

Policy Forum 07-071: Summit Spirit on the Korean Peninsula

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By Eric J. Ballbach

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I. Introduction

Eric J. Ballbach, research associate of the Korea Communication and Research Center in Berlin, writes, "If we now compare the circumstances and political conditions of the first and the second summit, there appears to be a major similarity, namely the basic fact that both summits occur in a time when North Korea began to emerge from a phase of diplomatic isolation. Differently put: North Korea's 'Yes' to the summit is inseparably connected with external developments in the Northeast

Asian region - despite the internal dynamic of inter-Korean relations."

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II. Article by Eric J. Ballbach

- "Summit Spirit on the Korean Peninsula"

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Introduction

Even though it was an event long discussed and thus somehow expected, the announcement made a worldwide impact: on August 5, North and South Korea agreed to hold the second inter-Korean summit meeting between Kim, Jong-il and Roh, Moo-hyun from August 28 to 30 in Pyongyang. Throughout the world and especially in the Northeast Asian region, hope for anew easing of tension on the Korean Peninsula aroused - particularly with regard to the progress made in the Six-Party Process. It is in the nature of the issue, however, that the summit announcement equally gave rise to criticism - especially from the conservative section of the political establishment in the ROK. Put in an interrogative form, the main points of criticism can be summed up as followed: Why do they hold the summit now, when Roh, Moo-hyun has just a little over five months left of his term and there are consequently only four months left before the December presidential election? Furthermore, why now, when - after long and hard work - at least some progress is made during the Six-Party Talks? Why do the two heads of state meet in Pyongyang again, whereas Kim, Jong-il promised a (return) visit to South Korea during the first summit? And what do Kim and Roh wish to accomplish? This paper addresses these uncertainties and questions the possibility of a positive reciprocal effect between the inter-Korean summit and the Six-Party Talks.

The way to the second summit

Since his inauguration in December 2002, the current South Korean President Roh, Moo-Hyun has been striving for a second summit - as agreed upon during the first summit between then-South Korean President Kim, Dae-Jung and the North Korean leader Kim, Jong-Il. According to Roh, Moo-hyun's chief presidential secretary for foreign and security policy - Baek, Jong-chun - Roh has been repeatedly sending direct and indirect messages to the North that he is willing to hold the summit "anytime, anywhere". But the North consistently refused this offer, arguing that the conditions for a summit meeting weren't met - until now. On August 7, Unification Minister Lee, Jae-joung, the chief of the South Korean National Intelligence Service (NIS) Kim, Man-bok, and Baek, Jong-chun declared in a joint press conference that Kim, Man-bok - at the request of Pyongyang - secretly visited the North to discuss the basic conditions of the aimed summit (reports vary over the exact time of this visit). According to Kim, Man-bok, the North's delegation - headed by the director of the United Front Department Kim, Yang-gon - expressed during that visit that the meeting with Roh, Moo-hyun would be a long-standing wish of Kim, Jong-il, who expressed that "now the timing was right for a second summit meeting considering the state of relations between the two Koreas and the improved regional situation." After reporting the North's stand to the ROK government, Kim, Man-bok immediately traveled back to Pyongyang for a second secret meeting (reportedly from August 3 to August 4), where the "North-South Agreement on the Visit of President Roh, Moo-hyun to Pyongyang" was signed.

Agenda of the summit remains unclear

After agreeing upon the basic principles and conditions through the (at least) two secret meetings, South and North Korea will hold 'minister-level working talks' in the North's border city of Kaesong this week. According to Baek, the predominant purpose of the Kaesong talks is to discuss and define the exact agenda of the summit, while at the same time deal with related matters like itinerary, security guarantees, etc. The presidential office confirmed thereby that it has yet to iron out the exact summit agenda with the North. Despite this unclarity, President Roh announced Wednesday, August 8 that the agenda of his summit with North Korean leader Kim, Jong-il would "most likely" include the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and ways to resolve the North's nuclear weapons program respectively, the establishment of a peace regime on the peninsula, arms control, and cross-border economic cooperation. He thus presented the agenda Seoul seems to strive for. It not yet clear, however, how the North will react to this proposal and how far it is willing to go to realize its own agenda.

