



Policy Forum 07-064: The Inter-Korean Summit: One Good Turn Deserves Another



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By Leon V. Sigal

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Leon V. Sigal](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Leon V. Sigal, Director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project in New York and author of *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*, writes that "for South Koreans to make the most of this second summit meeting, they must begin by appreciating its real significance as an opportunity to advance reconciliation with North Korea, which is the only way to end its nuclear ambitions and bring about much-needed change in the North."

This report was original published by [Global Asia](#) .

This PFO is part of a series on the Second Inter-Korean Summit. Please also see:

[Seoul's Impetuous Summit Initiative](#) by Bruce Klingner

[The Second Inter-Korean Summit: Four Arguments Against and Why They Could Be Wrong](#) by Ruediger Frank

The ROK Weekly report on the Summit is also available [here](#) .

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Leon V. Sigal

- "The Inter-Korean Summit: One Good Turn Deserves Another"

By Leon V. Sigal

For six years South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun sought a second inter-Korean summit meeting - without success. Why did North Korean leader Kim Jung-il agree to meet now? It is his way of acknowledging President George W. Bush's commendable about-face on North Korea policy. He recognizes that Bush has put the United States firmly back on the road to reconciliation with North Korea. With the US now moving to end enmity, the North Korean leader is ready to extend and deepen engagement with the South, which is the best way to accelerate internal change in the North. Some observers are dismissing the upcoming summit, now scheduled for October 2-4 in Pyongyang, as a crude attempt to influence South Korea's election, but they are missing the significance of this historic moment.

What can President Roh do to make the most of this historic moment? He can give new impetus to the process of reconciliation - and not only between the two Koreas.

He can probe whether Kim Jung-il intends to reenergize flagging efforts at economic reform, and if so, what he can do to help. He can also advance the process of ending the North's nuclear arms programs - not directly by trying to negotiate with Kim Jung-il on the nuclear issue, but indirectly by sounding out the North Korean leader on his hopes for a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

North Korea's leaders have never agreed to a summit meeting with the South unless the US was improving relations with North Korea. When the US was taking steps to reconcile, they were ready to meet with South Korea's president, but whenever Washington backtracked, they spurned summit meetings, letting North Korean propagandists blame the US and its "hostile policy" for the lack of progress in North-South relations.

This pattern began with Kim Il-sung's drive, starting in 1988, to reconcile with all three of North Korea's lifelong enemies - the US, South Korea, and Japan. The elder Kim, in a meeting with former US President Jimmy Carter just before his death, agreed to Carter's suggestion of a summit meeting with South Korea's president. To him, a visit by a former US president was testament to a shift in US policy away from enmity. With the US on the road to reconciliation, he was willing to meet with South Korea's leader. He was also willing to commit himself to freezing and eventually eliminating his nuclear weapons program.

Neither effort reached fruition, in no small part because of South Korean and US actions. After Kim

Il-sung's death, South Korean President Kim Young-sam dashed hopes for a summit meeting by launching a campaign to disparage his successor in hopes of destabilizing the North Korean regime. And no sooner did Washington sign the Agreed Framework in October 1994 than Republicans won control of Congress and denounced the deal. Unwilling to take on Congress, US President Bill Clinton's administration failed to keep its commitments under the accord, most significantly to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations." The North retaliated in 1998 by beginning to acquire the means to enrich uranium and testing a Nodong missile.

In late 1999, heeding the advice of President Kim Dae-jung, William Perry put Washington back on the road to reconciliation. Knowing that Seoul was seeking an inter-Korean summit meeting, Washington promised Pyongyang to end sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act once a summit took place. It also gave the North a draft communiqué saying neither government had "hostile intent" toward the other. This commitment to end enmity was issued when North Korean Vice Marshal Jo Myong-nok visited Washington the following July. With the US cooperating, Kim Jung-il was willing to host the first ever inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang and promised a return visit to the South. He also offered to end his medium- and longer-range missile programs.

Once again, hopes for a second summit and North Korean disarming did not come to fruition - this time because of President Clinton's temporizing over Kim Jung-il's invitation to come to Pyongyang and the Bush administration's refusal even to talk to North Korea, let alone negotiate in earnest, and instead threatening regime change or worse. Pyongyang retaliated by ramping up its acquisition of equipment to enrich uranium. When Washington ignored its offer to negotiate the enrichment issue in October 2002 and instead suspended shipments of heavy fuel oil, the North in turn restarted its plutonium program.

Last September, confronted with the North's 8-10 bombs' worth of plutonium and a nuclear test impending, President Bush decided to negotiate for a change - taking steps to reconcile with North Korea in return for steps by Pyongyang to halt its nuclear programs. When the US Treasury Department finally lived up to the US commitment to resolve the Banco Delta Asia issue, a test of good faith in Pyongyang, North Korea implemented its promised suspension of its plutonium program. By doing what Clinton did, Bush legitimized diplomatic give-and-take as bipartisan US policy, making it easier for his successor to follow in his footsteps. As Kim Jung-il told China's foreign minister on August 14, "Recently there have been signs that the situation on the Korean peninsula is easing."

President Bush, who has repeatedly cited the second summit as a test of North Korea's trustworthiness, now has confirmation that trust can be built - but only through mutual effort. And only a fundamental shift in political relations away from enmity - a gradual process that will take years - could reassure the North enough for it to yield its six-to-nine bombs' worth of plutonium.

President Bush has held out the possibility of signing a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War, but only after North Korea abandons its nuclear weapons. Similarly, both President Bush and President Clinton have made full normalization of US relations with North Korea dependent on nuclear disarming. But peace agreements could be politically useful as interim steps to a peace treaty. Such agreements signed by the US, South Korea, and North Korea - the three countries with armed forces on the peninsula - could provide for confidence-building measures, like hotlines linking military commands, advanced notice of exercises, military exchanges, or an "open skies" arrangement allowing reconnaissance flights. One peace agreement that the North has long sought is replacement of the Military Armistice Commission set up to monitor the cease-fire at the end of the Korean War with a three-party "peace mechanism." That mechanism could be a venue for resolving disputes like the 1996 shooting down of a US reconnaissance helicopter that strayed across the DMZ or repeated incursions of North Korean spy submarines into southern waters, as

well as for negotiating confidence-building measures (CBMs).

President Roh can use this opportunity to advance the six-party process by probing Kim's ideas for a peace mechanism and other confidence-building measures. If Kim's ideas prove negotiable, they could provide the basis for a series of peace agreements signed by the US and the two Koreas that could provide a form of diplomatic recognition the North desires. In return, that could elicit further steps by Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear programs.

For South Koreans to make the most of this second summit meeting, they must begin by appreciating its real significance as an opportunity to advance reconciliation with North Korea, which is the only way to end its nuclear ambitions and bring about much-needed change in the North.

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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