

SIGNIFICANCE AND PROSPECTS FOR THE SOUTH-NORTH SUMMIT

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A turning point in South-North relations

On June 12 to 14, a summit between South and North Korea is scheduled to be held in Pyongyang. If realized, it will be the first summit in the 55 years after the division of the Korean peninsula, a landmark event in South-North relations. Starting with President Chun Doo Hwan, every South Korean president has tried to arrange an inter-Korean summit. Although former President Kim Young-Sam agreed to meet North Korea's Kim Il-Sung on July of 1994, the arrangement was cancelled with the sudden death of the North Korean leader.

After the mid 1990's, because of the communist North's exclusionary attitude to the South, there was little progress in inter-Korean relations on an official level, although private exchange and cooperation saw some improvement. Therefore, the very fact that the two Koreas agreed to a summit without the help of a third country is remarkable. Even if the summit produces no results other than its symbolic value, it will still be a springboard for social, cultural, and economic cooperation between the South and North.

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On the other hand, if the summit results in agreement regarding sensitive issues, it will be a radical new turning point leading the two Koreas into an era of reconciliation, mutual respect and prosperity. If the summit relieves tensions on the peninsula and helps secure peace, it would be a great contribution to peace and security in the entire Northeast Asian region.

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Many observers view the summit as the fruit of President Kim Dae-Jung's consistent policy of engagement. Until recently, the North stubbornly resisted the engagement policy, regarding it as part of a South Korean strategy to absorb the North. However, after President Kim's March 9 speech in Berlin, some changes were visible in the North's attitude. The "Berlin Declaration", in which President Kim announced extensive economic assistance to North Korea, is seen as an important factor in the North's acceptance of the summit. While North Korea's decision to attend the summit may have stemmed from the country's strategy to negotiate with the U.S, South Korean aid was probably a consideration as well.

Exchange, cooperation and national unity

During the talks leading to the summit, there was no discussion of the summit's

agenda, including economic aid to North Korea. The South Korean government stated that procedural issues and the summit's agenda will be discussed in the preliminary meetings. However, a difference in the perceived role of the meetings became evident in the first meeting held on April 22 in Panmunjom, where North Korea seemed only to be interested in practical procedures.

The agreement made in Beijing on April 8 only stated that South and North Korea would "meet to talk about procedural issues in April", and did not mention creation of an agenda. If the agenda isn't decided in the preliminary meetings, it is possible it will be discussed comprehensively during the summit.

South Korea considers the following issues as important: creating peace on the lines of the Berlin Declaration, economic cooperation, reuniting separated families, and establishing channels of communication between the authorities of both Koreas. The summit agreement addresses the issues of reconciliation and unity, exchange and cooperation, and peace and reunification. Therefore, it appears that both South and North Korea want to discuss peace and cooperation, but only the North wants to bring up reconciliation, unity, and reunification.

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Because peace on the peninsula is a sensitive issue that involves the interests of the US, it is possible that the summit will avoid concrete discussions and mainly reiterate existing principles on a general level. The issue of divided families is connected to economic cooperation, and both sides are expected to look for a specific solution to the issue. It is possible that North Korea will demand the return of unconverted long-term prisoners. Regarding reconciliation and unity, North Korea is likely to demand the repeal of the South's National Security Law, and may propose reunification based on a federal system. The South should be aware that the North has been placing special emphasis on "national unity" during the preparatory talks for the summit. While it is uncertain what agenda the North will bring to the summit, the South should be fully prepared for any possible North Korean agenda.

The summit's key issue will probably be economic cooperation. As stated in President Kim's Berlin Declaration, economic assistance to North Korea will include agricultural aid such as fertilizer, pesticides, and agricultural equipment, as well as social overhead capital including roads, railways and electricity. While the methods and the scale of the economic assistance have yet to be decided, it is hoped that the summit will lead to some agreement on such issues and it is predicted that South-North economic cooperation will expand from private ventures to include government projects.

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Need for a flexible negotiation strategy

Following President Kim's announcement of a "special policy to North Korea after the general election" in late March and the April 10 announcement of the summit, there have been optimistic forecasts of large scale economic cooperation

between the two Koreas. While the summit will be an important development for economic cooperation, it is too early for excessive optimism. In the middle to long term, the special policy to North Korea may be possible, but it is unlikely to immediately follow the summit.

The scale and pace of economic cooperation will depend on a number of variables such as South Korea's ability to finance investment in the North, reform of the North Korean financial system, and continued talks on Korean economic cooperation following the summit. Presently, the North Korean government does not seem to have an accommodating attitude to large scale economic cooperation, and the country still appears to prefer private cooperation over government cooperation.

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Even if a definite agreement is reached at the summit, the talks needed for implementing the agreement will take a long time. Raising funds for investment in North Korea will also be a formidable task. Looking at these aspects, one can predict that economic cooperation will begin with small and medium sized projects, and large scale projects will gradually occur as conditions and systems change. Economic cooperation needs to be approached more realistically and objectively, and too much excitement from the beginning may lead to mistakes.

Because of the many sensitive issues in South-North relations, it is unlikely that the two sides will resolve all the issues at the summit. The two Koreas are approaching the summit with different attitudes: the South is focused on economics and economic cooperation, while the North is emphasizing politics in its call for national solidarity and reunification. It is unclear how much the two sides will actually agree.

One cannot rule out the possibility of North Korea arranging for President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il to discuss political issues while relegating discussion of economic cooperation to Kim Young Nam, the Secretary of the Supreme People's Assembly Presidium. North Korea will have to realize that the South is trying to distinguish between meetings and summits.

At several points in the past 55 years, South and North Korea reached historic agreements only to have them nullified after a short time. In the present case, one must cautiously guess that North Korea agreed to a summit because of its desire to improve relations with the US, and other political motives, not because the reclusive country has adopted a new pragmatic strategy. Therefore, it is possible that relations will revert to their former condition after the summit.

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Such a situation would be a tremendous setback to the KimDae-Jung government and its ability to improve inter-Korean relations. For the summit to be successful, both sides will have to be cautious and realistic, and equip themselves with a flexible negotiation strategy. **VIP**