

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



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Recommended Citation

"Nautilus Institute PFO 00-05: Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems", NAPSNet Policy Forum, June 27, 2000, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-pfo-00-05-koreans-take-steps-to-solve-their-own-problems-2/>

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PFO 00-05B: June 27, 2000

Let's Not Summit Slap-Happy in Korea

By Victor Cha

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Victor Cha](#)

[III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

[Discussion](#)

[Go to essay by Timothy L. Savage](#)

June 26, 2000

[Go to essay by Peter Hayes](#)

June 29, 2000

[Go to essay by Hwal-Woong Lee](#)

July 10, 2000

[Go to essay by Han Sung-Joo](#)

July 11, 2000

I. Introduction

This is the second in a series of articles on the recent ROK-DPRK summit in Pyongyang. This essay is by Professor Victor Cha, an East Asia security specialist in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, Washington DC. He is currently a Senior Fulbright Scholar in South Korea.

Cha argues that the summit meeting in Pyongyang was long on atmospherics and short on substance. He says that while the summit had important cathartic effects on the Korean psyche, the hard work has yet to be done. He maintains that reunification and withdrawal of US troops are not issues that are going to be solved in the near term.

II. Essay by Victor Cha

The summit between the two Koreas marked a watershed in reducing tensions on the peninsula, raising the hopes of many that a lasting peace on the peninsula is achievable in their lifetimes.

The quid pro quo was clear. The DPRK received at least 200,000 tons of much needed fertilizer and some \$450 million of new commitments by the South. The meeting was an important display of Pyongyang's intentions to seek a degree of reform and opening, which may facilitate progress in Pyongyang's relations with Washington and Tokyo, and beyond that, with the international financial institutions. Perhaps most important for the North, the summit offered Kim Jong-il ample opportunity to "de-demonize" himself to the world. As some Korean press reports have noted, he has gone from reclusive madman to cuddly teletubby(!). For the ROK, initial progress toward family reunions was made and Kim Dae-jung now has secured his place in the history books not only as a vanguard for democracy and human rights but also for unification. Can the summit be deemed a success? Reading the euphoric and glowing press reports over the past week, one would imagine so. Recent polls in South Korea show no more than 3 percent expressing dissatisfaction with the summit and nearly 90 percent answering they now had a positive image of North Korea and its leadership.

But let's not get carried away. First, the summit was bound to be a success. One must assess this in terms of substance and atmospherics. The summit can be judged successful in the former case only because the bar was set so low. The Pyongyang meeting, like other past first summits in Asia (after long periods of non-dialogue -- e.g., Nixon-Mao 1972, Chun-Nakasone 1983) was predictably short

on substance and long on ceremony. Moreover, the joint declaration was vague, less eloquent, and less original than the July 4, 1972 communique that remains the template for dialogue. The value-added of the event was clearly in terms of the atmospherics, which far exceeded expectations thanks to Kim Jong-il. Kim's desire to revamp his image in international eyes was abundantly clear as he dominated conversations with small talk almost like a giddy child craving attention. Kim Dae-jung was right to let his northern counterpart have his day in the "sunshine" (as it were) rather than compete for soundbites.

Second, let's not all jump on the unification bandwagon just yet. Commentary on the summit has oversold the unification angle. In my view, the reason the atmospherics were so hearty was precisely because breakthroughs could not be achieved on the substance regarding unification issues. You can bet the Southern delegation went to Pyongyang with hopes of achieving a bigger breakthrough (e.g. representative offices), but the North could not oblige. Over-the-top atmospherics became the way for the North to compensate without unduly exposing themselves. In addition, if anything, this meeting brings the two Koreas closer to mutually acknowledged co-existence rather than unification per se. In fact, the unification formulas referred to in the joint declaration are both premised less on integration and more on self-preservation, privileging one nation, two systems as the primary point of reference.

Third, let's not kiss the US-ROK alliance goodbye just yet. Perhaps the most disturbing reaction to the summit is that 53 percent of South Koreans polled said they now dismissed the possibility of renewed North Korean hostilities. It appeals to Korean romanticism to think that US alliance becomes less necessary because of this bold move by the Koreans, but the fact of the matter is that the alliance is here to stay. The majority of South Korean security thinkers, including Kim Dae-jung himself, have gone on record calling for a security relationship with the US even after unification. Such strategic imperatives do not change easily overnight. Moreover, toasts, platitudes, and photo-ops don't stop ballistic missiles, nuclear posturing, nor heightened tension in the DMZ. To believe that the summit enables Korea to decouple itself from these larger security concerns of Washington and Tokyo would be a grave mistake. Will South Koreans take the positive atmospherics in Pyongyang over the 8th Army? I doubt it.

My purpose is not to rain on Korea's parade. Only by studying the faces of Koreans as they viewed the live telecast of these events in Seoul subway stations, coffee houses, and offices, can one get a true sense of the cathartic nature of the event, filling a void in the Korean psyche and national identity. But perspective is important. The hard work is yet to be done. The absence of specific institutions for dialogue, a firm date for Kim Jong-il's return visit, and any mention of security issues may have been necessary omissions for the Pyongyang summit to happen. But one hopes that this iteration of North-South dialogue, in dealing with these and other difficult issues, will not go the route of past initiatives, dying after the initial fanfare and euphoria subsides.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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[Return to top](#)
[back to top](#)

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