

Policy Forum 10-035: How Can an Inter-Korean Summit Contribute to the Denuclearization of North Korea?

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How Can an Inter-Korean Summit Contribute to the Denuclearization of North Korea?

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By Sung Bae Kim

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I. Introduction

Sung Bae Kim, Senior Research Fellow for the Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul, writes, "It has been all too evident in the past that the inter-Korean summits held at the end of a presidency have provoked political controversy. But an inter-Korean summit held at any time would still be desirable as long as it is based on appropriate measures related to the *Cheonan* incident and can contribute to the denuclearization of North Korea."

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II. Article by Sung Bae Kim

-“How Can an Inter-Korean Summit Contribute to the Denuclearization of North Korea?”

By Sung Bae Kim

Prospects for an Inter-Korean Summit in the post-*Cheonan* Incident Era

Only a few months ago, a third inter-Korean summit and the resumption of the Six-Party Talks both seemed likely. With contacts for an inter-Korean summit under way since last year and the Chinese proposals for the Six-Party Talks having been warmly accepted by the United States and North Korea, the prospects were positive.

The sinking of the ROK Navy corvette *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010, however, destroyed this optimism. A two-month multinational investigation, led by South Korea, uncovered clear evidence of North Korea's involvement, and the South Korean government imposed strong and comprehensive sanctions against the North on May 24. The punishments included the suspension of inter-Korean trade, the resumption of psychological warfare operations, and strengthening naval exercises in the Yellow Sea. In response, North Korea announced that it would sever all inter-Korean relations and threatened war with the South. The whole situation on the Korean Peninsula has been deteriorating day by day, worsening already high tensions so that even military clashes seem potentially possible.

The prospects for the Six-Party Talks are now also very negative. The *Cheonan* incident has proved to be a black hole absorbing all other critical issues. Kim Jong-il 's visit to China in May 2010 seemed to signal that the Six-Party Talks might be resumed, but this possibility could not appease Seoul's fury over the sinking of the *Cheonan*. Diplomatic efforts for the resumption of the talks have been replaced with new moves to initiate additional sanctions against North Korea. Of course, the North Korean nuclear crisis, which is after all an urgent problem with both regional and global consequences, cannot be forever tied to the *Cheonan* incident. After a cooling-off period, diplomatic mediations to resume the Six-Party Talks can be restarted by China. But the concern at this time is that North Korea, in light of the *Cheonan* incident, might insist on excluding South Korea from the talks.

Given the current situation, is there any possibility for an inter-Korean summit? A summit might, paradoxically, be the only means of exit from the crisis. Interestingly, in 1993, when the first North Korean nuclear crisis had broken out and military tensions were extremely high, a proposal for an inter-Korean summit was accepted. The meeting was only canceled because of Kim Il-sung's sudden death on July 8, 1994. Today, for inter-Korean relations to resume, a whole new framework is needed, given that all existing North-South agreements have been nullified. Such a rebuilt relationship can only be achieved through a third inter-Korean summit. Moreover, progress on the North Korean nuclear issue is impossible until the current state of North-South relations is improved. Were the Six-Party Talks to resume that occurs, they would end up at best as a diplomatic battle between the two Koreas. In the end, the only solution is an inter-Korean summit, which could achieve a breakthrough both in relations between North and South and on the nuclear issue at the same time.

One reason we can expect an inter-Korean summit is that North Korea appears to have an interest in holding one. It is no secret that when high-ranking North Korean officials visited Seoul in late August 2009 to offer condolences at the funeral for former president Kim Dae-jung, they gave signals that Pyongyang wanted to hold an inter-Korean summit. Several contacts took place thereafter to coordinate such a meeting. Unfortunately, the contacts were not successful and there was no further progress. The reason North Korea wants a summit is very simple: through a successful summit, it would receive benefits of nearly a billion dollars in humanitarian aid and economic cooperation with South Korea. It would also be able to take advantage of enhanced inter-Korean ties to facilitate improved relations with the United States. In the wake of the difficulties stemming from the *Cheonan* incident, North Korea might be even more desperate for the benefits it could derive from improved inter-Korean relations. Thus, the chances are increased that Pyongyang would be willing to hold a summit and could be expected to make concessions to Seoul as part of the core agenda.

