

DECEMBER UPDATE

There were a number of issues that arose in December 2005 under the dual umbrellas of inter-Korean relations and six-party talks, and the issues seemed to indicate opposing shifts in relations. Several positive moves were seen toward warming relations and cooperation between South Korea (ROK) and North Korea (DPRK), while two major topics, North Korean human rights, and U.S. legal action over alleged North Korean counterfeiting both drove North Korea to avoid talks and seemingly furthered the divide between U.S. and ROK policies.

Kim Dae-jung to Visit DPRK

Coming during the month in which former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung celebrated the fifth anniversary of winning the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to peace on the Korean Peninsula, it was announced that he will attempt to visit North Korea soon. Seoul released a statement fully supporting such a trip.

Kim Dae-jung's proposals for the North and South alike include integrating the North's federation plan with the South's confederation plan and entering into the first stage of the unification process, signing a peace treaty between the two Koreas and the United States after resolving the North's nuclear issues. He also stated that he wanted to discuss turning the six-party talks into a permanent forum, Japan's increasingly hardline approach, U.S. rhetoric and international condemnation of North Korean human rights abuses.

ROK Redefines Summit Requirements

The South Korean government reaffirmed on December 3 that it no longer insists that Kim Jong Il travel to Seoul for a second summit as was originally agreed between the then-leaders Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il in 2000. ROK Minister of Unification Chung Dong-young stated that the venue is less important than the actual summit. Kim Dae-jung suggested that if Kim Jong Il refuses to travel to Seoul, then he and President Roh Moo Hyun should meet at Dorasan Station, a rail station on the South-North Korean border. Some in Seoul strongly disagree with the government's dismissal of the original agreement.

Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks

The 17th Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks opened on December 13 for four days of discussion on Cheju Island. The talks closed with a nine-point agreement including the following:

The South and the North shared a common understanding that in line with the spirit of the June 15 Inter-Korean Joint Declaration, both sides should break away from the outdated mindsets of the confrontation era which undermine the national reconciliation and union, and respect each other's ideologies and systems, and agreed to take practical measures to that end;

The Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks should be implemented at an earliest possible date for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and agreed to actively cooperate with each other in solving the North Korean nuclear issue in conformity with national co-safety and benefits;

To make proactive and practical efforts in order to ease military tensions and guarantee peace on the Peninsula, and so agreed to hold talks between the military authorities from each side at an earliest date in the coming year;

To expand and develop inter-Korean economic cooperation to a new level for mutual benefits and national co-prosperity, as well as a balanced and integrated development of a national economy;

To take practical measures in order to expand investments and cooperation in terms of regions, economic sectors and scale; had a common understanding that the second stage of development of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the procedures related to transit, customs and communications in the Complex as well as trial operations of Gyeonghui and Donghae railways should be pursued as soon as possible, and to discuss and solve them through the Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Promotion Committee;

To hold Inter-Korean Red Cross Talks in February 2006, and discuss and solve humanitarian issues of mutual concerns to the two parties;

To hold the fourth video reunion for separated families around the end of February 2006 and the 13th reunion for separated families at Mt. Kumgang around the end of March 2006;

To actively pursue humanitarian projects on the occasion of lunar New Year's Day in the coming year;

To provide active support for close cooperation between the World Taekwondo Federation (in South Korea) and the International Taekwondo Federation for the unified development of Taekwondo;

To cooperate with each other in the registration of historical remains in the district of Kaesong as the World Cultural Heritage, and their preservation and maintenance projects; To take measures to move Bukkwandaechubbi, an ancient monument from the Chosun Dynasty, which had recently been brought back from Japan to the South, to its original location in the North at an earliest date; And to hold the 18th Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks in Pyongyang from March 28 to 31, 2006.

There was no fixed date for restarting inter-Korean military talks or any breakthrough toward restarting stalled six-party talks.

Inter-Korean Legal Cooperation

Two issues this month will test inter-Korean legal cooperation. The first is a lawsuit filed by North Korean author Hong Sok-jung against an unnamed South Korean publisher. Hong filed the suit through the Foundation of Inter-Korea Cooperation, a foundation tasked with holding copyrights for North Korean authors. For the sale of 80,000 copies of his novel 'Hwang Chin-I', Hong is demanding 150 million won, or 150 thousand USD. This is the first lawsuit of its kind, but lawyers say that because the South Korean constitution considers North Korean territory its own, South Korean copyright laws should apply.

A second, more tragic case, involved the death of one DPRK soldier and injuries to two others as a South Korean worker at Mount Kumgang Tourist Resort struck them with a car on December 27. According to an inter-Korean agreement, the North has first investigative rights, and can issue a warning, fine, or expulsion. The driver would then be dealt with according to South Korean law.

