Policy Forum 07-060: The Second Inter-Korean Summit: Four Arguments Against and Why They Could Be Wrong

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By Ruediger Frank

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I. Introduction

Ruediger Frank, Professor of East Asian Political Economy at the University of Vienna, writes, "The sunshine policy, or how ever one prefers to call it, is a long-term strategy. It needs time and continuous support to bear fruits. Nuclear North Korea is a product of failed confrontation, not of naive engagement. Rather than being disappointed by the lack of spectacular solutions, we should take the time to think about what has already been achieved during a historically brief period of time, show some patience, and give the sun a chance."

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II. Article by Ruediger Frank

- "The Second Inter-Korean Summit: Four Arguments Against and Why They Could Be Wrong"
By Ruediger Frank

On August 8th, 2007, it was announced that the two Koreas plan to hold their second summit meeting in North Korea on August 28-30. This is a move that surprised and disappointed many observers, for good reasons.

The first issue is timing. A look at the ratings of President Roh Moo-hyun confirms the continuation of what has been a regular phenomenon for almost two decades in South Korean politics. Only four months prior to the next presidential elections, the current non-reelectable office holder is a lame duck. Why meeting him now? In the last years, the North Korean leadership has learned a bit about the negative effects of inflation. What is true for the economy is true for politics, too. Too many summits will not only reduce the value of the single event, they will also continuously raise expectations among the population. In other words, it is quite risky for Kim Jong-il to meet the South Korean leader without results that he can present as a significant success to his people. This task will become more difficult each time; it is even more difficult when the counterpart is almost out of office. As the North has nevertheless agreed to hold the summit, we will have to expect a major gift to Kim Jong-il, either of economic or political nature. What could it be, the establishment of diplomatic relations? Hardly - for legal reasons and because it would be regarded as cementing division rather than as a move towards unification. The agreement on a roadmap for unification? Such a paper would be worthless if signed by a counterpart who has a planning horizon of a few weeks left. What remains is an economic aid package, huge enough to satisfy the North and detailed enough to give South Korea a chance to participate in the exploration of the North's resources before all of the most profitable mines are run by Chinese. Could it be that we are back to the pathetic, five decades old situation of another race between Pyongyang's "supporters" putting the DPRK in the position to wag the dog?

Another disputable point is location. Not only has it been decided in June 2000 that the next summit would take place in the South. One of the first things I have learned as a student of East Asia was that colours, rites, or symbols matter. Traditionally, the receiver of a delegation has been in the higher position - or has the Chinese Emperor ever visited Korea? It is difficult to believe that the second visit by a South Korean head of state to North Korea would not be deliberately misinterpreted as some kind of tributary mission.

The third reason for raising one's eyebrows is, again, the secretiveness of the process. In numerous training seminars with North Korean officials, I have stressed that transparency is a precondition for trust, and that without trust no lasting business relationship can be built. The trainees will hardly

feel encouraged by high politics to follow my advice. How can the government of democratic, economically successful, cosmopolitan and internationally highly recognized South Korea expect trust from its own citizens if questions of the highest national priority such as a summit meeting with the North are discussed behind closed doors? This is not May 1972, and Kim Man Bok is not Lee Hu-Rak. Times have changed. It should be fair to expect a long-term, open discussion of a summit, its goals, its timing and its location. Instead, the subjects are notified three weeks in advance.

The fourth issue is power. Unless I grossly misinterpret the position of the DPRK, it seems that Kim Jong-il is in a much more favourable position than Roh Moo-hyun. The former has nuclear weapons, a deal with the U.S., an exploding trade with China and Russia, a firm South Korean commitment to Kaesong and the Mt. Kumgang project etc. etc., while the latter desperately needs a success to prevent the opposition from taking over. Let us not forget that in the not so distant past, Pyongyang has rather been terrified by the prospect of a progressive regime in Seoul and was ready to support conservatives by staging the one or the other intermezzo at the border prior to South Korean elections. This might have changed, but I remain sceptical. When both leaders will sit down at the negotiating table, Mr. Kim can be relaxed in his home turf and in no hurry and wait what his counterpart has to say. Mr. Roh, however, will have to work hard for his part of the deal while on foreign territory and knowing that this is his only chance. No need for Korea experts here: Common sense alone suggests an uneven result. That is a situation where many leaders in business and politics would seek to avoid talks, not to force them.

So much for the pessimists view: Wrong time, wrong place, wrong way and wrong balance of power. It is hard to believe there could be anything said in favour of the summit. However, that depends on the perspective.

Timing could have been better - or could it? A meeting before the February 13th agreement would certainly have been worse. President Roh has been in office since March 2003, the second nuclear crisis started in October 2002 - he had no better chance to meet Chairman Kim, unless he wanted to officially ignore the North's nuclear ambitions. Since February, we formally have a deal, no matter what it is worth. And there is a reason why many languages know the proverb "better late than never". At least they meet, and what does the South have to lose?

The location is not perfect either, but who really cares? This is the 21st century, not the Choson dynasty. Do the North Koreans think they receive a tributary mission? If it makes them happy, so be it. A brief look at the facts shows that such an interpretation is light years away from reality. One might even argue that the North is afraid of a bad reception and prefers to stay home, while the South shows the bravery of the strong and ventures onto the adversary's territory.

The lack of pre-summit transparency is hard to defend. Probably, it was less a result of top-down patriarchal leadership than of the well-funded fear of an uncooperative opposition in the South, plus the attempt to make the North feel comfortable so that the meeting itself is not jeopardized.

Finally, what about the balance of power? Of course: In the short run, the North will most likely win economically and politically. But two decades from now, history textbooks might well list this summit as one in a long row of steps towards a normalization of inter-Korean relations, as another measure of economic stabilization and political trust-building. The consequences could be a lasting reduction of military tension, an end to humanitarian disasters, and, who knows, even a peaceful and mutually acceptable resolution of the Korean question. No matter how weak the South Korean position might be during the summit: economic support can be discontinued, and the North knows it. Of the two parties, only Seoul can wield this stick - so who is really powerful? Waiting for a better day might play into the hands of Beijing, and not only Koreans would dislike a DPRK that unilaterally depends on China or collapses.

The sunshine policy, or how ever one prefers to call it, is a long-term strategy. It needs time and continuous support to bear fruits. Nuclear North Korea is a product of failed confrontation, not of naive engagement. Rather than being disappointed by the lack of spectacular solutions, we should take the time to think about what has already been achieved during a historically brief period of time, show some patience, and give the sun a chance.

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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