The main challenge for holding a summit at present is the need for some kind of preconditions and an agreement that meaningful achievements are possible. The Lee Myung-bak administration had a firm position even before the sinking of the *Cheonan* that it would participate in an inter-Korean summit only when the gathering would contribute not only to the denuclearization of North Korea but also to the resolution of the issue of South Koreans abducted by Pyongyang and South Korean prisoners of war still in the North. Now, following the *Cheonan* incident, Lee and his advisers will be forced to take a much stronger position.

First, preconditions are essential for any inter-Korean summit to take place. North Korea must apologize and punish those responsible for the sinking of the *Cheonan* in some way or other, as President Lee has demanded. It would be difficult for North Korea as a propaganda-based state to make a public apology, especially considering that it has already denied its involvement in public. Nevertheless, it would not be impossible for North Korea to send a special envoy and deliver a message of regret to President Lee and to inform Seoul of related measures taken to prevent further incidents.

Second, North Korea must guarantee that progress will be made in any inter-Korean summit on key disagreements such as the nuclear crisis and the abduction issues. The problem is that North Korea is reluctant to talk about these questions with South Korea. The nuclear issue is especially difficult to make progress on as it is an international issue, not an issue between the two Koreas. But a summit without achievements on the nuclear question cannot be justified or defended. The need for such progress is even more profound when taking account of the political situation after the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

The whole structural situation on the Korean Peninsula in the post-*Cheonan* incident era makes the need for an inter-Korean summit more urgent. Without a high-level diplomatic breakthrough, the standoff on the nuclear issue will continue and the crisis in relations between North and South cannot be resolved. Regardless of whether a third inter-Korean summit can overcome these difficulties, producing meaningful steps along the way will constitute an important success. The Lee administration will have to answer the deeper question of what an inter-Korean summit is really for in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* incident. This means looking at the identity of the summit. Certainly some progress on the nuclear issue is indispensable for the Lee government. Therefore, how can a summit help? In other words, how can an inter-Korean summit contribute to the denuclearization of North Korea? To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the dynamics between the North Korean nuclear crisis and inter-Korean relations.

Dynamics of the Nuclear Crisis and Inter-Korean Relations

North Korea regards its denuclearization as a bilateral issue that can only be dealt with by itself and the United States. Originally, Pyongyang developed its nuclear program for peaceful purposes but subsequently pursued nuclear weapons to cope with the U.S. military threat. Direct negotiations between North Korea and the United States will naturally follow as they seek to end their hostile relations.

The first North Korean nuclear crisis, which began in 1993, was resolved with the Agreed Framework that came about through a series of bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea in 1994. During those negotiations, there was no room for South Korea to take on any role. Since the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2003, the Six-Party Talks have become the new framework to handle the North Korean nuclear issue. Still, the major breakthroughs such as the September 19 Joint Declaration and the February 13 Agreement have only come about through U.S.-North Korean bilateral negotiations. North Korea even upset its ally China by excluding it from the process.

In contrast to its isolated role in the first nuclear crisis, South Korea sought to take a more proactive role in nuclear negotiations with the second crisis. However, the Roh Moo-hyun administration found its role limited to that of acting as a broker between the United States and North Korea within the Six-Party Talks framework. Naturally, the Roh administration tried to make progress in the denuclearization of North Korea through the various levels of inter-Korean meetings including an inter-Korean summit, but the nuclear issue was not seen as a serious agenda item, one that was more than merely symbolic. The Lee administration is maintaining a firm position that the North Korean nuclear issue must remain at the top of the agenda in inter-Korean meetings. Vision 3000, the Lee administration's North Korea policy, shows clearly that its top priority is the denuclearization of the North. Any inter-Korean summit would be regarded as meaningless unless it leads toward that goal.

Why has the North Korean nuclear issue failed to be treated seriously in the inter-Korean meetings of the past? Has it been due to the South Korean government's lack of will? It is true that the former governments in Seoul tended to stick only to the "easier" issues in North-South relations and yielded without strong objection to the North Korean regime's refusal to talk about the nuclear issue. In this respect, it might be reasonable to criticize the South's earlier lack of will. The characteristics of the North Korean nuclear crisis, however, have changed over the years and have gone beyond the scope of North-South relations.

