



North-South Korea Summit Reflections by Han Sung-Joo

What prompted Kim Jong-Il to emerge from his veil of mystery last week and accept an olive branch from his South Korean counterpart, Kim Dae-Jung? South Koreans are still bewildered, if pleasantly surprised, by the extravagant reception that President Kim Dae-Jung received from his host, Kim Jong-Il, during the historic visit to Pyongyang. They are wondering what is behind the warm gestures and magnanimous demeanor and what it all means for the future of North-South relations. It is possible, though not likely, that the North Korean leader has become an apostle of peace on the divided peninsula. A more plausible explanation suggests other motives.

North Korean Motives

Kim Jong-Il may have determined that if anyone can help the North solve its economic woes, it is the South Korean president. He could have been truly gratified by Kim Dae-Jung's "Sunshine Policy" of engaging the North and wanted to help shore up the latter's reputation. At the same time, Kim Jong-Il saw the summit as a chance to present himself as a national hero in North Korea and as a peace-loving, reasonable, and broad-minded man to South Koreans and the world.

The second motive concerns influence. Kim Jong-Il must have reasoned that a show of Korean amity would aid Pyongyang's efforts to improve diplomatic relations with other countries, particularly the United States and Japan. At the same time, he could have hoped to sow some discord between Seoul and Washington and Tokyo, which may not see eye to eye with South Korea on the urgency of issues such as missiles and nuclear weapons.

The North Korean leader may have deduced that the goodwill earned by being publicly magnanimous could be used at the bargaining table to avoid concrete concessions. This is especially true on such issues as weapons of mass destruction, which are very important to the United States and Japan, and the reunion of families, a question that is politically very sensitive in South Korea.

One thing seems clear. The North's steps toward bridging the divide signal a new sense of confidence that it can maintain its regime even while reaching outside for help. Six years after the death of his father, Kim Jong-Il must feel that he has succeeded in consolidating his own position at home and in building a political system essentially impermeable to outside influence.

Impact on North-South Relations

Whatever the motivation, the appearance of harmonious relations will have a positive effect on the political standing of both Kims at home and abroad. If symbolism was largely

substituted for substance, the summit at least opened a line of communication between the leaders. But it is premature to believe that trust and confidence have been built all of a sudden and that an era of cooperation has arrived. Neither is it realistic to expect that unification is imminent. The large-scale economic assistance to the North that may result from the talks could help sustain the viability of the Pyongyang regime.

The South Korean government, even while basking in the glow of the successful visit, has much work ahead. It must maintain the momentum established during the trip and push for concrete agreements in the area of economic cooperation and more important, on a framework for peace and expanded people-to-people contacts.

At the same time, the South must contend with the fact that heightened expectations from the summit have lowered the public's guard against the North Korean military threat, which remains undiminished. An overwhelming majority of the Korean people were born after the 1950-1953 Korean War. They neither remember nor scarcely understand why the U.S. fought in Korea half a century ago and question the presence of U.S. troops today. If the hospitality that Kim Jong-Il displayed on Kim Dae-Jung's visit to Pyongyang can be seen as his own attempt at a "Sunshine Policy," then the North's version may be working even better than the South's.

Within North Korea, there must be those who question the wisdom of embracing the South just as there are those in Seoul who have doubts about engaging Pyongyang. Kim Jong-Il is taking an even greater risk than Kim Dae-Jung. It could ultimately prove to be the undoing of himself and his regime.

It is also quite possible that the gamble may pay off for both sides. For North Korea it may be in the form of a revived economy and maintenance of the regime. For South Korea, it could mean a less threatening northern neighbor, increased exchanges between the North and the South, and improved chances of eventual unification.

Implications for the Major Powers

The major powers with strong interest in Korea, China, the United States, Russia, and Japan, have all welcomed and supported the inter-Korean summit. But it is clear that they are reassessing their positions vis-à-vis the Korean Peninsula as the summit will surely have profound implications for their respective interests.

