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

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Koreans Take Steps to Solve Their Own Problems

By Timothy L. Savage

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I. Introduction

The following is the first in a series of articles on the recent ROK-DPRK summit. This article by Timothy L. Savage , Program Officer for Global Peace and Security at the Nautilus Institute, appeared in the Korea Herald on June 21.

Savage argues that the summit was an important first step in breaking down the ideological barrier that separates the two Koreas. By embracing Kim Dae-jung, DPRK leader Kim Jong-il signaled a move away from the official designation of the ROK as a puppet state, thus opening up the space to a "Korean" solution to the ongoing problem of the divided peninsula.

II. Essay by Timothy L. Savage

Many years from now, when the two Koreas are finally reunited, Koreans may look back at Kim Jong-il's warm embrace of Kim Dae-jung on the tarmac of Pyongyang airport as the seminal moment in the path toward reunification. While much remains to be done, and the practical work of reconciliation has yet to even begin, the symbolism of that moment may linger long. For the first time since the tragic division of the peninsula, leaders from the two sides signaled in a powerful way their acceptance of each other's legitimacy. In doing so, they may have opened up enough ideological breathing room to begin the journey down what promises to be a long and difficult path.

The sudden shift in North Korean diplomacy away from its long-standing emphasis on bilateral negotiations with the United States toward pushing forward on multiple fronts took many observers by surprise, but it appears to have been a well-thought out tactical maneuver. Faced with a vacillating, lame-duck Clinton administration and the uncertainty of the upcoming U.S. elections, North Korea has focused on building a phalanx of U.S. allies to protect it against possible policy reversals in Washington. Pyongyang appears to believe that if it normalizes relations with enough U.S. allies, it will become increasingly difficult for the next administration to demonize North Korea as an intractable rogue state that's incapable of change and unworthy as a negotiating partner.

This strategy has its pitfalls, however. The U.S., as the world's sole remaining superpower, has both the capacity and the inclination to ignore its allies when they go against Washington's (often domestically driven) agenda. The United States' continued attempts to isolate Cuba, Iran, and Iraq

and to build a national missile defense system are examples of this trend. Rapprochement with Seoul is the sine qua non if Pyongyang's plan is to succeed.

Because the United States is protecting the southern half of Korea against the northern half, it has to respect the South's policy toward the North to some degree. While the United States has often used the threat of troop withdrawal to pressure ROK administrations on human rights, arms sales, or nuclear weapons issues, Washington has far less leverage to force Seoul to act more belligerent toward Pyongyang. Kim Young-sam's recent revelation that he refused to go along with U.S. plans to bomb the Yongbyon reactor during the 1993-94 nuclear crisis is a case in point. Kim Dae-jung has exploited this loophole in the alliance to his advantage, dragging an often reluctant Clinton administration into support of his sunshine policy, and rebuffing attempts to subordinate his attempts at reconciliation to Washington's missile concerns. In this instance, the tail has done a pretty good job of wagging the dog.

DJ's persistence was vital to the success of the summit. While North Korea's ruling juche ideology is usually translated in the Western press as "self-reliance," juche can probably best be understood as the opposite of sadae, the practice of serving great powers that frequently characterized rulers in the Choson and Koryo dynasties. Above all, juche is about not bowing down to foreign powers. In official North Korean propaganda, the regime of Kim Il-sung and his son was the only legitimate Korean state in the world, while the rulers in Seoul were merely puppets of American imperialism.

The summit, at least for now, appears to have changed all that. While it is likely that the North Koreans will continue to spin the summit domestically as Kim Dae-jung coming to pay homage to the Dear Leader, it will be much more difficult for Kim Jong-il to Kim Dae-jung as a puppet now that they've met and embraced.

In that embrace, Kim Jong-il may have found a way out of the conundrum he faces. North Korea is in the midst of an ongoing systemic crisis that cannot be alleviated save through fundamental reforms and opening to the outside world. Doing so, however, risks undermining the very legitimacy of the regime's existence, and thus putting its leadership at risk. Thus North Korea may be seeking a "Korean" solution through cooperation with Seoul. If South Korea is no longer a colonial puppet, but rather an estranged brother, then North Korea is somewhat less threatened by the prospect of ROK aid and investment. Juche would not be abandoned, it would just be expanded to include the wealthy southern branch of the family. North Korean leaders may feel that in gradually opening to the South in the name of reconciliation, they can avoid the fate that befell Russia and Eastern Europe in the wake of glasnost.

Whether this is true remains to be seen. The DPRK could easily halt all cooperation if it feels threatened, reversing all apparent progress overnight. Certainly, there are strong elements in the South Korean polity who will continue to resist such a gradualist approach, seeking nothing less than full capitulation by and absorption of North Korea. An early test will likely come if and when Kim Jong-il makes his promised visit to Seoul. Unlike in Pyongyang, where carefully orchestrated cheering crowds lined the road from the airport, in Seoul Kim Jong-il will also be met with protests over human rights abuses and North Korea's role in launching the Korean War. Whether he is able to face such hostility with the same good humor that he demonstrated in his first meeting with Kim Dae-jung will say a great deal about how far the regime has really come.

Even if the DPRK leadership is secure enough to push forward, unification is not immanent. For one thing, none of the powers most c involved in Korean issues favors it in the short-term. For the North, reunification now would mean absorption, for the South, an unbearable economic and social burden. China could lose its buffer zone against the U.S. military in Asia, and Japan might fear that a reunified Korea would tilt toward China. The United States would have to re-evaluate its plans for

missile defense and its forward troop deployment, or admit that these policies are ultimately aimed at China.

More fundamentally, North Korea simply lacks the capacity to absorb large Southern investment. North Korea's infrastructure is in a shambles. It lacks the intermediate management and regulatory capacity necessary to attract foreign investment. To join the global economy, it would have to pay back its defaulted loans, draining its already scarce foreign currency reserves. Put simply, North Korea will require years of restructuring and foreign aid before it can begin to look like a place where anyone would want to do business.

For this reason, North Korea can only look Southward for the help it needs. No one outside of South Korea has the interest in investing in such a basket case. While normalization of relations with Japan would bring much-needed reparations, and the lifting of US sanctions would allow the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to provide development loans, ultimately the only investors willing to take a chance on the North are fellow Koreans. Chung Ju-yung's trip to North Korea with 100 cows, a symbolic pay back for the one he stole from his father over 50 years ago, is an example of how even a highly successful businessman can sometimes subordinate the profit motive to nationalistic sentiment.

In the 20th century, Koreans saw their fate being dictated by outside powers. Korea was colonized by foreigners, liberated by foreigners, and divided by foreigners. The Korean War was largely decided by the intervention of foreign powers. As the 21st century unfolds, Koreans have finally made the first tentative steps toward solving their own problems, in their own way, on their own terms. And that is how it should be.

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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