The two Koreas have dealt with the nuclear issue before as a core agenda item. The Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in 1992 was the outcome of such an effort. But at that time the North Korean nuclear program was at a relatively low level and had yet to become a source of major international concern.

Following the first nuclear crisis, North Korea was assumed to have weapons-grade plutonium for just one or two nuclear warheads as long as the Agreed Framework was sustained. But since the Agreed Framework has collapsed and Pyongyang has increased its stockpile of plutonium, the nuclear issue has become a more serious one. Finally, as North Korea tested a nuclear device in October 2006 and the issue became much more complex, Pyongyang publicly declared its status as a nuclear state. Consequently, it made discussion of the nuclear issue between the two Koreas even more difficult. Particularly for North Korea, negotiations over nuclear disarmament with the United States would bring about more advantages than if it were to negotiate with South Korea.

The framework of the Six-Party Talks itself is in a sense one factor restricting an inter-Korean

resolution of the nuclear issue. It is true that the Six-Party Talks made room for South Korea to become involved in the issue, preventing the nuclear crisis from becoming a bilateral negotiation between the United States and North Korea. But at the same time, the talks restricted inter-Korean consultation on the nuclear issue to the Six-Party framework. During sessions of the talks, there often used to be purely inter-Korean contacts, but holding a separate bilateral meeting like that of the South-North Joint Nuclear Control Commission in 1992 is no longer possible. Even bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea can only be recognized within the framework of the Six-Party Talks. If South and North Korea talk about the nuclear issue too seriously, the other countries, including the United States, might cast a suspicious eye on them.

The nuclear issue has not been a core agenda item during inter-Korean meetings of the past. The issue's absence from the table comes partly from the South Korean government's lack of will, but also mainly from the changing characteristics of the issue over the past twenty years. And this situation seems likely to remain in flux in the future as well. If this is the case, then it would be desirable to make clear the limits and possibilities of the issue within the inter-Korean context and to reexamine how to contribute to the denuclearization of North Korea. In seeking to address the nuclear issue through an inter-Korean summit, what can past experience tell us?

Past Experience

The North Korean nuclear problem was not an urgent issue during the first inter-Korean summit held in 2000. Although there were concerns over Pyongyang's nuclear facilities in Kumchang-ri, north of Yongbyon, and its long-range missile program that included its Taepodong missile test in 1998, the Agreed Framework remained in place.

The second inter-Korean summit was held in 2007 while the Six-Party Talks were working on the implementation of the February 13 Agreement of that year. The goal was to implement the September 2005 Joint Statement, which was one of the most important achievements of the Six-Party Talks, finally laying down the principles to dismantle the North Korean nuclear program. It was produced two years after the Six-Party Talks had been launched, with the delay related to new U.S. financial sanctions against the North, leading to Pyongyang's nuclear test in October of 2006. A series of bilateral contacts between the United States and North Korea made possible the February 13 Agreement that led to the shutdown and disablement of North Korean nuclear facilities. The second inter-Korean summit was held in this favorable climate.

If the second inter-Korean summit had been held during a stalemate in the nuclear crisis, further contributions by the South Korean administration would have been expected. But the Six-Party Talks were proceeding smoothly as a framework for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. In this way, pressure on the Roh administration to make additional contributions to resolving the nuclear crisis was relatively low.

Nevertheless, it would have been politically unacceptable for the Roh administration to focus only on developing inter-Korean relations without doing anything toward resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. At the very least, a small achievement toward a resolution of the nuclear issue was needed politically to defend holding the second inter-Korean summit. What the Roh administration was seeking to achieve was to reconfirm and facilitate the achievements of the Six-Party Talks. The administration tried to accomplish this goal by phrasing Article 4 of the summit's Joint Declaration to make reference to joint efforts for the smooth implementation of the September Joint Declaration and the February 13 Agreement. For the Roh administration, the second inter-Korean summit contributed to resolving the nuclear crisis in that the summit was held during the Six-Party Talks. An agreement on the disablement and the declaration of time schedules was arrived at in the Six-Party Talks just one day before the summit. North Korea was originally very reluctant to accept the

agreement, but made this concession to foster a positive atmosphere for the inter-Korean summit.

