



North-South Summit: Potential Pitfalls Ahead?

by Ralph A. Cossa

“It could have been worse . . . a lot worse!” This was my initial reaction to the Oct. 2-4 summit meeting in Pyongyang between South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun and North Korea’s “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il!

The summit went relatively smoothly. The worst fears of many critics (myself included) were not realized . . . and least, not yet. While some good may even come out of the joint agreement signed by the two leaders – there was agreement, for instance, to examine military confidence building measures – there are also significant potential pitfalls ahead, depending on how the North (not to mention the South) chooses to interpret and implement the agreement.

The economic aspects of the joint statement – and it is mostly about economics – provide a real windfall for Pyongyang. The Roh government has not attached a price tag to the promised aid and development package, but the state-run Korean Development Bank has assessed the cost of three main proposed projects – expanding the Gaeseong Industrial Zone, establishing a new zone in Haeju, and providing infrastructure improvement to roads and railways in the North – alone as costing over \$50 billion (47.7 trillion won) in public and private funds. How much of this will come from public coffers remains to be seen – there is an ongoing debate about how much of the deal requires National Assembly approval, even as Roh tries to find ways to lock his successor into honoring his promises. Whoever wins the December South Korean presidential elections will no doubt take a hard look at what has been promised and make his own decision on how much will actually be pursued.

The fact that there is no linkage between this new handout and progress on the denuclearization front (or any other quid pro quo) has also raised many concerns. What if Pyongyang decides to slow down or end its current cooperative approach under the Six-Party Talks? Has Seoul’s no-strings-attached generosity removed some of the incentive for the North to cooperate with the U.S., China, and others? Only time will tell but some linkage would have been appreciated (and appropriate).

Also confusing is the reference to having the “leaders of the three to four parties directly concerned” work together to “end the current armistice regime and build a permanent peace regime.” What’s the confusion? South Korean spokesmen have said that the question is over whether China should participate – China is a signatory to the Armistice, as is the U.S. (signing for the United Nations) and North Korea; South Korean leader Syngman Rhee refused to sign! True, some North Korean interlocutors have expressed the view that China’s presence at peace talks is not really required. But, the

North has also long claimed that it is the South that has no place at the table. Has Roh been set up? Again, only time will tell but it is hard to be optimistic about the “appropriate parties” being able to reach agreement on a peace treaty if they cannot even agree on who the appropriate parties are.

The most troublesome phrase is the agreement by both sides, in the context of reducing military tensions, “not to antagonize one another.” What in the world does this mean? Pyongyang has long identified joint ROK-U.S. military exercises as proof of “hostile policy” toward Pyongyang. For that matter, the North is antagonized by the continued presence of U.S. military forces on the Peninsula. Is this what the Dear Leader had in mind?

When President Kim Dae-jung conducted the historic first North-South Summit in June 2000, he reportedly told Kim Jong-il that the continued presence of U.S. forces was important. He even claimed that the North Korean leader agreed (or at least acknowledged the point). Did President Roh make the same assertion? All we know so far, according to ROK Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo, is that the two sides “disagreed on the value of a continued U.S. military presence in the ROK.” He also noted that Roh’s proposal to withdraw all military forces from inside the Demilitarized Zone was “off the table as Chairman Kim Jong-il said that it was too early to discuss it.” So much for military CBMs.

President Roh needs to make it clear – to the South Korean public, to his American allies, and to his North Korean interlocutors – that military exercises and indeed a U.S. military presence are deemed vital to peace and security on the Peninsula. If he has already told Pyongyang that, he needs to repeat it for everyone else to hear, to foreclose future arguments about such “antagonistic” exercises being contrary to the spirit of the Oct. 3 declaration.

Both sides also agreed that “their highest authorities will meet frequently” – the North’s version of the declaration says “from time to time” – which the South is interpreting as a commitment to regular summits. However, Kim Jong-il displayed no inclination to honor his earlier commitment (to Kim Dae-jung) to visit the South, stating “Why don’t we have [titular head of state] Kim Young Nam pay you the return visit this time, And I will come to Seoul when the time is ripe.” In a society when symbolism matters, this reinforces Kim’s position as being somehow above Roh’s (and, by extension, the North being above the South).

Finally, one has to be amused by Roh’s discovery that Kim Jong-il does not like to talk about “reform and openness” and that he does not trust the ROK . . . and somewhat dismayed by Roh’s reaction to these observations. “We should try to avoid making such misunderstanding by not going on and on about reform and opening up to North Koreans,” Roh explained, noting also that “we have to make more efforts to

further tear down this wall of mistrust,” as if to acknowledge that the fault somehow lies primarily in the South. Avoiding discussions of openness and reform in effect validate the North’s current political and economic system; is this Roh’s intent? Meanwhile, the South’s Unification Ministry, ever eager to please, has already begun removing the terms “reform and openness” from articles about North Korea on its official website.

Surely a little constructive criticism among friends would be helpful. Kim had no hesitancy in complaining about the “slow pace of development” of the Gaeseong Complex – Roh described Kim as being “somewhat upset” by this turn of events – although one could easily argue that the fact the Gaeseong proceeded at all in the face of North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests sent all the wrong signals (and reinforced the North’s sense of entitlement, so evident in Kim’s complaint).

Despite all the potential downsides, the trip did accomplish one of Roh’s objectives; his standings in the polls at home have gone up roughly 10 percent, as the visit was generally (if cautiously) well-received in the South. A majority of South Koreans deemed it “useful.” Whether this support can be sustained and transferred to whoever is chosen to carry the progressive banner into this December’s presidential election remains to be seen, however.

For now, at least, we can all rest easier that our worst fears regarding the summit have not (yet) been realized. But many potential pitfalls lie ahead, as the North Korean leadership, if true to form, attempts to gain maximum advantage from the deal with minimal opening up or concessions to the South. The various South Korean presidential candidates, meanwhile, should refrain from making this a divisive political issue by jointly stating that aid and development will be tied to steady progress on denuclearization and sound business practices (read: reform, openness, and transparency) in the North.

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