Mixed reactions to the summit announcement

The critics of the conservative camp

It is in the nature of the issue that the summit announcement equally gave rise to criticism - especially from the conservative section of the political establishment in the ROK. In consideration of the fact that the two leading presidential hopefuls of the main opposition *Grand National Party* - Lee, Myung-bak and Park, Geun-hye - currently enjoy approximately 60 percent of aggregate approval ratings in most public surveys (while no candidate from the liberal camp has achieved two-digit ratings), the conservative contenders regard the forthcoming summit primarily as a politically geared attempt to influence the December election. The GNP criticized the ulterior motive of holding the summit "in an inappropriate time and place", accusing President Roh, Moo-hyun of using the summit to give the liberal candidate(s) a boost in the polls. The party also criticized the government's lack of preparedness for the summit and urged it to focus on resolving the North's nuclear issue during the meeting, not dwell on Pyongyang's demands like the abolishment of the national Security Law and the redrawing of the Northern Limit Line (NLL). "The summit should produce tangible results on the issues of repatriation of South Korean prisoners of war and those kidnapped by the North, and improvements of human rights," party floor leader Rep. Kim, Hyung-o said. "The president should not use the summit as a photo opportunity."

Washington's cautious acceptance

Washington first seemed surprised in regard to the summit announcements. According to the South Korean Yonhap News Agency, Seoul communicated the news to Washington just a few hours before the public pronouncement. However, the U.S. State Department on Tuesday, August 7 welcomed the announcement of the inter-Korean summit later in August. "We have long welcomed and supported North-South dialogue and hope that this meeting will help promote peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, fulfilling the goals of the six-party talks," department spokeswoman Joanne Moore said. Washington seems to hope that the summit will help push forward the six-nation talks on denuclearizing North Korea. White House spokesman Tony Snow called the summit a chance to enhance peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. These statements indicate that Washington has - in principle - nothing to fear from a North-South summit. At the same time, however, the US is worried that Seoul may be too generous with the North, which would make it much more difficult to make further progress in the six-party talks. "Why should Pyongyang dismantle the Yongbyon reactor and continue down the path of giving up its most important trump card if it can get the assistance it needs with no strings attached", Peter Beck asked in a Korea Herald Column. Hence, while officially still welcoming the announced inter-Korean summit, Washington stressed on Wednesday that the focus should still be on the multilateral (Six-Party) talks. Although State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said he does not think the summit "affects in any negative

way" the six-party discussions, there are critical voices, arguing it would be better if the summit took place after there had been more movement in the six-way talks.

Goals of the summit participants

The goals of the Roh camp

The Roh-government (and the liberal camp in general) unsurprisingly welcomed the forthcoming summit meeting, hailing it as another historic chance to further strengthen the ties between North and South Korea. There are several goals the liberal camp seeks to obtain through the summit meeting. The main goals can be summed up as followed:

1. Roh's chief presidential secretary for foreign and security policy - Baek, Jong-chun - expects, that the second summit will significantly raise the tone of inter-Korean relations as a whole, describing the summit as a direct contribution to an "era of peace and prosperity" between the two Koreas. According to his spokesman Cheon, Ho-seon, President Roh said that his meeting with Kim, Jong-il would pave the way for "regularizing and institutionalizing" inter-Korean summit talks. To sum it up: the primary goal of the summit is the substantial improvement of inter-Korean relations in line with its policy for peace and prosperity.
2. Unification minister Lee, Jae-joung said on August 9, that the forthcoming inter-Korean summit would help boost international efforts to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions in the framework of the ongoing six-party nuclear talks.
3. Another Cheong Wa Dae official expects, that the Roh-Kim summit will pave the way for a four-way summit between two Koreas, the U.S. and China, accelerating multilateral discussions on permanent peace for the Korean Peninsula.
4. Even though the liberal camp probably wouldn't officially admit, it is safe to assume that the summit should boost the approval rates within the election folk, thus preventing an election defeat in December. Moreover, it is also possible that Roh wants to secure his legacy in terms of showing a "symbolic and remarkable achievement".

North Korea's motives

Again, the biggest question is the one revolving around North Korea's motives and intentions, which largely remain opaque. Is the second summit - together with the progress in the six-way talks - a visible sign that North Korea really changed its policy posture towards more cooperation and continued reform of its own economy? Or, is the summit merely a tactical move to obtain more (bilateral) economic concessions from South Korea or influence the forthcoming elections?

