



North-South Summit: Same Bed, Different Dreams?

By Ralph A. Cossa

ROK President Roh Moo-hyun is clearly looking forward to his first face-to-face meeting with North Korean Dear Leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang Oct. 2-4. What's still not real clear is what the two leaders will or will not talk about. Just as the process leading up to the meeting announcement was kept secret, so too is the current agenda. In this case, however, it could be because there has yet to be a true meeting of the minds about what will and won't be discussed.

This is hard to accept or understand from a U.S. perspective. Recall that the proposed summit between Kim Jong-il and then-U.S. President Bill Clinton in 2000 failed to materialize in large part because the North would not clarify "deliverables" in advance. The "trust us, it will be a good meeting" approach that no U.S. president would (or should) ever accept is apparently all too acceptable to Roh, a fact that makes a lot of South Koreans and Americans very nervous. One can be pretty sure that Kim Jong-il has a firm idea of what he wants to get out of the meeting; Does Roh?

On the surface, Roh's motives and objectives seem relatively transparent: he is looking to build his legacy. While it is doubtful that even the most diplomatically successful effort will garner him a Nobel Prize (as it did his predecessor Kim Dae-jung), it could be a feather in his cap (just as not having a face to face meeting with Kim Jong-il would be seen as falling short of his stated objectives).

Roh would also no doubt like to give his fellow "progressives" a boost in the upcoming presidential elections and progress in North-South relations (or at least the appearance of progress – the bar has been set pretty low) will help in this regard. Kim Jong-il no doubt sympathizes with and shares this objective. Pyongyang has made no secret of its disdain and distrust of the opposition Grand National Party (GNP), whose candidate Lee Myung-bak remains far ahead of any potential rivals from the ruling party camp (the actual candidate has not been officially chosen).

One has to suspect that one key reason for Pyongyang agreeing to the meeting now and perhaps a reason for its being more accommodating in the Six-Party Talks is to give the pro-engagement camp a boost. This does not imply, by the way, that the GNP is anti-engagement it isn't – but it would insist on more reciprocity and much better terms than the current administration has demonstrated that it is prepared to do.

Economic motivations no doubt are also a factor. While Pyongyang cannot expect to get another secret check (like the one for \$500 million that accompanied the first summit), there is talk of a \$20 billion economic incentive package being among the gifts Roh will be bringing to the North. Given the

failed nature of the North Korean state, every little bit helps and \$20 billion is considerably more than a little bit.

The visit also helps Kim Jong-il's "legitimacy." By agreeing to once again go north, South Korean leaders help play to the domestic image of Kim Jong-il as the "real" Korean emperor, with Roh (gifts in hand) being seen as playing a tributary visit. While one can come up with many excuses for why the Dear Leader did not keep his promise to pay a reciprocal visit (fear of a less than enthusiastic reception being primary among them), the appearance of tribute is there and will no doubt be played upon by propagandists in the North. (While I see little reason for Roh to have refused to see Kim anywhere other than in the South, a third country venue would have been more appropriate.)

Of greater concern, Pyongyang may have agreed to the summit in hopes of gaining leverage in discussions with the U.S., China, and others when it comes to actually establishing the "permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula" promised in the Sept. 19, 2005 and Feb. 13, 2007 declarations "at an appropriate separate forum" outside the Six-Party Talks.

Roh has made no secret of his desire for a North-South "peace declaration" although the nature and content of such a declaration remain unclear. No one is expecting a legally binding (and subject to ratification in the South) formal peace treaty to come out of the meeting. Even if it did, this would not result in a state of peace since there are other parties to the 1953 Armistice that "temporarily" put a halt to hostilities on the Peninsula. (The ROK is not even a signatory to that agreement, between the U.S. (signing for the United Nations) on one side and the DPRK and Chinese on the other.)

The real concern is that any symbolic declaration not be seen as a substitute for progress on a substantive peace agreement or (and Seoul seems to have lost this point) somehow be used to keep the ROK out of the follow-on peace process. Washington has been steadfast over the years (Clinton and Bush administrations alike) in refusing to negotiate a peace treaty with Pyongyang that excludes Seoul. The old Four-Party Talks broke down in 1999, largely because Pyongyang would not give Seoul equal status.

Pyongyang previously argued that there was no need for Seoul to be represented since South Korea did not sign the 1953 Armistice and since there was already a separate agreement (the 1992 North-South Basic Agreement) between Seoul and Pyongyang. A "peace declaration" that does not clearly state that the ROK and DPRK are sovereign equals or one that can be used to imply otherwise and/or to justify subsequently excluding Seoul from the real peace talks would give Roh a temporary symbolic "victory" but seriously undermine Seoul's long-term interests. Could this be Kim Jong-il's real motive?

When President Kim Dae-jung returned from his historical 2000 summit and declared that war on the Peninsula was no longer thinkable, he inadvertently placed a great deal of stress both on the ROK-U.S. Alliance and on the South Korean Ministry of Defense (MINDEF). If war is now impossible, the reasoning went, why are U.S. forces still based in the South, using up precious real estate, costing taxpayer dollars, and contributing to all sorts of real and imagined hardships for the South Korean people? And why does the ROK military still spend so much money on defense and support universal military service for all able-bodied young men in the South if there is no longer a threat?

The real reason war has been unthinkable is that the primary antagonist (which the MINDEF is no longer allowed to describe as the “enemy”) has been deterred from realizing its dream of reunification under the North by the combined strength of the alliance and the ROK military. This is why Kim Dae-jung, in Washington, was still proclaiming the vital importance of the alliance seven years later. Kim reminded his audience that he had made this same point to Kim Jong-il during their 2000 summit.

But does the Dear Leader agree? It seems increasingly clear that some type of highly symbolic (read: non-substantive) peace declaration will come out of the Oct summit. If it is to contribute to the prospects for lasting peace on the peninsula and a genuine peace treaty, then it must be clearly identified as the first step in a long process, one that will ultimately require confidence building measures and increased military transparency, that will respect ROK as well as DPRK sovereignty, and not be used to cut Seoul out of the ultimate peace process or to put pressure on Washington (and Beijing) to settle for less than a substantive peace accord with a fully denuclearized North Korea. Otherwise, it will be a very costly symbol indeed.

Finally, there is the issue of Korean Peninsula denuclearization. There is considerable confusion as to whether President Roh even intends to raise the issue. Speaking in Washington recently, former President Kim Dae-jung assured his audience that Roh would firmly raise denuclearization as a central issue in the up-coming summit. One wonders, however, if this was a prediction based on knowledge or a pointed suggestion that he hoped Roh would follow.

For his part, Roh has been quoted as saying that he would not raise the denuclearization issue since many others were already talking about it and, more importantly, discussing such a contentious issue could ruin the atmosphere of the talks: “Such arguments will not be helpful to peace on the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean relations,” the ROK leader reportedly exclaimed, to the amazement (if not anguish) of many.

Seoul continues to argue, of course, that the summit meeting will support, not undercut, the Six-Party Talks objectives but it is hard to understand how this will be the case if a strong statement supporting Korean Peninsula denuclearization is not in whatever final communiqué comes from the summit.