

Policy Forum 07-068: A Russian View on Inter Korean Summit

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By Georgy Bulychev

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I. Introduction

Georgy Bulychev, Director for Korean Research Programs, Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow, writes, "if the DPRK gains short-term profits (like fostering her stance vis-à-vis the U.S. and receiving economic aid), the South and other interested countries will gain over the long-term. For the South, it is an important step forward on the way towards normalizing relations with the North and strengthening the common potential of the Korean

states. Looking from the angle of regional geopolitics, it would provide for stronger stability and growing interaction and coincide with Russia's priorities."

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II. Article by Georgy Bulychev

- "A Russian View on Inter Korean Summit"

By Georgy Bulychev

The recent breakthrough in inter-Korean relations occurs against the background of serious shifts in the DPRK's relations with the outside world and the U.S. in particular in the progressing settlement of the nuclear problem. Judging by what the North Koreans told the Southerners, this is the reason why, in view of a better regional situation, the 'time is appropriate' to hold a summit.

It may not be all that bad that Seoul's initiative on the summit is being realized only now. After 2000 Kim Jong Il's failure to visit Seoul caused reproaches of perfidy. But after George H.W. Bush came to power in Washington relations with the U.S. became extremely strained, and a nuclear crisis broke out. Would it have been sensible and fruitful, in a situation of hostilities with the Republican administration, for Kim Jong Il to go to Seoul? The North Korean leader's inner circle would, for security reasons, have hardly given consent to his trip to the territory where U.S. troops were deployed.

We consider it absolutely sound that the Roh Moo Hyun, without concentrating on problems of periodicity and protocol so painful for the Confucian world outlook, did not conceal his wish to meet DPRK leader 'any time in any place.' At one time Moscow became interested in hints about a possible meeting in a third country, since Russia has always called for North-South national reconciliation it would have been willing to offer its services. The arrangement of a meeting in Pyongyang is a direct result of President Roh Moo-hyun's offensive diplomacy. The fact that he is accompanied by both Foreign and Defense minister means substantial issues would be on the agenda. The North Koreans, certainly, consider the agreement as an act consolidating their advantages: usually, the junior goes to visit the senior. Many South Koreans felt insulted by this fact even though it can be interpreted otherwise: the stronger state does not attach attention to conventionalities and is ready to make symbolic concessions in order not to provoke the weaker side's inferiority complex.

The DPRK's consent to hold a summit is a rather resolute step for Northerners, too, because Kim Jong Il's partner is an outgoing president, unable, for objective reasons, to control how his promises will be implemented. For this step to be justified in the eyes of Kim Jong Il's team and the DPRK population, a practical outcome aimed at consolidating the regime and further raising the authority of North Korean leader is needed - not simply in form of economic aid, which some South Korean and foreign observers attribute to be Pyongyang's main goal.

The goals are broader, although not always duly conceived by the South. ROK conservatives, in particular, suspect that Kim Jong Il (whose country's status has been strengthened recently) can have an impact in the South's elections through his position-of-strength. However, the impact of the summit would hardly become decisive in the presidential race. In our view, Pyongyang's goal is to foster its position in the multilateral negotiating process and - in a broader context - in the DPRK's relations with the outside world. Pyongyang will try to gain Seoul's support in getting most beneficial conditions during the Six-party talks.

The Northerners might attempt to exacerbate growing contradictions between the partners in the Six-party talks, particularly between the ROK and U.S. It must be expected that to exert pressure on its counterpart the DPRK will bring up issues like the withdrawal of US troops from the South, cessation of military exercises, abrogation of ROK-U.S. military alliance, but these issues should be regarded as attempts to extract compromise conditions favorable for the DPRK. In the end, the Seoul - Washington relationship depends on the wisdom and flexibility of these countries' leaders.

Via the South Korean President, Kim Jong Il can signal to President Bush his readiness to accelerate de-nuclearization (possibly, before the latter's term in office comes to an end) if the US meets the DPRK half-way. But the nuclear problem cannot be resolved in an isolated way. First of all, the DPRK wants security guarantees extended and its relationship with the US normalized. It should also be understood that security guarantees are not a document or a declaration but a real system of mutually verifiable international commitments allowing the DPRK to feel immune against attempts to isolate and pressure the country, or efforts to undermine its regime by means of 'soft power'.

