

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

Hak-joon Kim*

The North-South Korean summit is to be held during June 12-14 of this year. The meeting, which is the first summit meeting ever since the division of the peninsula, is worth being called historic. The evaluation of the meeting will be different depending on the result as usual. From this problematique, I will examine the historical locus of the meeting and provide some conjecture about the prospects of the meeting.

History of Seoul-Pyongyang Relations before the Summit

It is worth noting that this summit meeting is the first meeting ever of that kind since the division of the Korean Peninsula. The first occasion for the talk about the possibility of and need for the summit meeting at the official level was provided by the South-North Joint Declaration announced on July 4th of 1972. After the 5th Republic was launched in 1981, Seoul officially proposed the holding of summit meeting to Pyongyang, which led to the secret visits to each other by envoys of the both sides. The 6th Republic also witnessed the envoys exchanging secret visits to Seoul and Pyongyang discussing the holding of summit meeting. As a result, both sides almost agreed to hold the summit meeting in 1992.

It was June 1994 that secret envoys eventually came out with the official agreement to hold the summit meeting. Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter successfully managed to draw agreement

* President, Incheon University

on the summit after his meeting with both South Korean president Kim Young-sam and North Korean leader Kim Il-sung while the tension was rising on the Korean Peninsula in the wake of hard-line approach of Washington toward the nuclear development of North Korea. This, however, came to nil due to the sudden death of North Korean leader Kim Il-sung on July 7.

Seoul has consistently pursued reconciliation and engagement policy toward Pyongyang and has expressed its will to hold North-South summit meeting since the inauguration of Kim Dae-jung administration in Feb. 1998. Pyongyang received Seoul's Pyongyang policy and related proposals in a positive manner, and after several exchanges of secret envoys both sides were able to announce the agreement to hold the summit meeting in Pyongyang during June 12-14 on April 2000. Seoul and Pyongyang met 5 times in Panmunjom to discuss working level preparations for the meeting and agreed to the issues on the agenda, protocol, and convoy.

Historic Significance of the North-South Summit Meeting

North-South summit meeting has a historic significance in following points. First, it is a first meeting between the leaders of two Koreas ever since Korean Peninsula was divided in August 1945. The simple fact of meeting itself constitutes a great significance. Let me explain why it is so. Internal struggle between the two different systems as well as international power struggle played an important role in dividing the Korean Peninsula in its origin. This element of internal strife was a major cause of the Korean War in 1950, and in turn the war aggravated internal conflicts between the North and South Korea. Due to this internal nature of conflict, Koreans were not able to get rid of tension and confrontation on the Peninsula despite the international mood for reconciliation as a result of dissolution of Cold War structure, thereby still maintaining high level of arms race.

Seen this way, it is almost impossible to achieve peace and, eventually, unification without easing internal confrontation between the two Koreas. The summit has a historic meaning because it is not only a symbolic expression of the improved relations but also an effective way to decrease internal confrontation

which has prevented Koreans from achieving reconciliation.

It is much easier to understand what I am saying if we look back on the roles played by the summit meeting between the hostile countries. Improved relationship and ease of tension between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War era was achieved through about 10 times of summit meeting since 1959. Reconciliation between Washington and Beijing was also mediated through a series of summit meeting since 1972. Summit meeting played the same role in moderating tension between East and West Germany, and between Israel and Arab countries.

Second, the significance of this summit looms larger considering the fact that it is a fruit of direct and bilateral negotiations between Seoul and Pyongyang. Compared to the agreement of 1994 which was mediated by Carter, summit this year was realized by the envoys of Seoul and Pyongyang without external help of foreigners or foreign countries, which attests to the ability of the Korean people to resolve their own problems between themselves.

Third, summit meeting is enjoying a wide support from international society. Surrounding powers might have different ideas on the agenda and agreements of the summit. But overall, the summit is accommodating demands of the international society, which proves that Korean people is capable of actively utilizing external environment.

Pyongyang's Position on the Summit

What are the positions of Seoul and Pyongyang on the summit meeting?

First, on the Seoul side, there has been an accumulated desire to hold the summit meeting with Pyongyang. President Park was reported to be hesitating on the summit meeting due to his pro-Japanese career which would contrast with the anti-Japanese career of Kim Il-sung. However, since 1980s, every president of South Korea aspired to inscribe his name on history by holding historic summit meeting. President Kim Dae-jung was not an exception.

What is more important than a presidential aspiration was the demand of the Korean people which required transformation of confrontation into reconciliation and eventually into unification. More specifically this epochal demand includes followings.

