



Three Scenarios for President Roh's Trip to Pyongyang: The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly by Michael J. Green

There is much speculation about what President Roh Moo-hyun will do when he meets North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang Aug. 28-30. The opposition Grand National Party (GNP) worries that Roh will pledge billions of dollars in aid to secure a dramatic visit by Kim to Cheju Island on the eve of the South Korean presidential election. The South Korean minister of unification has said that North-South economic cooperation will be on the agenda, but no promises have been made comparable to the shameless \$450 million bribe that former President Kim Dae-jung arranged to secure his June 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il. The U.S. government, which was notified but not consulted about the summit, has expressed its expectation that the meeting in Pyongyang will advance the denuclearization goals of the Six-Party Talks.

With preparations for the summit shrouded in secrecy and managed by South Korea's intelligence chief, few officials in Seoul or Washington had an opportunity to plan for outcomes. Now that the trip is public, different groups will jostle for position to determine what is given and what is received. Depending on who wins – and on President Roh's attitude – it is possible to construct three scenarios for the summit. One is good. One is bad. And one is ugly.

The Good

The good scenario will depend on the national security experts in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the ROK NSC keeping Roh focused on the national interest and not just the polls. It will also require Roh to think about his place in history over the course of decades and not just over the next six months. In the recent past I have heard Roh dismiss rumors about a North-South summit and declare his lack of enthusiasm for a trip north, stressing that denuclearization must proceed and noting that Kim Jong-il had pledged to first make a trip south to reciprocate the June 2000 summit in Pyongyang. Granted, these statements were made to high-ranking U.S. officials, but Roh seemed to lack the dangerous messianic desperation about North-South relations that characterized President Kim's attitude before June 2000.

Assuming that President Roh and his team stay strategic, a good scenario is possible. Roh would travel to Pyongyang on Aug. 28 with a clear message for Kim: further expansion of North-South economic cooperation in stages is possible, but only if Kim pledges to complete phase two of the Feb. 13 six-party agreement by the end of the year. This is what the U.S. and ROK delegations tried to achieve in the last round of the Six-Party Talks. It would mean disablement of the Yongbyon facility to the satisfaction of the IAEA and the other five parties and a credible declaration by Pyongyang of

its existing inventory of nuclear, weapons, components, and facilities.

In the good scenario, Roh would seek Kim's support for working on the peace mechanism contained in the Feb. 13 agreement, but would recommend restarting the confidence building measures contained in the unimplemented North-South Basic Agreement of 1992 as a first step toward a North-South Peace Treaty. He would also tell Kim that progress on human rights is important, and seek ways for an early accounting of the hundreds of abducted South Korean citizens missing in the North, in addition to urging Kim to make progress with Japan on their missing abductees. Roh could note the aspirations of all Korean people for reconciliation and reunification, but he would avoid any euphoria or celebration. Most important, he would tell the South Korean people honestly whether Kim Jong-il agreed to his proposals for concrete steps to improve North-South relations.

In the good scenario, Roh might advance the cause of denuclearization, human rights, and real reconciliation and he certainly would do no harm if he failed.

The Bad

The bad scenario will happen if the summit is driven by domestic political considerations over national security. The politicians around Roh realize that a celebration of North-South reconciliation in Pyongyang will polarize the South Korean public. However, since President Roh currently has only around 20 percent support in most polls and polarization of South Korean society would rally 50 percent to his side, politicians may calculate that those would be good numbers going into the December election. A celebration in Pyongyang would also overshadow the GNP's Aug. 18 presidential primary and keep the conservative candidate off message in his or her first week.

A symbolic summit would not require any actual breakthroughs, since the left will look at the whole event as a glass half full even if it is empty. President Roh has already won points with optimists by convincing Pyongyang to refer to him in official KCNA broadcasts as the "President of the ROK." He can score more points in Pyongyang by convincing Kim Jong-il to publicly confirm what Kim Dae-jung was only able to report unilaterally after his 2000 visit: that the North is ready to proceed with the three-stage confederation process. Since Pyongyang can continue what it is doing anyway, the price would only be ideological. Roh might also declare with Kim that the Korean War is officially "over," which would be hugely symbolic, but have no legal bearing until the armistice is replaced with a formal mechanism to maintain the peace. To ameliorate the center and the other parties in the Six-Party Talks, Roh could point to statements he extracts from Kim Jong-il on the North's

commitment to “fulfilling the six-party commitments” – another low-cost pronouncement since Pyongyang has an endless list of “hostile” U.S. policies it can point to as excuses for not moving forward at a later date.