Let's first take a look at the North's official stance. Pyongyang simultaneously released the announcement of the forthcoming summit with South Korean media. Remarkable was the positive tone of the KCNA announcement, stressing that the "meeting between the top leaders of the north and the south will be of weighty significance in opening a new phase of peace on the Korean Peninsula, co-prosperity of the nation and national reunification by expanding and developing the inter-Korean relations onto a higher stage in accordance with the historic June 15 North-South Joint Declaration and in the spirit of 'By our nation itself.'"

The official reaction thus remains vague - the rest, unfortunately, remains in the scope of speculation. Then, there are several possible motives: Some North Korea observers pointed out, that North Korea's agreement to hold a second inter-Korean summit must be seen as an attempt to further improve relations with the United States, and possibly normalize its diplomatic ties by

showing "good will" signs. In my point of view, this isn't the driving motive for Pyongyang. To me it seems more logical, that Pyongyang wants to elicit more aid from South Korea as long as there's a liberal ruling party that is willing to give. Closely connected is the wish to influence the coming presidential elections in the South, since the summit announcement came six months before South Korea's presidential election and Pyongyang must be very concerned by the unpopularity of the liberal candidates who support a more generous policy of dealing with North Korea. Another, more negative speculation, is the assumption that North Korea could seek to open a "second front", thus diverting attention from the progressing six-way process.

The questions of 'timing and venue'

Without doubt, we could imagine a more fitting time for an inter-Korean summit. But it is absurd to accuse the Roh camp of "bringing up the matter so quickly", since Roh has been striving for an inter-Korean summit since his inauguration. In fact, the summit is totally consistent with his "Policy for Peace and Prosperity". It is rather questionable that further delaying or holding the summit in the midst of an escalating second nuclear crisis would have been better. At the same time, however, President Roh must show great diplomatic skill to press ahead with the bilateral inter-Korean 'summit process' on one hand without diverting attention from the multilateral Six-Party talks - which are at a crucial point on either entering the next stage or falling back into a state of de facto insignificance - on the other hand. This tightrope walk, sequencing the 'summit-process' and the six-way process is the most important factor deciding over real win or loss of the summit. If Roh is successful in this regard, it is quite possible that the summit will bring the inter-Korean dialogue back on track and once again increases the 'diplomatic rating', thus significantly raise the tone of inter-Korean relations - especially in the field of inter-Korean economic cooperation. Paik, Hak-soon of the Sejong Institute expects that the two Koreas will discuss a dramatic boost in the field of economic cooperation. He correctly pointed out that "It is what South Korea wants to do, and it's something that the North is upset that the South has not done already despite its earlier promises." Those observers criticizing the timing and the high level of the meeting are overseeing the basic fact past negotiations with the North have shown: the higher the level of consultation and negotiation, the higher the possibility of substantial results. And if this summit is another step to a less confrontational, more cooperative environment on the Korean Peninsula, it is in the interest of all the countries of the region - above all the Koreans themselves.

With regard to the venue-question, there's a pretty simple background to that. During Kim, Man-bok's secret visits to Pyongyang, the North Korean authorities proposed Pyongyang as the host city of the summit, despite a differing deal during the first summit. The North argued that Pyongyang was the "more elegant" venue, where President Roh could receive the "best possible treatment." A closer look, however, suggests that it is of course not an assessment of elegance that motivated this decision. Rather, the decision was borned by fears of a security and (internal and external) public relations debacle. In South Korea, there is a tradition of active - and sometimes violent - public protest, and both North Korean and South Korean authorities are aware of this. No matter what South Korea does for guarding Kim, Jong-il, it cannot provide a 100 percent guarantee of his safety. Because of the incomparable power concentration in the hands of Kim, Jong-il any danger to him is (from a North Korean perspective) seen as a threat to the entire North Korean system. The South's "Yes" to hold the summit in Pyongyang must thus be seen as a political concession to the North. Despite this personal risk for Kim, Jong-il, there's another major point to hold the summit in Pyongyang (again from a North Korean perspective) - namely the 'propaganda bonus'. The first summit showed hundreds of North Koreans paving the way, waving flowers and flags. Thus, propaganda is an important part of 'selling politics to its own people'. Such propaganda measures wouldn't be possible in Seoul, where the summit would be without doubt accompanied by massive demonstrations - thus eliminating the important 'propaganda bonus'.

