

## PROSPECT OF NORTH-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS

*Excerpts from the Interview with Dr. Robert A. Scalapino\**

### *The North Attempting to get Recognition*

There is no reliable information which would indicate when Kim Jong-Il will assume one or both the positions of Secretary of the Party and President. Most individuals with whom I have talked, both in China and other nations, think that it will take place some time in the coming months, possibly in the fall. October is often mentioned as a possible time.

But the broader issues of what his precise role will be - these are crucial questions on which the hard data is simply too insufficient to speculate. It is my assumption that Kim Jong-Il's imprimatur has to be upon all crucial policies, and that he therefore must have agreed to the results of negotiation between U.S. and North Korea which involves the South Korean nuclear reactor construction. One cannot have the information that would indicate how substantial his input was. One can only say that he would be involved in the final decision-making.

I do believe that one can make a few assertions about the political future of the DPRK. First, the current generation of individuals who have risen to the top are better educated, more technocratically inclined, and in some degree, more cosmopolitan than the old Kapsan guerilla types that surrounded Kim Il-Sung for so many decades. One can also say that given the nature of this society, the role of the military will continue to be highly important, and its support for Kim Jong-Il and his program will be crucial. And we have had considerable evidence that he has solicited that support

first and foremost. One can also assert that this is a period of generational change in North Korea, as it is in many parts of Asia, and on balance, this is hopeful. For reasons that I have just suggested, the incoming generation is going to be more in tune to the need for economic reform and technological change.

When it comes to the question of North Korea's one or two-Korea policy, in my view, first of all, North Korea's effort today centers upon attempting to get recognition as a separate state from the United States and Japan and moving toward a stronger position both with respect to bargaining with the South, and with respect to various regional and international organizations. This is vastly more important at this moment than reunification per se. For the North, reunification at this stage is a myth, and a dream.

### *Economic Opening Inevitable for the North*

As a result of the negotiation between the U.S. and North Korea at Kuala Lumpur, South Korean light water reactors are going to be the reactors used in the North. There is also the effort to develop Rajin-Sunbong and Chongjin as special economic zones. Beyond this, South Korean corporations are likely to be invited to invest, and not only in Rajin-Sunbong but also in Nampo which is much closer to Pyongyang. All these developments signal the likelihood that despite the political risks and hazards, the present leadership in Pyongyang has decided to move

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\* This interview was held on July 9, 1995 by Professor Lee Hong-Yung (University of California at Berkeley).

down a new course.

If we had only the North Korean requests for rice upon which we make a judgement regarding its basic intentions, we might determine that this was an act of desperation. But as a matter of fact, this is not the only signal we have gotten on the North's new approach to economic problems. We have had receptivity on the part of the North to South Korean investment. We have seen plans drawn up for special economic zones, some of them quite ambitious with respect to this region serving as a transshipment port.

It is certainly true that the issue of the visibility of South Korea in the North is going to be a continuing issue. If economic statistics are even roughly correct, the per capita income of South Korea is eight or nine times that of the North. And no one can doubt the gap in technological terms. Consequently, any Northern government would have to be concerned about the degree to which the South was visible as far as the North Korean people were concerned. The North realizes that it is taking significant risks, not only with respect to South Korea, but with respect to other foreign influences as well. That is the price of economic change. But what are the alternatives? To retain the status quo unaltered is simply impossible. It could only mean collapse in one form or another. One of the most isolated societies of this present era is opening a new chapter in an effort to survive.

As far as the issues of economic opening versus reform are concerned, I myself do not see these as being separable, since a policy of economic opening will require reform. You are not going to attract foreign capital, for example, unless it senses the opportunities that are implicit in some sort of contractual system, legal structure, that enables a market to take place. The timing of change, and the timing of reform, I am certain, are subjects of great debate within Northern policy-making circles, just as it has been inside Chinese policy-making circles. But the broad direction, once you have

determined upon opening, must be reform.