Kim Jong Il would benefit from such a celebration in propaganda terms alone. The symbolism of “ending” the Korean War and proceeding with confederation would erode any remaining pressure on the North to move to phase two of the Feb. 13 agreement and would put another piece in place in Pyongyang’s effort to socialize the outside world into accepting its nuclear weapons status after last October’s test. (Who could convince the South Korean people or even the Chinese to call for new sanctions against the North for noncompliance with its commitments after Roh and Kim had declared peace in our time?). The symbolism of a breakthrough would come with other price tags from Kim Jong-il, of course. The menu floated unofficially by some close to the Blue House has included a new fertilizer plant, rebuilding the port of Nanpo, construction of a modern Kaesong-Pyongyang highway, and opening a new tourism project at Mt. Paektu (the last would involve tens if not hundreds of millions of dollars of cash for the elite a year with virtually no “pollution” of the North Korean people).

The bad scenario would definitely set back the course of denuclearization, probably causing the whole process to bog down in phase one of the Feb. 13 agreement as Kim Jong-il worked away at his existing plutonium-based weapons, his missile inventory, and his high-enriched uranium program. It would isolate Japan. It would create renewed tensions with Washington. At the same time, it might help the progressive camp avoid a drubbing in the December presidential elections, which would be one more benefit for Kim Jong-il. On the other hand, this scenario is not risk-free for President Roh, since the South Korean public’s idealism about the North is not what it was a few years ago.

The Ugly

The ugly scenario would require the hardcore believers of the 386 generation – the so-called “Taliban” in the Blue House – to trump both the national security professionals and the political realists. It would also mean that “Roh the Defiant” trumped “Roh the Pragmatic” (the one who brought us the USFK realignment, the Iraq dispatch, and the Free Trade Agreement). If Roh recognizes that a breakthrough on denuclearization is beyond his control, but nevertheless wants to leave a major legacy, he could instead agree with Kim to a North-South peace treaty that would pave the way for dismantling the current security architecture of the peninsula.

The North is already testing this possibility by demanding that the annual U.S.-ROK *Ulchi Focus Lens* exercises, inconveniently scheduled for Aug. 20-30, be cancelled. Perhaps Roh agrees to that or perhaps to canceling them in future in exchange for proceeding with the summit. The North’s other demands on the security front include

settling the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea, dismantling the UN and Combined Forces Commands, and ending the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The “Taliban” in the Blue House has tried unsuccessfully to deliver in all of these areas for Pyongyang and could convince Roh to resolve them once and for all as part of a comprehensive peace treaty. The scenario would be even uglier if rumors prove true that Roh plans to pledge \$20 billion in aid and is working on a second summit in Cheju Island to ruin the conservatives’ shot at winning the presidency in December.

As dear as this scenario is to some of Roh’s closest supporters, the downside risk is obvious. For one thing, a significant majority of South Koreans believe that the U.S.-ROK alliance is still indispensable for stability on the peninsula. The political and strategic backlash against a unilateral peace treaty could be devastating for the progressive camp in December, no matter how much the hardcore elements of their political base would be inspired. But for a president who sometimes likes doing the unexpected to keep his opponents on the defensive and who hasn’t been afraid to ignite anti-Americanism in the past, this scenario might be attractive.

The odds are that that President Roh’s summit will be somewhere between good and bad, with a slight but unnerving possibility for ugly. It is also quite possible that the Pyongyang Summit will be good, bad, and ugly all at the same time. With various constituencies grasping for control and different audiences expecting different messages, the entire affair may end up sending a muddled message to Pyongyang, Washington, and the South Korean people. The significance of the summit would then only become clear in the next wave of competition to define what happened and who promised what. That can be avoided if the U.S. and ROK governments agree now on how they would define a *good* summit, and begin coordinating to make sure Pyongyang knows what to expect.

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