The second inter-Korean summit, however, has not been regarded as contributing much to the denuclearization of North Korea. In fact, there was no breakthrough. The statements made only reconfirmed previous agreements. There was also disappointment that there was no clear commitment to denuclearization by Kim Jong-il, contrary to the general expectation. This weakness came from depending too much upon Kim Jong-il's political decisions on the spot, rather than on an approved decision in advance.

The Roh administration tried to compensate for this lack of achievement by focusing on building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea shared a desire with the North to terminate the existing armistice regime and to build a permanent peace regime, and to cooperate on issues related to ending the Korean War by holding a three- or four-party summit of directly involved participants on the Korean Peninsula. But this was considered to be an unpleasant surprise rather than an achievement by the other countries. China was unwilling to accept such a summit as it implied that China might be excluded from any peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. As for the United States, a summit with Kim Jong-il, whether made up of three or four parties, just seemed too much, considering the slow progress on the denuclearization issue.

The past experience of South Korea shows how difficult it is to contribute toward a resolution of the nuclear issue, but it provides some implications for the future. First, different approaches are needed to determine whether the Six-Party Talks are progressing or not. The resumption of the Six-Party Talks as a result of an inter-Korean summit is sufficient if the Six-Party Talks are in deadlock, but additional progress on the nuclear issue is necessary to make a favorable evaluation when the talks are in progress. Second, a detailed consensus is needed at the start regarding goals for the nuclear issue. Wishful thinking is quite dangerous when negotiating with North Korea, as Pyongyang is very skilled at making vague statements to its negotiating partner that something is possible. The assumption that simply meeting with Kim Jong-il will guarantee results is no longer valid. During the second inter-Korean summit, the Joint Declaration was drafted on the spot and was heavily dependent upon the political decisions of the two leaders. This pattern of agreement must not be repeated. Third, there must not be any surprises on the nuclear issue. Prior consultations or background briefings are a prerequisite to receiving a positive evaluation from other countries.

Plausible and Workable Agreements on the Nuclear Issue

How could an inter-Korean summit substantially contribute to the North Korean nuclear issue if it were to occur in the near future? To answer the question, it is essential to clarify the current situation of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Currently, analysts speculate that North Korea has accumulated enough plutonium over the past twenty years to produce between five and six nuclear weapons and has acquired significant data on weaponized technology through two nuclear tests. If North Korea is to continue developing its nuclear program, its next step will be to produce more nuclear materials and conduct further nuclear tests. To achieve this, North Korea will pursue a uranium enrichment program (UEP), as it has recently proclaimed, because the Yongbyon nuclear facilities have deteriorated so much over time. Therefore, the most urgent requirement at present is to halt North Korea's UEP and any further nuclear tests. On the other hand, the whole process of declaration and verification has to be completed as initial steps toward the dismantlement of all its nuclear programs and weapons. These steps have been suspended since 2009 and this process will be able to restart only if the Six-Party Talks resume.

The current objectives for resolving the nuclear crisis are to resume the Six-Party Talks, complete

the declaration and verification procedures, halt the UEP and any further nuclear tests, and begin the dismantlement of all nuclear programs and weapons. Both the Lee administration and the Obama administration are seeking a comprehensive package deal, not a stage by-stage process. It is practically impossible to offer any package deal during any inter-Korean summit because the comprehensive package (or so-called Grand Bargain) is very closely connected to the interests of all the Six-Party Talks participants, requiring a multilateral consensus. Furthermore, North Korea has raised the threshold of nuclear negotiations by insisting on the denuclearization of North Korea only in parallel with that of the whole Korean Peninsula and “the world” in its “Memorandum on the Nuclear Issue” released on April 21, 2010. This document, which is a response to the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, seeks international recognition of North Korea as a nuclear state. Although it would be completely implausible for the two Koreas to talk about the denuclearization of the world, any agreeable or workable bilateral actions could, and must, be pursued through an inter-Korean summit.

