

Discussion of “Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems”

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Nautilus Institute PFO 00-05: Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems

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Discussion of "Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems"

By Timothy L. Savage

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June 26, 2000

I. Introduction

The following comments were contributed regarding the recent Policy Forum Online articles by Timothy L. Savage. Comments were provided by David Brown, Vice President of the Stanton Group and former Korea Desk officer for the US State Department, and Jekuk Chang, a Tokyo based attorney- at-law and currently a Ph.D. candidate at Keio University in Tokyo, Japan.

II. Comments on Timothy Savage's Paper

1. Comments by David Brown

I thought Tim Savage's essay was excellent; right on target, with one minor quibble. To my certain knowledge, there was no serious consideration given by the US government to bombing the Yongbyon reactor complex. Yes, some people may have talked about it. Someone or other may have even tested Kim Young-sam's attitude on the subject (I have not seen his remarks). But the idea would never have survived vetting by the National Security Council or any other rational forum.

David Brown Vice President, The Stanton Group

2. Comments by Jekuk Chang

In his article, "Koreans Take Steps to Solve Own Problems", Timothy L. Savage listed three possible reasons why North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, decided to invite South Korea's President Kim Dae Jung to the summit in Pyongyang: first, Pyongyang wanted to secure sufficient US allies, including Seoul, before its new administration comes into power next year, in the hope that these allies will remain supportive of Pyongyang, even if the new administration's policies take a more hawkish turn; second, Kim Jong Il decided to put his regime and leadership at risk in order to avoid "the fate that befell Russia and Eastern Europe"; and third, realizing that North Korea lacks the capacity to attract investment, due to its execrable infrastructure, Pyongyang viewed Seoul as its hope of attracting foreign investment. Based on these explanations, Savage concluded that "Koreans have finally made the first steps toward solving their own problems, in their own way, on their own terms."

None of these explanations, however, justifies his jumping to such a quick conclusion. As Savage himself admits, the summit was basically a "tactical maneuver" designed to help Pyongyang stave off the possible future challenges described above. Pyongyang has, in fact, already achieved two of its objectives: it has succeeded in creating a more positive image of Kim Jong Il, and it has received an assurance of sorts for economic assistance from Seoul.

What is not clear, however, is whether Kim Jong Il really wants to launch a reconciliation process with Seoul; and if there is any likelihood at all that his apparently warm welcome to President Kim Dae Jung was not based on a sincere desire for a reconciliation with the South, this one-off peace gesture from the North must be viewed with a great deal of skepticism and caution. Unfortunately, however, despite President Kim Dae Jung's warning that premature hopes on inter-Korea relations are dangerous, many worrisome phenomena are already occurring in Seoul and Washington.

First, the South Koreans now seem to be in the state of euphoria about the summit, and falling over themselves in their haste to readjust their long-held beliefs about North Korea and Kim Jong- Il. A

so-called "Kim Jong Il syndrome" is rapidly pervading Seoul, where his particular style of sunglasses now top many people's shopping lists. Some policy makers in South Korea are already suggesting amending the Constitution to limit the territorial boundary to the southern part of the peninsula, and others are speaking of eliminating the National Security Law, no less. Intimidated by this sudden change in attitude, conservatives in Seoul have become very cautious about expressing their opinions, because they do not want to be viewed as "anti- unification hawks." Moreover, previous popular perceptions of North Korea are being abandoned so widely, that even if it were proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that North Korea's real intentions do not include a peaceful reunification, it would be very difficult for conventional wisdom to be restored.

Second, premature policy debates, including what to do with the US forces in South Korea, have begun to proliferate even before any serious discussion has taken place concerning Kim Jong Il's real intentions. Already, Republican Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Jesse Helms, has stated that the withdrawal of US forces from Korea should be considered seriously. This kind of suggestion could legitimize the concept of withdrawing US forces from Korea within some foreign policy circles in Washington. Indeed, Secretary of State Albright's visit to Seoul last week, and confirmation that the US army will stay, indicate that the issue is already on the table.

Third, anti-US feelings are running high in Seoul at present, fueled by revelations that the US Army killed South Korean civilians during the Korean War, as well as the dispute about the terms of the SOFA [Status of Forces Agreement], although it is still too early to tell how these will influence future policy decisions. These reactions to a one-off friendly gesture from the North are all the more alarming because few people seem to have seriously questioned the real significance of the summit. If there is the slightest likelihood that the North called the summit with the intention of provoking friction between Seoul and Washington, or of raising an anti-American reaction in South Korea, or of merely creating a more positive image of Kim Jong Il, there is no way we can view it as a first step towards a peaceful reunification, even though you may argue that it was a first step towards solving North Korea's own problems, in its own way, on its own terms. And while there is any ambiguity and uncertainty about North Korea's motives, we would be very unwise to jump to conclusions. On the contrary, a more careful analysis and a wait-and-see attitude is highly recommended, because there will be plenty of time for us to relax our guard and change our views on North Korea when we know their real intentions and understand the real reason for their recent friendly gesture.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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