Reunion of the separated families for humanitarian cause

Korean War left about 10 million Korean people separated from their family. Most of the 1st generation separated family members are gone, but those who are still alive have held deep aspiration to tread on their hometowns or at least to hear about their family members remaining in the North Korea. This deep-held aspiration has been one of the major force working for the improved relationship with Pyongyang and also for the holding of summit meeting as a way to realize that aspiration.

Relaxation of arms race

Severe arms race between Seoul and Pyongyang have caused a huge burden on the defence budget, which made both sides warfare states, not welfare states. The demands for overcoming this state of wasteful competition and for controlling arms race and thereby reducing the financial burden have been rising. The idea also gained momentum that this important question can only be solved through the summit.

Transformation of armistice agreement into peace treaty

Year 2003 will witness the 50th anniversary of the Armistice Treaty. It is very rare in world history to find an armistice treaty that lasts so long. The demand of transforming armistice treaty into peace treaty in this context comes as a historical necessity. Furthermore, Armistice Treaty contains an article that it should be followed by the conclusion of peace treaty through political meeting.

Four party talks involving Seoul, Pyongyang, Washington, and Beijing has been promoted since 1996 on this background. Failure of this four party talks to produce any tangible result, however, contributed to the idea that summit meeting could be effective in dealing with this issue.

Economic cooperation between North and South Korea

Economic cooperation between North and South Korea is an

issue that dates back to the time the Peninsula was divided. This issue became more prominent with the food crisis of North Korea since the middle of the 1990s. It is well known that the North Korean economy is experiencing a severe crisis. The countries that can help resolve Pyongyang's economic crisis are quite limited. Even China, which is known to have provided economic support to Pyongyang, has actually provided only a minimal amount of food and oil. It is now clear that the South Korea is the only country that can help Pyongyang.

Economic cooperation with Pyongyang could be of advantage to Seoul depending on the form and contents of the cooperation. With the widening common ground that is shared by both Seoul and Pyongyang, exchange and cooperation between the two Koreas will also be expanded, which could serve as a foundation for North-South economic community. Seen this way, it is simply natural that expectation is rising that basic frame of economic cooperation can be made through the summit meeting.

Then what is the motives that made Pyongyang accept a summit meeting? One thing to remember is the fact that late Kim Il-sung had accepted the summit before he died, which opened the way for Kim Jong-il to accept Seoul's proposal. Kim Dae-jung government, which is free from condolence disputes and which has been pursuing engagement and reconciliation policy in a consistent manner, made it easy for Kim Jong-il to accept the Seoul's offer to hold a summit meeting.

What is most important, however, is the severe economic crisis of North Korea. Many observers are predicting that Pyongyang will experience total paralysis or cease to function as a nation in 2-3 years if it fails to secure substantial level of economic support from outside. Such is the seriousness of the economic crisis of North Korea. This is the background against which Kim Jong-il accepted the offer of Seoul which is expected to provide long term economic support and cooperation.

Pyongyang could have calculated that summit meeting would make it more persuasive to demand that Seoul abolish the National Security Law. Pyongyang might have taken into consideration that the issue of U.S. forces stationed in Korea and transformation of armistice treaty into peace treaty can also be dealt with in the meeting.

Considering different motives of the two Koreas, summit meeting might reveal many differences. Seoul will be more interested in the reunion of the separated families, while Pyongyang will focus on the securing of economic aid. Summit meeting might find it difficult to reach an agreement if Seoul raises very subtle issues like responsibility of provoking Korean War and nuclear and missile development, while Pyongyang holds on to the issues of U.S. forces, National Security Law, and unification scheme.

Task after the Summit

Many questions will be raised on various issues from both inside and outside of the country. In the South debates will flourish on whether the return visit by Kim Jong-il and the second summit meeting can be realized, and whether the separated families can be reunited, and how much and what kind of support for Pyongyang is desirable. It is even possible for the summit meeting to turn out to be one-time event. Washington will be interested in what would be discussed on the nuclear and missile program of Pyongyang and the status of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. Depending on the case, Seoul-Washington relations might face some tension. If that kind of tension occurs between Seoul and Washington, it will also negatively affect domestic politics of South Korea and Seoul will face difficulties in pushing for the reconciliation policy toward Pyongyang. This implies that, despite the symbolic and historical meaning of the summit meeting, relations between two Koreas will not be all that rosy.

However, if the results of the summit is satisfactory and thereby come to secure broader support base both in and out of the country, and if some visible results are made through such measures as successful holding of a second summit and the smooth preceeding of economic cooperation between the two Koreas based on reconnection of the disconnected railways and roads, and investment of the South Korean companies to the North Korea, then Seoul-Pyongyang relations can develop into peaceful coexistence. This will also promote formation of the economic community, which may be followed by the formation of confederation and then stable federation for unification. ■■■