Can anybody expect Pyongyang to be willing to give up its trump cards during the summit - for example, turnover nuclear explosive devices which might have already been manufactured? Excessive expectations will only bring about disappointments. However, even a reaffirmation by the DPRK leader of the country's intention to advance on the path of de-nuclearization and, at a certain stage, discuss the issue of its military nuclear potential would be a great success for Roh Moo-Hyun. The DPRK has the right, then, to count on a more decisive ROK support of her legitimate demands in the framework of the Six-party talks. Nevertheless, de-nuclearization issues on the Korean Peninsula and the making of a regional security architecture seem to be a subject not for inter-Korean relations, but for multilateral arrangements. As the results of the summit the ROK will, obviously, raise its profile in the discussion of these matters. It is no secret that the DPRK prefers to discuss modalities of security provision on the peninsula mainly with the U.S. Seoul, thanks to a direct open dialogue with the North, will have more chances to have its interests considered in these discussions.

The DPRK will also seek to gain the support of the South for its demands for multilateral energy and economic assistance, in the Six-party talks. The LWR issue could become a topic in the summit. Remembering the KEDO experience (with South Korea bearing the main financial burden and consent to supply energy equipment) the North apparently expects the Seoul to 'lobby' the U.S. for the DPRK request for a nuclear power station. Russia is also not indifferent to this 'topic' and is interested in energy equipment and technologies deliveries and, moreover, in the involvement of Russian nuclear energy industry in the eventual construction of a nuclear power plant in the DPRK. Let us remember that the 1985 bilateral agreement with DPRK on building a nuclear power plant is still in force.

The ROK leadership has noted its desire to conclude a 'peace pact' with the North. This issue is closely linked with the discussion of a new peace regime in place of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. In this case Russia's (and Japan's) interests should remain in the background. This is an issue where the Six-party process participants should submit to possibly important arrangements reached without their actual participation.

The DPRK, however, has always stressed that the main issue is a peace treaty with the U.S. since relations with ROK are formally normalized by the 1992 Agreement on Reconciliation, Exchanges and Cooperation. The PRC, for its part, is not directly involved in designing new arrangements to replace the Armistice Agreement because it normalized relations with both the U.S. and South Korea long ago. In reality, the DPRK seems to feel burdened by its excessive dependence on Beijing and does not like allowing China to meddle in its deal with the U.S. As to relations between the divided parts of Korea, they should be codified in bilateral format as soon as possible, without looking back

at the obsolete Armistice Agreement. In case of this arrangement the ROK would become a full-fledged participant in setting up a new peace-maintaining regime (and would have no reason to protest a DPRK-U.S. bilateral treaty). We assume these observations can dictate the political line of the Northerners during the upcoming meeting. Are these goals contradictory to the U.S., ROK, Russia and other participants' political targets? Seemingly not, particularly if we bear in mind that China's increasing influence on the DPRK and the capture of Northern resources by Chinese business are not pleasing to Seoul.

After the summit we can expect substantial progress in inter-Korean economic cooperation. We support the statement that laying down the economic 'foundation' is, at the present stage, the most necessary and most logical next step for North-South rapprochement. One has to keep in mind that cooperation with South Korean business is an important development in the economic modernization of the DPRK and its integration into the international system of labour so the parties involved could forgo the expectation of immediate profits.

The North will evidently expect a weighty 'gift' from the rich South - not in form of assistance, but in investments, primarily into the DPRK's infrastructure. This type of investment assistance meets South Korean and DPRK's interests much more than aid in form of foodstuffs and goods ('Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and he'll eat forever.')

For Russia it is highly important that the concept of tripartite cooperation initiated by Russia is set in motion at the summit. Connecting the Trans-Korean railway to the Trans-Siberian Railway proposed by the countries' leaderships should be very important in the future. Russia's perception of the summit will in many respects depend on the progress in this issue during the Pyongyang meeting. Russia is also interested in a North - South agreement on other promising tripartite projects, such as transmission of electric energy from the Russian Far East to the North and South of the Korean Peninsula, and the eventual cooperation of the three countries in restoring DPRK energy facilities.

In short, the summit should not result in a zero-sum gain. If the DPRK gains short-term profits (like fostering her stance vis-à-vis the U.S. and receiving economic aid), the South and other interested countries will gain over the long-term. For the South, it is an important step forward on the way towards normalizing relations with the North and strengthening the common potential of the Korean states. Looking from the angle of regional geopolitics, it would provide for stronger stability and growing interaction and coincide with Russia's priorities.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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