

The Summit and Search for a New Korean Peninsula

Won-sup Lee*

Significances and Achievements of the North-South Summit

The summit, which had started with a humble idea that the meeting itself would be significant enough, achieved far more than expected. The fact that the two leaders signed the North-South Joint Statement after lengthy and sober discussion was indeed a historic event, signaling the end of "animosity and confrontation," and the beginning of a new era of "reconciliation and cooperation."

What the two leaders agreed on included the principle of seeking an independent solution for the unification matter, the recognition of the commonality between the two different unification formulas proposed by each, the reunion of separated family members, the expansion of economic cooperation and other social and cultural interchanges, and the resumption of official dialogue. As such, they encompassed virtually all the current issues in inter-Korean relations. The promise of Kim Jong-il's return visit to Seoul, in particular, was a great achievement in that it would give the summit meeting a sense of continuity, thus contribute to the building of confidence between the two Koreas.

The Joint Statement carries a far greater weight than any other inter-Korean agreements of the past in that it was agreed and signed directly by the two leaders after serious discussion, and that it was witnessed by the whole world. The summit is also significant in that the meeting came true by the initiatives of the two Koreas without mediation by a third party. A meeting urgently made up by a third party cannot be free from some limits arising from its tentative nature, and oftentimes it may cause considerable costs on those involved.

* The Hankyoreh Shinmun

Agreement on the Principle of Unification and the Unification Formula

The most surprising as well as the most significant among the five clauses of the Joint Statement was the one regarding unification. The two Koreas agreed on the principle of unification, and found some common grounds on how to get there. It was hardly expected that the two leaders would admit in public the commonality between the two unification formulas, that is, a confederation proposed by the South and a loose form of federal system pursued by the North. The fact that the two sides agreed on the necessity for some form of transient stage (characterized by "one nation and two systems") in the unification process is highly significant.

With this agreement, the two sides can now avoid unproductive and unrealistic disputes of the past, where each side unilaterally argued for the merits of its unification formula. There is little doubt that this will be a great help in bringing about reconciliation and peace on the peninsula. To interpret it more liberally, the agreement suggests that the two Koreas should not be content with a peaceful coexistence, but move forward hand in hand to the ultimate goal of unification.

Of course, we need to further discuss and clarify the concepts of a confederation and a loose form of federation. If, as explained by President Kim, the North's loose form of federation were to denote a political system, where diplomatic and military powers reside in local governments, then it would not be much different from the confederation proposed by the South. The only difference would be whether a formal central government without any substantive powers exists or not. It is reasonable to assume that the loose form of federation refers to the idea proclaimed by Kim Il-sung in 1991, in contrast to the "Korea Democratic Federal System" proposed by the North in its early years. In any event, the North should further clarify what the loose form of federation means exactly.

Regarding the agreed principle of unification, that is, the principle of independent solution, some criticize that it merely reflects the North's past arguments such as the removal of foreign influences and the withdrawal of US armed forces stationed in the South. During the summit, however, President Kim explained from a realistic point of view why US armed forces need to be stationed

in Korea, and reportedly Kim Jong-il acknowledged it. From the gradual change of the North's attitude on this matter, one can cautiously guess that the two leaders might have discussed the status and future of the US armed forces.

The issue of US armed forces in Korea is not merely a matter concerning US-Korea bilateral relations, but also a matter that is related to US policy toward Northeast Asia. It is also closely related to such sensitive matters as replacing the armistice with a peace treaty, arms reduction between the North and the South, and ultimately peace on the peninsula. Therefore, it is essential that we do more research and review the status and future of US armed forces in Korea.

In relation to this matter, it also seems unwise to show excessively allergic responses to the North's insistence on the removal of foreign influence. Given the geopolitical uniqueness of the Korean peninsula, it is natural that we secure international cooperation in general and understanding and cooperation from the neighboring four major powers in particular, in order to resolve the Korean problem. It is equally natural, however, that the two Koreas, free from any significant foreign intervention, take the initiative in resolving this essentially national problem.

The Reunion of Separated Family Members and the Release of Long-term pro-North Korean Prisoners in the South

The first visible achievement out of the summit would be the reunion of separated family members. This issue is particularly important for Kim Dae-jung, who needs nation-wide support in order to approach North-South Korean relations from a progressive perspective. Reportedly, around 100 people will be involved in the initial reunion program. For this program to be a success, it must not end as a one-shot event, but evolve into an institutionalized program.

The issue of releasing long-term pro-North Korean prisoners in the South must be dealt with from a humanitarian perspective. Some in the South may argue that this issue must be separated from the family reunion matter and that a more strict version of reciprocity must be applied, thus linking this issue with more

equivalent issues such as the release of South Korean war prisoners and fishers held by the North. As this point, however, such a strict approach may become an obstacle to national reconciliation. It may be more realistic to pursue those humanitarian issues one by one at later times.

Expanding Inter-Korean Exchanges and Cooperation

Among various inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation, economic cooperation is the area from which the North expects to gain most tangible benefits. Although inter-Korean economic cooperation has continued at the private firm level, it has recently been showing its limits due to the lack of progress in official dialogue. While economic cooperation had been regarded by many as the South's assistance on the North, the joint statement expressed it as "a balanced development of the national economy." It is seen now from the perspective not of "unilateral benevolence," but of "common prosperity." For example, the reconnecting of Seoul-Shineuiju railway can result in not only an expansion of the North's infrastructure, but also a reduction for the South's transportation costs, as the railway might be extended in the long term to China, Siberia, and all the way to Europe.

In the short term, however, the South's investment on the North will be the most prevalent form of economic cooperation. The agricultural cooperation and the construction of the North's railways, roads, and ports require financial commitment from the South's government. In order to stimulate and maintain private firms' long-term investment in the North, the government should also consult closely with the Northern partner, and establish legal and institutional arrangements that will minimize the risks of investment.

Inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation in other areas including social, cultural, sports, public health, and environment are also expected to grow rapidly in the near future. The easiest but the most visible would be cooperation in the sporting events, including North-South joint entrance in the upcoming Sydney Olympics, a single national soccer team for the 2002 World Cup, a single national team for the upcoming table tennis tournament, and exchange

soccer matches between the South and the North.

North Korea's Strategic Changes and Political Situation surrounding Korean Peninsula

Background for the North's Strategic Changes

One may put forward many different reasons why North Korea agreed to the summit and to the joint statement. The gist of controversy, of course, is whether the North's changes should be interpreted as tactical or strategic ones. If one takes a comprehensive look at various circumstantial evidence, it seems that the dominant view is to interpret the North's changes as strategic in nature. In order to resolve its economic difficulties, the North is in dire need of external assistances, and its leaders seem to have finally been convinced that the much-needed assistances structurally depend upon dialogue with its Southern partner.

The consolidation of Kim Jong-il's status within the power circle and the slow improvement in the food shortage problem must have boosted the leader's confidence. With his confidence restored, Kim Jong-il regime might have felt comfortable enough to agree to the summit. As the regime has overcome the crisis to some extent, it has changed its policy direction from that of isolation to that of opening.

Responses by Neighboring Countries and Political Situation surrounding the Peninsula

All the neighboring countries including the US, Japan, China, and Russia have welcomed the unexpected achievements of the summit. This reflects the view that a progress in inter-Korean relations not only contributes to stability and peace on the peninsula, but also is congruent with the national interests of each neighboring country. In particular, the North-US relations are likely to be much affected by the summit's success. In fact, the two sides are meeting quite often nowadays to discuss such pending issues as the limiting of the North's missile development and export, and the lifting of the US economic sanctions against the North. An improvement in the North-US relations will in turn give a positive

impetus to the normalization talks between the North and Japan. All these developments suggest that the framework of cross-recognition of the two Koreas by the four major powers might be completed in not so distant future, which will contribute to the long-term stability and peace on the Peninsula as well as within the Northeast Asian region.

One should look beyond what can be readily observed, however. The neighboring countries, although they all have officially expressed welcome to the summit's great achievements, might feel uncomfortable in some respect. In particular, the fact that the two Koreas have emphasized the principle of an independent solution for the unification matter might cause the neighboring countries to be wary of the possible reduction of their influence on the Peninsula.

The US seems to show the most sensitive responses to the summit. Right after the summit, the Special Assistant to President Kim Dae-jung on diplomatic and security matters, Mr. Hwang Won-tak, paid a visit to Washington to explain the summit results. Nonetheless, the US was eager enough to send the Secretary of State, Madeleine K. Albright, to Seoul in order to listen directly to President Kim Dae-jung's explanations. The US has good reasons to be concerned, as the reconciliation between the two Koreas will gradually weaken the rationale for the stationing of US armed forces in Korea, which will in turn force the US to reconsider the direction of its policy toward Northeast Asia.

Tasks for the New Era of Reconciliation and Cooperation

In order to succeed to the achievements of the summit and to consolidate the frame of reconciliation and cooperation, the two sides must build trust by keeping their promises faithfully. The North is arguing that it will never break the promises if the South keeps the promises. As opposed to the North, a political system where the supreme leader's decisions are deemed important, the South has a political system in which governmental decisions need to be backed by popular support. It is important, therefore, for the South to make efforts to build national consensus on the matter. More specifically, it needs to get rid of the rigid cold-war mentality as well as various

legal and institutional obstacles. Various institutions and devices that have contributed to the ordinary people's distorted perceptions of the North should be removed as soon as possible.

First of all, the National Security Act should be revised or abolished so that it does not stand in the way of the new era of reconciliation and cooperation. The contradictory nature of the Act was revealed drastically by the summit. According to the Act, Kim Jong-il is the leader of an anti-state organization, and the picture of him shaking hands with President Kim Dae-jung at the summit shows how wide the discrepancy is between the law and the reality. Moreover, Chairman Kim Jong-il has reportedly implied to President Kim that the North may revise the Labor Party's regulations regarding its explicit policy direction of liberating the South and building a unified, socialist country. Revising or abolishing the National Security Act, therefore, has become an urgent task for the South. In addition, other laws and institutions that might become obstacles to the future reconciliation and cooperation should be revised to reflect the changing reality.

More important than institutional reforms is the reorientation of our attitude and values. We should destroy the "division mentality within our mind," which was forged and reinforced throughout the cold war period, and replace it with more community-oriented values. The North must be viewed not as an object of animosity and competition, but as an object of symbiosis. There must be efforts to destroy various forms of distorted prejudice we have internalized in the past. In addition, there is a need to fundamentally review the goal and direction of our unification education, as it has been based mainly on the principle of anti-North Korea.

The task of destroying the division mentality cannot be accomplished by governmental efforts alone. While the government is engaged in official dialogue with the North to build peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, the civil society must actively take part in the process by supporting the government, expanding contacts with the North in various areas, and thus heightening mutual understanding between the two societies. At the same time, the civil society should also make efforts to build internal consensus on this important matter. ■■■

SPECIAL FEATURE

▼

Inter-Korean Summit Meeting and the Future of Korean Peninsula

16/ Korean Peninsula after the Summit
Meeting: From Economic to Security
Cooperation

... Byung-joon Ahn

24/ Meaning and Prospects of the Korean
Summit in the Context of the History
of Inter-Korean Relations

... Hak-joon Kim

30/ The Summit and the Economic Future
of the Peninsula

... Marcus Noland