

KOREAN SUMMIT: A MESSAGE FOR WASHINGTON?

By

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"Beginning is half way there!" as they have said in Seoul and Pyongyang since ancient times. The North/South Korea agreement to convene a summit on June 12 in Pyongyang is, in itself, an historical accomplishment. Once before in 1994 the leaders of the two Koreas agreed to meet. But it was former US President Carter who forged the agreement. The North's leader Kim Il Sung, father of the present leader Kim Jong Il, died before the summit could take place. The historical significant this time is that the North's Kim Jong Il accepted the South's President Kim Dae Jung's invitation. The US was not involved.

That is how it should be. After all, peaceful co-existence, and possibly even peaceful reunification between the two Koreas will be possible only if the Korean people decide that is what they want. No foreigners can or should decide these matters for the Korean people. At the same time, failure to convene the summit in June or to make it a productive event will be entirely the responsibility of both Koreas, no one else. This is an integral aspect of self determination, and that too is how it should be.

No more appropriate way could be found to commemorate the Korean War's fiftieth anniversary than to have the two Korean leaders convene a summit. Half a century is surely long enough to begin a joint pursuit of a durable peace on the Korean Peninsula!

Since the Korean War's end in 1953, Germany and Vietnam have reunified, the Communist Bloc and Soviet empire have evaporated and Seoul has established diplomatic relations with all its former adversaries except Pyongyang. For all Koreans, the road ahead remains littered with terrible memories of the Korean and Cold Wars. For both leaders and their followers, however, the possibility of another war remains an even greater common fear. Hopefully, this shared fear will guide both sides toward peaceful co-existence.

How did Kim Dae Jung get this far? He has done exactly the opposite of what his predecessors and the US have done for half a century. First he rallied the support of the superpowers. Never before have Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo and Washington supported the foreign policy of a South Korean leader. Simultaneously, instead of stubbornly attempting to subdue the North with economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and saber rattling in the name of deterrence, Kim since 1998 has engaged the North with a consistent, persistent policy designed to erase the negative images of the past by creating new, positive images. His positive engagement, nicknamed "Sunshine Diplomacy" by the South Korean press, has correctly interpreted the North's threatening rhetoric as cries of insecurity. His response has been calm, carefully worded public statements that refrain from the Cold

War rhetoric of containment and confrontation. Instead of trying to first disarm the North, as Washington has so adamantly tried but failed to do, Kim sent representatives of Non-governmental organizations North with food, clothing and medicine. Instead of economic isolation, he encouraged businessmen from the South to go North, lead by Jung Ju Yong, founder of the enormous multinational corporation Hyundai, to trade and to invest.

Despite the criticism, especially in Seoul, Kim Dae Jung has persisted. Why? Obviously Kim has not been seeking to win popularity polls nor to be reelected. The constitution bars him from a second term. His objective has been to win over public opinion in the North, not in the South. He has sought to convince the North of his sincerity. In Korea's Confucian cultural context, consistent action speaks louder than soothing rhetoric, or as we say in the United States, "Actions speak louder than words." North Korea has tested Kim Dae Jung's sincerity, and apparently found it sufficiently earnest to agree to a summit.

Strangely, Kim Dae Jung's efforts to engage North Korea have won him support around the world, but in South Korea the criticism has been harsh. Rather than berate their President, South Koreans would do well to help him pursue their dream of peace and reconciliation with the north. Instead of accusing their President of all kinds of unsavory conduct, the critics in South Korea could help their nation better if they suggested ways to ensure that the summit is successful. Since South Koreans enjoy democracy, they share with their President responsibility for the summit's success or failure. In North Korea, Kim Jong Il is the absolute ruler. He alone has this responsibility.

Of course, success or failure of the summit must be shouldered equally by Seoul and Pyongyang. North Korea's political leadership must demonstrate its sincerity toward South Korea. If Kim Jong Il really seeks peace and reconciliation with his brothers in the south, he must ensure that Kim Dae Jung's visit to the north is politically successful. The best way for Kim Jong Il to accomplish this is by agreeing to the reunion of long separated families.

Critics everywhere are certain to continue shouting, "But we are only half way there!" True, but that is so much closer to a durable peace than the Korean Peninsula has experienced for a half century. Since this is only the beginning, we must restrain our expectations. The problems of the past fifty years cannot be solved at a single summit. Both sides must approach the summit with realistic expectations. We all would do well to follow Kim Dae Jung's example. What precisely did he do to get us to the summit? He used a mix of patience persistence, Christian compassion and Confucian sincerity. All the while he avoided using threatening Cold War rhetoric of deterrence. Hopefully, Washington will listen and learn from the Korean Summit.

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