

KIM DAE JUNG AND THE UNBURDENING OF NORTH KOREA

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Let me say at the beginning that leaving Washington during the current state of affairs is a blessing, and I want to thank Dan Smith, Ingeborg Haavardsson, and Professor Stein Tønnesson for providing me with the fig leaf needed to cover my escape.

I will review North Korea's current situation, its options in diplomacy with South Korea, the U.S., and other international actors, and the impact of Kim Dae Jung on the present state of affairs. I invite you to take issue with any point I make, and we can then have a more detailed discussion. This subject can be both very complex and very simple, and I will try to respect both of these aspects.

The Unburdening

I have used the title "the unburdening of North Korea" because it suggests several of the fundamental processes at work regarding North Korea and its current, tentative engagement with South Korea, its neighbors, and the West. One process is the effort by the U.S. to relieve itself and its allies of the burden of deterring North Korea from inflicting deadly, suicidal havoc through mistake or miscalculation. South Korea, in its current effort to pry open the North, seeks foremost to relieve its five-decades-old burden of a twisted political, business and national security culture. The taking on of an enormous new burden, resuscitating the North Korean economy, is secondary to this domestic need. Finally, North Korea hopes to ease its burdens, the result of decades of disastrous industrial, labor and agricultural sector mistakes, while leaving the most fundamental mistake unchanged.

North Korea Before the 2000 Summit

Before the summit of last June, North Korea was engaged in a losing battle to get substantial relief from its failed policies by threatening and bargaining with its neighbors and the U.S. I say losing because that behavior would not have resulted in enough relief to improve the desperate conditions of life for the public or the security of the regime. The politics of South Korea, Japan and the U.S. would not have allowed it.

Early in the Clinton administration the U.S. almost went to war with North Korea. The administration was threatening actions that it could not initiate politically, and the North Koreans called its bluff. This humiliation was largely overlooked when Jimmy Carter forced a face-saving exit on the parties. But the defeat was felt most by American conservatives, and helps explain why they have been so adamant to somehow regain the "face" lost in 1994. Unfortunately, many critics of dealing with North Korea often use the same logic of empty

threats that almost proved so disastrous the first time around. Others suggest a policy of “benign neglect,” but ignore the likelihood that such a course would lead back to the same place.

For its part, the North was so isolated that truly dangerous acts, such as landing commandos on a South Korean beach or provoking cross-border shooting incidents gained it little additional censure. Its reputation for irrational behavior both insulated it from attack and limited its ability to gain any advantage. This activity irritated the Chinese as well as the three “front line” allies: South Korea, Japan, and the U.S., but no country had enough leverage or incentive to change the North. The great “what if” here is the never-realized North-South summit being planned in 1993 before the death of Kim Il Sung. Since in many ways the South was then weaker and the North stronger relative to the situation in June 2000, it is difficult to imagine any sustained, meaningful engagement growing out of that meeting. We will never know.

The 2000 Summit

The June 2000 summit has changed the equations involving North Korea. It is fair to say that the whole U.S. East Asian security paradigm has shifted, and analysts have been scrambling to digest the meaning of the summit and its aftermath. The National Missile Defense proposal, likely to receive new attention from the next president, had one of its central justifications weakened by the summit. While NMD supporters have insisted there remain sufficient reasons to proceed with the \$60 billion effort, there was not one of them who did not refer to the North Korean threat before the summit. It may be that the summit dislocations have helped the U.S. security apparatus continue the critical work of choosing a post-Cold War posture, integrating goals and strategy. This task was only barely begun during the Clinton administration.

South Korean officials can throw thirty years of wild, often manufactured, speculation about Kim Jong Il down the drain, now that it can be replaced by forty-some hours of direct, face-to-face experience with Chairman Kim and his entourage. But more importantly, Kim Jong Il has raised the bar of expectations on his own behavior by presenting himself to his own public, Kim Dae Jung, and the world as a rational, responsible, national leader. No one could have forced him to do that. In addition, Kim subjected himself to many hours of debate and discussion with Kim Dae Jung, an experience that would test the stamina of anyone. In many ways the success of Kim Jong Il’s new attempt at statesmanship depends on whether he is listening to Kim Dae Jung. We know that Kim Jong Il was prepared to offer very little at the summit. Perhaps unintentionally, he was ready to send Kim home to Seoul empty-handed. Only the long and pointed debates with the South Korean president changed his position.

We have a wealth of detail about what was said between the two. Kim Dae Jung’s argument boiled down to this: North Korea needs two things, security and economic development. Unless you in North Korea find a way to make friends with the U.S. and Japan, just as South Korea made friends with China and Russia, you will have neither. If you do not find a way to do this, I cannot help you; no one can help you.

