



Summit in Pyongyang: Breakthrough or Breakdown?

by Scott Snyder

The dramatic announcement of an inter-Korean summit provides an opportunity to test the momentum created by North Korea's pragmatic attempt to develop new relationships with the outside world. ROK President Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy has supported Pyongyang's own apparent efforts to reach out to the international community. It is only fitting that North Korea reciprocate by acknowledging the ROK as a legitimate counterpart and the likely main partner in achieving economic rehabilitation.

Some critics have suggested that attempts to influence the outcome of South Korea's National Assembly elections drove the timing of the summit announcement, but now the elections are over and the opportunity to progress toward inter-Korean reconciliation remains to be grasped. Most notably, all the former South Korean presidents endorsed the summit announcement even during the heat of a domestic election campaign, and the divided outcome of the election itself underscores the need for leadership that broadly represents the desires of the South Korean people; namely, pursuit of engagement with reciprocity.

The South Korean election result is also a subtle reminder that the Sunshine Policy in its current form may not last forever. In combination with the undetermined outcome of Japanese and U.S. elections to be held later this year, the atmosphere for an agreement that can "lock in" important gains for North Korea may never be better than if inter-Korean summit talks are indeed realized.

The next rounds of preliminary negotiations over protocol and agenda setting will not be easy, and the historical record shows that there have been more breakdowns than breakthroughs in inter-Korean dialogue. In addition, past breakthroughs have been accompanied by external shocks such as the announcement in 1971 that Nixon would visit Beijing and the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, a pattern which raises questions about precisely what conditions have triggered the current opening. The task of managing appropriate respect for hosts in Pyongyang while also maintaining dignity as South Korea's highest leader will require Kim Dae Jung to exercise political wisdom at every turn.

Compounding the difficulty of managing preliminary negotiations is the fact that future negotiations will be conducted under public scrutiny and excessive media speculation over the agenda has already made the task of working-level negotiators more difficult. Excessive South Korean media speculation gives the upper hand to the North Korean side, which does not have to worry that media leaks would compromise their own negotiating position. In fact, North Korean media accusations of ROK DMZ violations may

already provide a pretext for tactical demands or even possible withdrawal from negotiations.

However, there are powerful factors in favor of expanded inter-Korean exchange and cooperation that would best be stimulated by the symbolism accompanying an historic direct meeting between top Korean leaders. First, if the South Korean government is to offer expanded assistance to North Korea's economic recovery, it is appropriate for Kim Jong Il to acknowledge the extensive economic support of the South Korean people in his meeting with Kim Dae Jung.

Second, the next stage of North Korea's economic rehabilitation must go beyond food aid to include economic development, a process that will inevitably require much greater access to North Korea if it is to be successful. The KEDO project to build light water reactors in North Korea and the Hyundai tourism project at Mount Kumgang are two examples of the necessity for South Korean technical experts to go to North Korea as part of any expanded infrastructure rebuilding and economic rehabilitation process.

Third, North Korea's own efforts to expand relations with the international community will be stimulated by progress in inter-Korean relations. President Kim Dae Jung's own voice has been valuable in shaping a more favorable international environment for North Korea. President Kim called for the United States to lift economic sanctions two years ago and played a major role in convincing former Defense Secretary Perry to recommend that the United States reach out to North Korea diplomatically (although there has been little significant progress thus far). In the future, the South Korean president may be the most effective advocate in gaining international support for North Korea's economic recovery.

Perhaps the most difficult challenge Kim Dae Jung faces is the task of converting the extraordinary symbolism accompanying a summit meeting into substantive, mutually beneficial progress – through enhanced security of South Korea in exchange for the economic stabilization of the North. The outstanding question is whether, having taken a few tentative steps outside in the spring of a new millennium, North Korea is ready to bask in greater sunshine and the warm "South wind" of Kim Dae Jung's visit. An even more complex question is whether, with wind from the South, there will be political will to persist in the face of possible typhoons that may accompany warmer weather.

Scott Snyder is Representative to Korea of The Asia Foundation and author of Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior. The views presented here are his own and do not necessarily represent those of The Asia Foundation.