



RESEARCH NOTE

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The Korean Leadership Summit—More Security and Less Uncertainty for the Asia-Pacific Region?

The meeting between North Korea's Kim Jong-il and South Korea's Kim Dae Jung on 12-15 June will be a positive development for the security of the Asia-Pacific region. It is an example of how a cooperative approach to regional diplomacy by China and the US, in coordination with interested parties like Japan and Australia, can achieve a good outcome.

The agreement

The agreement reached by the two Kims is the first ever signed by the leaders of the two Koreas. The Kims set out their aim to achieve Korean unification by peaceful means and agreed :

- to resolve the question of unification independently
- to promote unification on the basis of the common elements in Seoul's concept of a confederation and Pyongyang's idea for a federation, that is, one country two systems
- to resolve humanitarian issues such as visits by family members separated since the Korean War
- to consolidate mutual trust by promoting economic, cultural and other exchanges
- to conduct further dialogue to implement these agreements.

Sensibly, both sides put off discussion of potentially vexatious topics like North Korea's nuclear and missile development program and the question of the US military presence in South Korea.

Flashpoint Korea?

The Korean peninsula has long been regarded as a dangerous flashpoint with the potential to ignite a wider regional conflict. The relationship between the two Koreas for the last fifty years, indeed, has been that of

sworn enemies. Rivalry between the two Koreas was cited by the Secretary of the Australian Department of Defence, Dr Allan Hawke, as one of the key factors contributing to Australia's uncertain and volatile strategic environment.¹

Until recently, North Korea was widely perceived in the United States to be an unpredictable rogue state intent on proliferating weapons of mass destruction and their delivery system. The two Koreas are technically still at war, even though the Korean War ended in 1953. The demilitarised zone dividing the peninsula contains concentrations of opposing military forces – one million on the north versus 750,000 on the south - that are unmatched anywhere else in the world.

The US is committed to the defence of South Korea under the terms of their 1953 Mutual Defence Treaty , a commitment guaranteed by the tripwire location of US armed forces directly in the path of any attempted invasion across the demilitarised zone.

In this context therefore, the Korean leadership summit signals a potentially important turning point in the security outlook for the Korean peninsula, the Asia-Pacific region and for countries like Australia.²

Questions about North Korea's sincerity

The welcome given to President Kim Dae Jung by President Kim Jong-il – and indeed the former's willingness to go to Pyongyang - reflects a turnaround in intra-Korean politics and security. It confirms a change of direction in North Korea's attitude towards South Korea, the US and the Pacific community. It is an indication of North Korea's interest in opening up

to the outside world and undertaking economic reforms along the lines pioneered by China.

Significantly, the United States State Department considers that North Korea is genuinely reaching out to engage the rest of the world, and that North Korea is behaving in a very useful, constructive and business-like manner, while Kim Jong-il is perceived to be 'a leader with courage and vision'.³

This judgement is supported by North Korea's moves to establish diplomatic relations with Italy, Australia and prospectively with New Zealand and other Western countries.

Of course, fundamental differences and distrust remains deeply embedded in the psyche of both Koreas. In the absence of anything tangible, it is easy to be sceptical about the prospect of any real progress in North-South relations. After all, both sides have previously agreed to seek unification and have spoken of peace and reconciliation, to no avail. And serious doubts must be raised about North Korea's ability to manage dramatic social and economic change without disintegrating.

But as Kim Dae Jung observed in Pyongyang, it is not possible to solve all problems at once. What is important, he said, was that the two Koreas were choosing reconciliation and cooperation rather than distrust and confrontation.

Kim Jong-il seemed relaxed and confident and in charge of North Korea when he met Kim Dae Jung. Presumably anybody opposed to the shift in North Korea's domestic and foreign policies has been retired or removed.

