argued that the North sees little value in interacting with a lame duck President in the South and that it is now up to the U.S. to take the initiative to revive the Peninsula peace process. But, as Korea specialist Aidan Foster-Carter (who writes on North-South relations for Comparative Connections) wryly noted, it was North Korean actions that prematurely lamed the duck. By missing yet another opportunity to get North-South dialogue back on track, the North has reduced the likelihood of U.S.-DPRK rapprochement as well, especially since the North continues to insist that President Bush "return to the policies of his predecessor" as a precondition to a resumption of dialogue.

This DPRK approach seems based on two false premises: one, that the U.S. needs the dialogue more than the North and is thus willing to bend over backwards to accommodate Pyongyang's unrealistic demands; and two, that time is somehow on Pyongyang's side - that the longer Pyongyang stalls, the more willing Washington (and Seoul) will be to generously reward the North for future cooperation. Many blame the Clinton administration's apparent over-eagerness to arrange a presidential visit to Pyongyang in its waning days with reinforcing this North Korean mind-set. But remember that, in the end, Clinton did not go, since Pyongyang would not agree in advance to satisfying U.S. concerns regarding its missile program, promising only that problems would be solved once Clinton visited. The real lesson Pyongyang should have learned was that there will be no "faith-based" agreement with Washington. Pyongyang will have to make verifiable concessions (and deliver on already made promises) if there is to be any hope for future meaningful cooperation. This was true during the Clinton administration and is likely to be doubly true now.

This does not mean that Washington is unwilling to talk with Pyongyang, however. For months, the Bush administration has expressed willingness to conduct a "comprehensive dialogue" with North Korea, but Pyongyang seems to be holding out for a better deal. My guess is that Washington's pledge to hold discussions "any time, any place, without preconditions" is as good an offer as the North is going to get. This was true before September 11 and is even more so today, given other more pressing concerns and yet another missed opportunity: North Korea's failure to jump fully on board the anti-terrorism bandwagon. To its credit, Pyongyang has strongly condemned the 9/11 attack and signaled its willingness to sign the UN International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages. But Pyongyang continues to strongly criticize U.S. military action in Afghanistan and has refused to take concrete measures (laid out by the Clinton administration) to remove itself from the State Department's list of state-sponsors of terrorism. Had Pyongyang agreed to expel five fugitive hijackers from a Japanese Red Army faction that have enjoyed over 30 years of asylum in the DPRK, it would have likely been dropped from the list prior to September 11 - yet another missed opportunity.

A resumption of North-South dialogue is also still possible but Pyongyang's past behavior has made President Kim so weak politically that he now has virtually no flexibility in dealing with the North. There is little opportunity today for further ROK concessions. But this does not mean that it would be wise for Pyongyang to wait things out until after the December 2002 ROK elections. Any Kim Dae-jung successor, regardless of party affiliation or size of mandate, will likely feel compelled to take a more hardline approach and demand much greater reciprocity in dealing with Pyongyang, especially if the North continues to litter the road ahead with more broken promises.

Once the ROK presidential campaign gets into full swing - and it is already warming up - the window of opportunity for improved North-South relations will close. And, even if Pyongyang finally sees the wisdom of resuming its dialogue with Washington, it should realize that the Bush administration is not likely to let its own dialogue with the North outpace the North-South effort (and the same holds true for the EU and others).

Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy offered North Korea its last, best hope for peace and stability on the Peninsula and for greater international acceptability - will it miss yet another opportunity?

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