



What a Week for North Korea

by Aidan Foster-Carter

In 20-odd years of following North Korea, there have been weeks - months, even - when nothing much discernibly happened. In recent years that has been less the case. Last week events came thick and fast. On Tuesday, Sept. 17, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi flew to Pyongyang for what may prove a turning point in ties with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The same day, Seoul's Mr. Football, Hyundai scion Chung Mong-joon, declared his long-expected candidacy for South Korea's presidential election on December 19. As yet he doesn't have either a party or a program, but polls suggest he could still become Kim Dae-jung's successor.

That was just Tuesday. On Wednesday the two Koreas held separate ceremonies for starting work on two road and rail corridors across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Actual mine-clearing began for real on Thursday. The publicity photos were a contrast. In the South, a German-made bulldozer led a posse of troops clad in bright-orange protective uniforms into the DMZ, whereas the North just showed a lot of guys with spades. (Seoul has sent them a load of equipment, so one would hope the Korean People's Army, or KPA, has protection too.) First agreed after the 2000 summit, this project had stalled for two years. Now, it seems, it's for real.

Nor did it stop there. On Friday, the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that the city of Sinuiju, on the Yalu river (Amnok-gang to Koreans) across from Dandong, China, has been made a special administrative region (SAR) for 50 years. Pretty much anything goes by way of business, it seems. Foreigners are welcome.

Quite a week, all in all. In detail, I'm still digesting it. But as a whole, the mind boggles. Who can now deny that North Korea really is changing? Any one of these three events would have been major news. Each entails risk for Kim Jong-il. At the same time, none of them is wholly clear-cut. Pyongyang is not about to simply roll over, wag its tail and make nice to everyone. There may still be reversals. Yet even a hardened cynic like me finds the evidence overwhelming that we're now in a new and hopeful phase.

For a start, suddenly Koizumi is a foreign-policy mover and shaker. Sunday found him in Copenhagen for the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). Kim Dae-jung was in town too, and the pair urged the United States to resume dialogue with North Korea. That call will be echoed by ASEM as a whole. Thirteen out of 15 European Union member states - all but France and Ireland - plus the EU itself now have ties with the DPRK. Especially since the skeptical George W. Bush administration came to power in the U.S., Europe has strongly backed engagement with Pyongyang, an approach endorsed equally by ASEM's Asian members.

Spot the odd man out. True, in Iraq Washington seems to be planning to go after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein come what may, with or without allies. If that proves a pushover - which is a very big if - then "axis of evil" logic suggests North Korea could be next on the list. Here again Russia and China are dead against, as is the current South Korean government. But even the conservative opposition leader Lee Hoi-chang, current favorite to be South Korea's next president come February, pointedly hasn't endorsed the evil-axis phrase. Now that Japan has plumped for dialogue too, it'll be hard for President Bush not at least to give peace a chance. So Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly is now expected to make his much-delayed trip to Pyongyang in early October.

And then what? That remains to be seen. Unlike some, I don't think we're out of the woods yet, not by a long chalk. It depends on how you evaluate Kim Jong-il's sensational admission that North Korea did indeed kidnap about a dozen Japanese in the 1970s and '80s. While a welcome change from their usual "Bart Simpson" (of The Simpsons) denial posture - "didn't do it/nobody saw me/can't prove a thing" - is this a new leaf overall (next up, here's where we hid the nukes)? Or is it rather a gamble: playing a low-value card - and for vast potential gains in Japanese aid - precisely so as to keep hidden the aces that really matter?

It doesn't help that the abduction issue may backfire. Coming half-clean doesn't cut it. It was brave to admit these crimes, but dumb to let the issue run on by not fessing up in full. Why are most dead? How did they die? Bilateral ties can't move forward until the whole gory story is known. But if this runs on, Kim may conclude that confessions are a Pandora's box and revert back to denial mode on other issues. Also, naturally, families of South Korea's far more numerous abductees are now demanding parity and want their own loved ones back, or at least news of their fate.

Lee Hoi-chang agrees, so North-South ties under him could turn frosty too. Then again, it was cunning timing of Kim Jong-il finally to let the rail and road links roll now. If Lee inherits these as a fait accompli, he will be locked into the Sunshine Policy. Yet making Sinuiju a SAR suggests the first border to open may be the far less risky one with China.

But as ever, the United States is crucial. If and when Kelly goes to Pyongyang, he needs to hear credible offers of serious dialogue on the nuclear, missile, and other issues. Will he? Or will a U.S. attack on Iraq instead stiffen the KPA's resolve not to yield up any of its own nasty arsenal, for fear of facing the same fate and give Pyongyang a pretext to break off North-South dialogue as well? It would be tragic if Bush's seeming determination to do things John Wayne-style in western Asia torpedoes the Korean peace process as collateral damage, just when North Korea is at last showing it is willing to risk real change.

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