Kim Jong-il may have used North Korea's economic plight to argue for faster and more dramatic policy

change. By 1995, North Korea was on the brink of famine because of the cumulative effects of drought, floods, rural mismanagement, the inability of China to fill the gap because of its own harvest failures and shortages of spare parts, fuel and fertiliser after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

There were however signs of a policy rethink in Pyongyang many years before the 12-15 June summit. They include:

- North Korea's attempts to ease its perceived security dilemma by developing nuclear weapons in the late 1980s;
- its acceptance by 1991 that reunification of the Koreas could not be achieved by force and that it had to co-exist with South Korea
- Kim Il-sung's agreement for a leadership summit when he met former US President Jimmy Carter in June 1994
- North Korea's compliance with its 1994 undertakings to cease nuclear research at Yongbyon
- experimenting with Chinese-style special economic zones at Kungansan and Rajin-Sonbong
- opening up to tourism and trade with South Korea since 1997, and
- the 1999 agreement to refrain from testing missiles in exchange for the lifting of US trade sanctions.

Impact on the regional balance of power

While by no means guaranteed, strategic stability in Northeast Asia has been enhanced. The four big powers with a stake in the region have demonstrated a new style of cooperative diplomacy. The collaboration between China, the US, Japan, and to a lesser extent Russia in opening the door to North Korea reflects a shared great power interest in building trust and common security in the peninsula.

China however, gains most. If sustained, the promise of the summit will strengthen Beijing's role as a central player in the Korean peninsula. Kim Jong-il, for instance, consulted with China's

President Jiang Zemin just prior to his meeting with Kim Dae Jung.⁴ If it continues, North Korea's good behaviour will weaken the American case for maintaining its 37,000 military personnel in Korea. North Korean restraint on developing weapons of mass destruction will help undermine the moral argument being made in Washington for developing a national missile defence system (NMD). China and Russia are opposed to NMD because it jeopardises the 1972 ABM (Anti Ballistic Missile) Treaty.

The US military presence in Korea is unlikely to change in the medium term. South Korea's Kim Dae Jung said he told Kim Jong-il that the US military presence in South Korea should remain even after reunification. Kim Jong-il is reported to have said that the US troop presence in South Korea was 'not necessarily bad', a view also espoused by his father, Kim Il-sung. China can probably see the benefit of the strategic stability offered by a US presence in Korea, as too does Japan.

But in the longer term, improved North-South relations will eventually add to the pressure for a reduced US military presence in Korea. Similarly, it may become harder for the US to justify the expense and uncertainty of NMD if North Korea, for example, ceases to be a missile-equipped rogue state.

Japan sees economic opportunities and strategic benefit in North Korea's change of direction. Japan has been working closely with the US and South Korea to give North Korea a soft economic landing provided North Korea gives up its missile plans. In the longer term however, Japan will be concerned about the implications of a dynamic united Korea. It will also be concerned about a shifting regional power balance in which China's influence is likely to expand at the expense of the US.

Russia too has an eye on renewing its influence in the peninsula. Russian President Vladimir Putin is to visit Pyongyang and Beijing in July where no doubt he will push his opposition to America's NMD agenda.

Assessment

Despite doubts about North Korea's bona fides and allegations that it is still intent on developing nuclear weapons and missiles, the Kim summit is an achievement of historic significance. In the short term, it is likely to enhance security cooperation and stability in Northeast Asia. In the longer term, a federated Korea may reduce US influence in the region but it could also serve as a useful buffer that can stabilize the potential great power rivalry of China and Japan.

If North Korea does come in from the cold, as seems likely, credit should be given to the willingness of the US and China to collaborate in cooperative diplomacy, and to South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's decision to pursue a 'sunshine' policy of engagement with the North.

1. 'Defence—the state of the nation', RUSI, Canberra, 2 February 2000.
2. As well as being an ANZUS Treaty ally Australia was one of 16 nations that signed a declaration on 27 July 1953 to the effect that the signatories would return to Korea in the event of another armed attack from the North.
3. USIS EPF502, 9 June 2000, 'Special State Department Briefing'.
4. 'China supports DPRK-ROK Summit', *Wen Wei Po*, Hong Kong, 9 June 2000.

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