### *Firm US-South Korea Relationship Needed*

There is broad agreement in the U.S., across party and regional lines, that our alliance with the Republic of Korea should be maintained. I see no opposition to that whatsoever. As long as the people and the government of South Korea want the continuance of the security agreement, including the presence of a small number of American troops, essentially for tripwire purposes, this will continue. Therefore, I do not believe that the U.S. overtures to North Korea fundamentally challenge the US-ROK relationship.

As far as the North is concerned, what the United States looks toward is relationship with the DPRK that moves toward normality. That will ultimately involve both diplomatic recognition and with the participation of South Korea, a peace treaty. But I underline the fact that whatever party is in power in Washington and whatever party is of influence in Congress, the U.S. will insist on the involvement of the Republic of Korea in negotiations to move from the armistice to a peace treaty. It is very natural that we should at some point move in that direction, and we will, but it must involve South Korea.

### *Bumpy Road Ahead to Reunification*

The South must be conscious of the situation confronting the North and not press too hard, too soon. My point would simply be that the coming months and years are likely to be extremely delicate, and it is important in my view for the South to have an understanding of the situation, and to move with caution and forbearance, while at the same time not making concessions that would jeopardize its security or its long-range objectives. I am hopeful that Seoul

will act in this fashion.

It seems to me clear that the Republic of Korea would be under enormous difficulties if it had to absorb the 22 million people of the North in a collapse scenario of the type that happened in Germany. The costs would not only be economic, but also political. The current political institutional structure of the South is still somewhat fragile. It is relatively new. To try to absorb a population that has lived under a totally different economic and political system having no experience with economic or political openness would exact frightful costs. If this is to be avoided, and if the North is to be brought to a so-called soft-landing, then it seems to me it is going to require a good deal of sophistication and patience on the part of the South as well as some good luck.

### *Symbolic Summit Meeting*

Quite clearly, until Kim Jong-Il is placed in one or both of the top formal institutional posts, discussion of a summit meeting is premature. One assumes that these appointments are going to take place in the not distant future. In my opinion, a summit meeting might be important symbolically, but it is vital to state that summits are only successful when the groundwork has been laid for them by the respective governments; when there is already on the agenda a set of agreements that can be ratified by two top leaders. It therefore seems to me that there is a great deal of preliminary work and some preliminary activities that should go on to make a summit truly meaningful. In other words, it would be very useful to first resurrect the working committees that were signalled at the time of the December, 1991 agreements, on a whole range of issues. If these could come back into operation with some tangible results, and then at an appropriate time, you could have a meeting of the two leaders, when they could announce some concrete

programs that would be executed, this could have significant meaning. However, for such a meeting to take place now, when everything is so preliminary and when there is no strong arena of agreement on the future course in any given direction seems to me premature. I doubt it would have the necessary and desirable results.

### *Cautious Optimism on the Korean Issue*

Over the last two or three years, even before the death of Kim Il-Sung, we have had signals that the North realized its own economic system was not working, and that changes had to take place. Note Kim Il-Sung's call for agriculture first, light industry first, trade first, enunciated publicly in his New Year's Address at the beginning of 1994. Food conditions may have accelerated parts of this process, but there can be no doubt now that the North is committed to some degree of economic change, opening and reform, while still very tentatively, very cautiously wanting to explore what the political ramifications of this may be.

I am cautiously optimistic on the Korean issue. I believe that while the agreements reached thus far are by no means perfect and many challenges lie ahead, we have, broadly speaking, moved in the right direction. Neither the U.S. nor any other country in Asia wants a collapsed North Korea on the one hand or a nuclear North Korea on the other. The current effort is to bring North Korea into the region in terms of economic intercourse. This course will involve DPRK economic reform in the first instance. It seems to me to be the only sensible and rational approach to the Korean problem. Moreover, it is an approach that obtains the greatest consensus from the neighboring nations. It is the only approach upon which we could bring China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea together.