China. In the short to medium term, China has the most to gain diplomatically from radically improved relations between North and South Korea. As the secret visit by Kim Jong-Il to China only a few days before the Korean summit underscores, China is back on the center-stage in Korean affairs. China did not seem uneasy about improved relations between the United States and North Korea. At the same time,

neither would it mind to play a more central role in Korean affairs as a country having good relations with both the North and the South.

From China's point of view, a breakthrough in North-South Korean relations is consistent with its other interests. China prefers peace and stability on the peninsula, maintaining a balance between North and South, and avoiding any conflict into which China could be drawn. China is particularly interested in preventing the collapse of North Korea. An improved relationship between North and South Korea, and the resultant improvement in North Korean economic situation, will not only help prevent the collapse of North Korea but also obviate the need to provide massive assistance to it.

United States. For the United States, a sudden and radical change in the situation on the Korean Peninsula could be seen as a mixed blessing. The United States shares with China many of the same objectives, including peace and stability as well as preventing a sudden collapse of North Korea. *Vis-à-vis* Pyongyang, the United States has pursued a soft-landing policy, intended to bring about a peaceful transition of North Korea into a relatively open and market-oriented society. This policy resulted from the conclusion that bringing about a sudden collapse of North Korea was neither feasible nor desirable under the existing circumstances. A thaw between the two Koreas would be quite consistent with this aspect of U.S. policy and interest.

However, the United States is committed to preventing and curtailing North Korean development of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) including nuclear weapons and missiles. It does not want to see North Korea's nuclear and/or missile program precipitate an arms race in Northeast Asia and proliferation of such weapons globally. Thus, the United States would be concerned that the appearance of improved relations between the two Koreas might divert international attention away from the issues of North Korean WMDs. Furthermore, as North Korea discovers an alternative source of economic support and assistance, the United States might lose some of the leverages it has had in negotiating with North Korea. At the same time, complacency regarding the ever-present military threat of the North, that may result from the appearance of good relations between the two Koreas, could weaken the rationale for continued stationing of U.S. troops in Korea.

Russia. Russia's main concern regarding the Korean issue in recent years has been not to be left out of the process. Hence, in 1994, it proposed an international conference, which would of course include Russia, in connection with the North Korean nuclear issue. Russia, like Japan, also had apprehensions about the four-party talks on Korea, which excluded both Russia and Japan. Until 1995, Russia's relations with Pyongyang worsened to the extent that Russia decided not to renew its security treaty with North Korea. Since then, Russia has mended fences. Now, Russia would like more than to simply preventing exclusion. Russia made an emphatic gesture of return to the Korean question by announcing shortly before the Korean summit the forthcoming visit by its president, Vladimir Putin, to North Korea.

Japan. Japan's policy goals may be summarized as follows: maintaining peace, stability, and status quo on the Korean peninsula; maintaining Korea as a buffer between it and China, for which maintaining U.S. troops both in Korea and Japan is deemed necessary; ensuring the non-nuclearization of Korea, both for security and non-proliferation purposes; and curtailing North Korean missile program. In the long run, Japan would also be concerned about the possibility of Chinese dominance of Korea. So far, Japan has had only limited involvement in Korean matters, the obvious one being the KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) process. However, any large scale economic rehabilitation program of North Korea will inevitably involve some form of contribution by Japan. Hence, Tokyo feels it has the need and claim to be actively involved in the discussion of the Korean question. For this reason, Japan, together with Russia, supports the idea of a six-party (North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States) mechanism on Korea.

Conclusion

Thus, there is a whole new game developing in the international politics involving the Korean Peninsula, where each country is trying to secure a place for itself in determining the fate of Korea. North Korea will try to take advantage of the competitive proclivities of the major powers.

South Korea, on its part, must have the wisdom to distinguish between appearances and realities, and between short-term impulses and long-term interests. It should be able to devise and pursue a diplomatic policy that enables making new friends while keeping old allies.

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