Kaesong Industrial Complex

Korea Telecom (KT) opened 300 phone lines connecting the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC) with South Korea. This is the first direct private connection between the two Koreas since 1945. KT will open a branch office in the KIC in order to facilitate direct contact with the North and to

advance discussions on postal and Internet cooperation.

With the KIC now exporting to the South, inter-Korean trade topped one billion USD for the first time, over 57 percent from the previous year. Unification Minister Chung, on a December trip to the United States urged U.S. officials to encourage U.S. firms to set up in Kaesong. Deputy Secretary of Commerce David Sampson replied that U.S. firms could operate there, just as South Korean businesses can. The United States sees the complex as important to inter-Korean relations and supports the project.

South Korean Public Opinion

A survey by Metrix, a Seoul-based research group, carried out on December 6 - 7 showed that 64.2 percent of South Koreans favor gradual reunification. This is over 10 percent higher than last year. In addition, 18.9 percent of those polled preferred separate Koreas, and only 18.4 percent thought that economic aid to the North should be increased, while 34.6 percent thought too much was being given, with 7.2 percent calling for aid to be halted completely. The number of people viewing North Korea as an enemy, however, decreased by almost half, from 50.1 percent last year to 25.7 percent.

Unification Ministry

South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-young stepped down at the end of December to return to the Uri Party and prepare for his party's presidential nomination in the election scheduled for fall of 2006. Lee Jong-seok, deputy chief of the National Security Council, was named as Chung's replacement. Lee is a long time North Korea scholar and advisor credited with Roh Moo Hyun's 'Peace and Prosperity' policy.

Six-Party Talks

Six-party talks are still on hold as the North has said that it would be impossible to rejoin talks while the United States imposes sanctions against its banking partner Banco Delta Asia in Macao and North Korean companies accused of proliferation. Previously, North Korea refused to return to talks unless the United States would agree to 'bilateral talks' on the issue, while the United States was only offering a "briefing" on the U.S. Patriot Act. Now the North is demanding a lifting of sanctions, and the return to six-party talks with an attitude of mutual respect. It also reaffirmed possession of nuclear weapons in a release on December 20 and

stated that it would focus on the development of graphite-moderated reactors. A senior South Korean official stated that Washington and Pyongyang should have bilateral discussions over the forgery issue within the framework of six-party talks. The U.S. response was that sanctions in retaliation for counterfeiting are a non-negotiable legal issue and not at all part of North Korean nuclear negotiations.

U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Alexander Vershbow on December 7 publicly labeled the North a “criminal regime engaged in drug trafficking and money counterfeiting” as well as accusing them of “engaging in dangerous activities such as weapons exports to rogue states.” This led to top North and South Korean officials condemning the comments as inflammatory and unsubstantiated. This was followed by a letter from Henry Hyde, chairman of the U.S. House International Relations Committee, to Vershbow supporting the ambassador’s statements and criticized “those who would made apologies for such a regime” as being “no friends of America or her people.”

In response to sanctions, North Korea has shifted its banking to Austria, asking Hyundai Asan to transmit Mount Kumgang Tourist Resort profits there.

ROK Top Envoy and Deputy Foreign Minister Song Min-soon headed to China in an attempt to discuss the six-party talks and how to advance in light of the DPRK-U.S. standoff, while Unification Minister Chung headed to Washington to brief officials on inter-Korean relations. After spending a short time in Washington, Chung will proceed to Los Angeles to address Korean-American community leaders.

Human Rights

The United States is also turning up pressure regarding North Korea’s human rights issues. Washington’s Special Envoy on North Korean Human Rights Jay Lefkowitz spoke out at an international conference and again at a candlelight vigil in Seoul over a three-day summit from December 8 - 10. The summit, sponsored by the U.S. group Freedom House, was not welcomed by the South Korean government although it was the largest-ever human rights conference in Seoul. On the same day that Lefkowitz called on the South Korean government to take stronger measures, Kim Dae-jung staged an event at which he called for gradual reconciliation as the only path for resolution of human rights issues.

On December 6, Japan named Fumiko Saiga as its special envoy on North Korean human rights.

Japan's foreign ministry stated that the purpose of the appointment was to handle matters related to the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Commission. North Korea launched a media offensive against Japan for the naming of a special envoy and moves to enact a North Korean Human Rights Bill.

Defectors

The number of defectors from January through November 2005 was 1,217, the fourth year in a row that defections topped 1,000. Officials doubt defections will reach the 2004 total of 1,894 due to the joint defection of 468 people in July of that year.

DPRK-Japan

North Korea and Japan successfully held talks on normalizing diplomatic relations. After two days of meetings in Beijing, both sides agreed to hold working-level talks on normalization, abduction issues, and nuclear weapons programs, and to hold ambassadorial-level talks on normalization in January 2006.

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