Much of the diplomacy of the past five months suggests that Kim is trying to make friends, in his own way. It is still not clear, however, if the North Korean leadership understands the limits of

what can be gained from other countries. Again and again, the North seems to misread the political realities in Japan, the U.S. and South Korea. In fact the only major infusion of funding and aid available is from Japan, if and when the North settles outstanding issues of kidnapped citizens and support for terrorism. However, there are enough very sharp and capable people in the NGOs talking to North Koreans about the broad and significant gains they could make in farming, power generation, health, and economic investment to point the way to real development, if the leadership allows it. The security part of what North Korea needs must come from trading away its threats for what it perceives to be protective arrangements with other governments.

The other part of Kim Dae Jung's argument to Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang was this: You must sign this agreement yourself, because you are the leader here and this is an issue of taking responsibility. It is also imperative that you make a reciprocal visit to Seoul. Unless you and I provide the visible leadership for this new relationship, our bureaucracies will mire us in problems, delays and disappointment. Neither of us can afford that.

We can see the problems of drift already. The family visits in Seoul are beginning to leave a sour taste in the mouths of many, due to their stilted, brief and unsatisfying qualities. The spirit of a changed relationship is absent from the North's effort. The meeting of defense ministers has yet to move beyond the largely symbolic. The increased pace of contacts at all levels is bringing wider contact, but everyone waits for a significant breakthrough, something that would lower the threat from the North on the ground. Kim Dae Jung's political opponents have yet to make a strong case to curtail the engagement policy, but they have succeeded in confusing the public about the cost and attempted to portray the effort as motivated by Kim Dae Jung's desire for a Nobel Peace Prize or his starry-eyed embrace of Kim Jong Il. For these reasons, the visit of Kim Jong Il to Seoul is now a make-or-break necessity for the North to take the next step toward emerging from its seventy-year nightmare.

Kim Dae Jung's Contribution

Kim Dae Jung's view of security in East Asia is informed by a life experience wholly unlike that of the leaders in the U.S., Japan, China or other countries in the region. It integrates security with social participation, national purpose, economic structure and broad alliances. Kim has supreme persistence, tenacity, and self-confidence. He believes in the power of ideas. He has been ambitious in the best sense, working for ideas and ideals, always basing his legitimacy on a practical vision of the future, thereby distinguishing himself from the simply power-hungry.

Kim has engaged in a life-long meditation on strength and weakness. He used to say of one former Korean President "If you watch him you will see: he is always weak before the strong, and strong before the weak." Much of the writing done about Kim's engagement policy has missed this difference between strength and toughness, weakness and self-confidence in the relationships of South Korea and the U.S. to North Korea. Looking at the Korea issues, it is remarkable how much of recent history in East Asia has been determined by leaders, personalities, leadership, and luck. This is why attributing these developments mainly to trends in diplomacy, economics or politics, fails to explain why we are where we are today.

Genesis of the “Sunshine Policy”

Kim has been proposing for decades an opening to North Korea based on the idea that the two Koreas share some basic goals, beginning with security and economic development. He understood long ago that an isolated and paranoid leadership can more successfully be changed by offering to mitigate its fears and weaknesses rather than by threatening actions to punish or further isolate it. The facts of North Korean artillery 30 miles from Seoul and an active nuclear bomb program have only meant that threats were even less useful and the costs of a failure to deter more catastrophic.

Kim argued that if the South was ever going to achieve a reunification without war it had to build up its strength in relation to the North, and that its strength must be political and social as well as economic and military. It seemed crystal clear to Kim that without social cohesion and political self-confidence, the South would not be able to take the risks and do the difficult work of dragging North Korea into a transforming relationship. Ironically, it would be far easier to rally the nation behind a war, assuming the North had provoked it, than to sustain the public will for a lengthy, incremental campaign of de-isolation and investment of the North in international intercourse. This idea is at the core of Kim’s book *Mass Participatory Economy*, which he wrote in 1985 while at Harvard.

Another core premise of the Sunshine Policy is that North Korea needs engagement more than South Korea or the U.S. South Korea and the US have not always acted from this premise, and occasionally have given strength and bargaining power to the North. But the recent success of the policy follows Kim’s exhaustive drive to coordinate the interests of the two Koreas, the three “front line” allies, the major powers, and the world community. By showing increased strength and coordination among all the major states, and at the same time offering a trustworthy partnership for development and security, Kim was able to coax Kim Jong Il to explore a different kind of relationship.

Conclusion

The momentum of the June summit may fade if Kim Jong Il does not come to an agreement with the United States on missile and other security issues and visit Seoul early next year as promised. Chairman Kim must become more sophisticated about the political needs of the American and South Korean administrations. The major powers will need to think of ways to move forward jointly with respect to the new security arrangements in East Asia, with the prospect for a far more stable region in the near future. However, there are several points at which the leaders now in place can fail to take advantage of these opportunities, and we could lose this moment of unusual, tantalizing possibility.