

Policy Forum 07-072: Kim Jong-il's Calculation



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By Scott Snyder

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Scott Snyder](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Scott Snyder, senior associate with the Asia Foundation and Pacific Forum CSIS, writes, "Despite Kim's strategic calculus, a second inter-Korean summit draws him further into the public light and diminishes the opacity surrounding the North Korean regime. Kim's economic needs reveal his dependency on external aid, which should only be given transparently with the full approval of the Korean taxpayer."

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II. Article by Scott Snyder

- "Kim Jong-il's Calculation"

By Scott Snyder

Introduction

Many doubts have been expressed in Washington about the wisdom of holding an inter-Korean summit in the waning months of a presidential term, but there is little reason to be surprised.

There is inherent unpredictability in a meeting between a high-stakes gambler (Roh Moo-hyun) and a shrewdly poker-faced survivor (Kim Jong-il). Both leaders have their own motives for making high-risk wagers against long odds. In the end the summit is a gamble worth taking, but neither leader is ultimately likely to win.

During the past two decades, an inter-Korean summit has been the holy grail for every South Korean leader. It was denied to Roh Tae-woo (in part due to mishandling of presidential instructions by his own staff), and Kim Young-sam (by Kim Il-sung's death), but granted to Kim Dae-jung (literally, the high bidder), and now to Roh Moo-hyun.

Given South Korea's consistent eagerness for a summit, the timing, location, and atmosphere surrounding the summit all play into Kim Jong-il's hands. In Pyongyang, Roh must decide whether to be a statesman (seeking a lasting legacy) or a politician (seeking short-term electoral gain). He will probably try to do both.

Kim's decision to pursue a summit is designed to further his own tactical and strategic objectives.

These include a desire to influence South Korea's presidential elections, to distract from North Korea's denuclearization commitments, to affirm the status quo through mutual recognition and acceptance of the DPRK as a nuclear state, and to benefit domestically from having South Korea's leader pay tribute to Kim at home.

Kim might use the summit positively by publicly affirming North Korea's denuclearization commitments, declaring peace with South Korea, or accepting South Korean economic offerings, indirectly pressuring the United States to implement diplomatic normalization with North Korea while leaving questions of implementation to the future.

Kim will use home court to his advantage, but a second look at his objectives - even despite last October's nuclear test - reveals more weakness than strength in the "Dear Leader's" summit gamble.

Previously, North Korean attempts to influence South Korea's domestic politics were made from behind the curtain; never has the North attempted to assert itself so boldly in favor of one side than in its attempts to marginalize the opposition Grand National Party. What if Korean voters still vote for change, regardless of the summit? Having campaigned for continuity, Kim would be a loser.

There are worries that the summit could be used as a pretext to avoid denuclearization, but the timing of the summit -- prior to the completion of the implementation of the Feb. 13 agreement and prior to North Korea's implementation of its commitment to full denuclearization imposes an unavoidable burden on Roh Moo-hyun to raise the nuclear issue.

Kim's response on a subject that North Korean officials have traditionally avoided discussing with South Korea will draw out North Korea's top leader regarding his nuclear intentions.

The two Koreas seek center stage in shaping their own destiny and deservedly should be in the lead to determine the shape of Korean reunification.

But the shared objective of a non-nuclear Korean Peninsula has brought together Korea's neighbors, imposing structural conditions on its achievement.

Korean unification without denuclearization would carry with it a price too high for South Korea to bear, and will not succeed without unlikely acquiescence by Korea's neighbors.

The declaration of a permanent peace is the surest way to affirm the status quo, but will not be sufficient without turning the demilitarized zone into a normal border. This process requires not just a declaration, but also a pullback of troops and arms from the border.

If the two Koreas can take tangible steps to live in peace with each other, this would be a dramatic step forward, but it is unlikely given that South Korean influence remains the biggest threat to the viability of Kim's regime.

A second visit to Pyongyang by a South Korean leader will affirm the centrality of Kim in the mind of the average North Korean.

But why does Kim need to affirm his leadership now? Has information about South Korea already spread deeper into North Korean society than we think?

Despite Kim's strategic calculus, a second inter-Korean summit draws him further into the public light and diminishes the opacity surrounding the North Korean regime. Kim's economic needs reveal his dependency on external aid, which should only be given transparently with the full approval of the Korean taxpayer.

The ROK government has occasionally gone beyond what the South Korean public has been willing to support or has not been transparent regarding the total bill for economic and cultural exchange.

Roh may offer, but South Korea's next leader should not be obligated to pay for North Korea's economic development without a return on investment.

The sooner Kim is placed in harness to South Korean public opinion, the sooner a more reciprocal inter-Korean relationship will be realized. In this respect, the timing of the summit could not be better.

Roh faces a structural constraint on how far he can go to please North Korea without risking public backlash and damaging progressive chances to maintain power, but a successful summit in the eyes of South Koreans will enhance progressive chances and constrain his successor.

If this indeed proves to be the case, my wager is that South Korean public will be the true winner, and that North Korea's leaders will have no choice but to play out their hand.

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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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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