Positive interdependencies between the summit and the nuclear issue?

President Roh, Moo-hyun himself said "Improvement in inter-Korean relations should go hand in hand with the settlement of the North's nuclear problem" and that "Improved South-North Korean relations tend to heighten the outlook for the settlement of the nuclear problem." A set of academic Korea observers, e.g. Lee Ki-tak, professor of political science at Seoul's Yonsei University, would agree to this positive interpretation, arguing that "the summit could in fact boost the nuclear talks." Many other observers (including myself), however, are less confident in this 'positive interdependency effect' between the summit and the six-way process. "The summit is not going to contribute to the resolution of the nuclear issue in any way," said Brian Myers, associate professor of international relations at Dongseo University. Lee Dong-bok, senior associate at Center for Strategic and International Studies in Seoul, also questioned the impact the meeting would have on the disarmament talks. "This summit will do little to boost the six-party talks because South Korea has no leverage in the process. It should have come after a breakthrough in the nuclear talks. Now it's the other way round." In my point of view, the upcoming inter-Korean summit is unlikely to have a major impact on the process of Pyongyang's denuclearization, mainly because North Korea sees the nuclear issue as one between Pyongyang and Washington and thus tries to separate it from the inter-Korean process. In the above-cited KCNA announcement, Pyongyang stressed the necessity of "By Our Nation Itself" in regard of the inter-Korean process. This phrase, however, does not refer to the nuclear issue, which, in fact, Pyongyang still directly links to its relations with the US. No inter-Korean summit can - in Pyongyang's view - substitute this crucial relationship to Washington. Although President Roh will undoubtedly urge Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions, up till now the North has not allowed Seoul to play any meaningful role in this field. Pyongyang recently even asked Washington to hold military talks that would exclude Seoul, thus proving once more that crucial security issues are not on the inter-Korean negotiation table. Thus we can expect the two leaders calling for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Concrete efforts, however, are unlikely. Similarly, Roh and Kim will likely pledge to sign a peace treaty, but concrete steps in this regard are unthinkable without direct involvement of Washington and Beijing.

Conclusion: 2007 = 2000? Is there a basic condition for inter-Korean summits?

During the Cold War, inter-Korean relations were largely driven by Great Power relations. However, since the end of the Cold War, and especially since the first summit the major impetus in inter-Korean relations has shifted toward an internally driven dynamic on the Korean Peninsula itself - especially under the initiative of South Korea. The continued cooperation during the second nuclear crisis, especially in the economic field, provided evidence that inter-Korean relations are up till now dominated by this internal dynamic. At the same time, however, they still remain constrained and restricted by external forces. The interruption of high-level dialogue after the North's missile and nuclear test last year showed that particularly the nuclear confrontation between North Korea and the United States has a direct effect on inter-Korean relations. While the two Koreas have moved toward a position of de facto peaceful coexistence, further integration between the two is necessarily linked to resolution of these external conflicts.

If we now compare the circumstances and political conditions of the first and the second summit, there appears to be a major similarity, namely the basic fact that both summits occur in a time when North Korea began to emerge from a phase of diplomatic isolation. Differently put: North Korea's "Yes" to the summit is inseparably connected with external developments in the Northeast Asian region - despite the internal dynamic of inter-Korean relations. In the context of the first summit - among others - North Korea established diplomatic relations with many countries in Western Europe and Southeast Asia and joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Furthermore, the US-DPRK relations were in a phase of relaxation. In this context, South and North Korea were able to

substantially reconcile and expand cooperation with each other for the first time. The visible outcome of the first inter-Korean summit was the subsequent announcement of the June 15 Joint Declaration. In order to implement the agreement, the two Korea opened several channels of communication and negotiations, e.g. ministerial talks, military working-level talks, Red Cross talks and economic working-level talks. As Armstrong correctly pointed out, improvements in inter-Korean relations were "part and parcel" of this trend toward North Korea becoming a more "normal" country. Now, in the context of the second summit, we can identify quite similar political conditions. The Six-Party Process showed first visible results (Pyongyang froze the Yongbyon reactor and received the first "aid-package" in accordance with the February Agreement), the IAEA is back in North Korea, and the DPRK-US relations changed dramatically within the last months. These changed external conditions triggered the "internal dynamic" of inter-Korean relations, thus paving the way to the second summit.

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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