An agreement to resume the Six-Party Talks would be the minimum contribution of any inter-Korean summit. North Korea currently refuses to return to the talks, insisting on the lifting of sanctions against it and the initiating of peace talks between Washington and Pyongyang as preconditions. If North Korea were to declare, during a summit with the South, its willingness to return to the talks without any preconditions, that would be a substantial contribution to beginning to ease the nuclear crisis. North Korea seems to want to delay the Six-Party Talks, knowing that lifting sanctions and launching peace talks will be extremely difficult, and that therefore it can leverage these actions as political tools for any inter-Korean summit to take place or for it to receive Chinese aid.

If North Korea declares a moratorium on nuclear testing as a result of an inter-Korean summit, this would be a major contribution to the denuclearization of the North. Such actions do not have to be agreed upon within the Six-Party Talks, because they could be unilateral decisions made by Pyongyang. Making North Korea abandon its UEP would be an impossible task, as that step is a very useful bargaining chip in the North’s negotiations with the United States. However, making North Korea agree to a moratorium on nuclear testing is worth the effort to hold an inter-Korean summit.

The case of Pyongyang’s moratorium on missile testing in the late 1990s is a useful example in this regard. In September 1999, the United States and North Korea agreed on a moratorium on missile testing as long as the dialogue continued between the two countries on the easing of sanctions against the North Korean regime. Pyongyang agreed to continue the moratorium twice, when Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi visited North Korea in September 2002 and again in May 2004. In addition, earlier, during the visit of Russian president Putin to Pyongyang in July 2000, North Korea hinted at its willingness to maintain the moratorium on long-range missile tests on the condition that a third country substitute for it in launching its satellites. The moratorium was eventually broken when North Korea tested a long-range missile for the stated reason that the United States was refusing to participate in more talks. The United States could have been more effective in hindering North Korea from developing an increased missile capability had it stayed in the negotiations longer. On nuclear testing, North Korea has always implied that it would be open to calling a halt to further nuclear testing. On October 19, 2006, Kim Jong-il reportedly told Tang Jiaxuan, a Chinese special envoy, that North Korea had no current plans for nuclear testing. Of course the critical weak point with these reported comments is that they cannot be confirmed and were unofficial remarks.

Considering these cases, there is a good chance that a moratorium on nuclear testing could be agreed upon in an inter-Korean summit. In this case, a clear released statement rather than a vague message would be much more desirable. If the goal were to be realized, it would be one of the greatest achievements in South Korea’s diplomatic history.

The minimum achievement would be to confirm North Korea's commitment to denuclearization in Kim Jong-il's own words and then to insert those comments into a joint statement at the end of the summit. Even if North Korea were to violate its agreement, clear remarks by Kim Jong-il would have considerable binding power. As is known, once a political decision has been made by Kim Jong-il it becomes impossible to reverse it. Such a commitment could not be achieved during the second inter-Korean summit.

The core agenda items for a third inter-Korean summit are the revival of inter-Korean relations and the denuclearization of North Korea. The former might be easier than the latter. In the process of restoring nullified agreements, the Lee administration has to reorganize inter-Korean relations in a more reciprocal way. There is little pressure on the Lee government currently, because there is nothing to lose anymore in inter-Korean relations. However, if the next summit fails to contribute to the North Korean nuclear issue, it will be considered a political failure. The problem is the limitations within the inter-Korean context. The following is a shopping list of what is plausible and worth trying for a future summit between the two Koreas: the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, a moratorium on nuclear testing, and a clear commitment to denuclearization expressed in Kim Jong-il's own words. If one among this list could be realized, then a third inter-Korean summit will be seen as having contributed to the denuclearization of North Korea. Under the current situation, it does not look like the Six-Party Talks will be resumed before the revival of inter-Korean relations. Therefore, the Lee administration can work on reestablishing and improving relations and in that way try to achieve the resumption of the talks plus the other two goals—a moratorium on nuclear testing and a strong commitment to denuclearization. However, time is not on Lee's side. It will take at least several months for the hostile atmosphere surrounding the sinking of the *Cheonan* to calm down. Furthermore, if the summit is held too late, toward the end of the Lee presidency, it will be vulnerable to domestic politics and the coming election. It has been all too evident in the past that the inter-Korean summits held at the end of a presidency have provoked political controversy. But an inter-Korean summit held at any time would still be desirable as long as it is based on appropriate measures related to the *Cheonan* incident and can contribute to the denuclearization of North Korea.

III. Nautilus invites your responses

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