

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

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Discussion of "Let's Not Get Summit Slap-Happy in Korea"

By Victor Cha

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June 27, 2000

I. Introduction

The following comments were contributed regarding the recent Policy Forum Online by and Victor Cha. Comments were provided by Robyn Lim Professor of International Politics, Nanzan University, Nagoya Japan, and Professor Charles K. Armstrong of the East Asian Institute, Columbia University, who is currently a Fulbright Senior Scholar in Seoul.

II. Comments on Victor Cha's Essay

1. Comments by Robyn Lim

Victor Cha's paper is a most welcome dose of realism after all the hype on the summit. It seems to me that Kim Jong Il has gained much, while offering almost nothing in return. His objective of course is to preserve his odious regime at all costs, and thus to avoid the fate of the Romanian dictator Ceausescu. As soon as they got the chance, Romanians showed what they really thought of their Dear Leader.

Dr Cha's paper is also a warning of the disadvantages that democracies face in trying to negotiate with dictatorships. But it seems that the lesson must constantly be re-learned.

Kim Dae Jung has also raised expectations in the South, especially over family reunions, that he may not be able to fulfill.

Robyn Lim Professor of International Politics, Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan

2. Comments by Charles Armstrong

As we all shiver under the cold water Professor Cha has thrown on the enthusiasm for the North-South summit, I would like to challenge a few points Professor Cha has made in his forum. First, what Cha dismisses as "atmospherics" (or what the Koreans call "punuigi") is a crucial part of negotiations regarding Korea, especially for North Korea. The atmosphere surrounding the talks was far more positive, cordial, and open than any previous inter-Korean talks. Atmosphere is not substance, but its symbolic importance cannot be overestimated. The atmosphere of the summit augers well for future progress in inter-Korean talks.

Second, was the summit "bound to be a success?" Hardly. Virtually up to the last minute there was speculation that Kim Jong Il would not even show up and that Kim Dae Jung would be dealing with SPA Chairman Kim Yong-nam. Kim Jong Il's appearance and behavior at the summit far exceeded everyone's expectations. Perhaps that is because expectations were so low, but experience has taught us to expect little out of these sorts of meetings. Was Kim Jong Il using the talks to cultivate a better image of himself to the outside world? Of course he was, but he never seemed to have the inclination to do so before. Whether his change of style represents a change of policy remains to be seen.

Third, the substantive and difficult work of improving inter-Korean relations is beginning. This includes institutionalizing inter-Korean relations through creating channels for economic and military communication and cooperation, and more immediate issues such as family visits later this summer. It also includes important gestures such as toning down public rhetoric against the other side and, this year for the first time ever, canceling major events surrounding the anniversary of the Korean War in both Seoul and Pyongyang. This may be "atmosphere," but one cannot imagine progress in inter-Korean relations without the improved atmosphere such symbolic moves create.

Finally, my impression from Seoul is that the Koreans as a whole are not as giddy with the summit success as Cha suggests. Yes, people are enormously pleased with the positive atmosphere and the show of camaraderie (or "Kim-radarie," as the Far Eastern Economic Review called it) between the two leaders. But, unlike previous breakthroughs in inter-Korean relations (1972, 1985, 1992) there is very little talk of imminent unification. In the mass media, in academic forums, and on the street, Koreans express their wish for unification and their hope that this summit is a major step toward that goal. After fifty years of the bitterest, most arbitrary and most tragic national division produced by the Cold War, we can hardly begrudge them that wish. But the general understanding is that this is the first step in a long process of mutual recognition and reconciliation that will lead to unification at some as yet unforeseeable point in the future. Nor is there widespread expectation that the US-ROK military alliance will soon be dismantled. Even the North Koreans themselves have hinted that US troops may need to remain in a post-unification Korea. No one on either side of the Pacific can doubt that a substantial change in inter-Korean relations will necessitate a re-thinking of the US military presence on the Korean peninsula, and in East Asia as a whole. This hasn't happened yet, and may not happen in the immediate future, but the summit has rightly triggered a frank discussion on the meaning and future of the US-Korean alliance.

Professor Charles K. Armstrong East Asian Institute, Columbia University Currently Fulbright Senior Scholar, Seoul

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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