

North Korea's Strategy of Survival and the Inter-Korean Summit Meeting*

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Presumably, there would be various intentions and objectives behind North Korea's decision to accept the second inter-Korean summit meeting. Receiving economic support from South Korea would be one important short-term goal; but even more crucial is the regime's intention to use the summit meeting as momentum for a policy shift toward system survival because North Korea is in crisis.

North Korea in Crisis

It is well known that North Korea's economy has severe problems. But it is not well known that these economic failures have serious impact on the system in terms of expediting its collapse. North Korea's economic problems have exhausted the central government's resources, which has led to the failure of allocating budgets to various governmental organizations, local governments, and factory institutions. Citizens are unable to receive rations from the government. Because the central authority lacks the budget, its power of command and control systems has weakened. Therefore, local governments, factories, and enterprises in North Korea are developing independent methods of survival, while households are engaged in home manufacturing of goods. Currently, a self-sufficient feudal system that is independent of the planned economy system. The independent establishment of this feudal system reflects the third phase of Robert Kaplan's theory of North Korea's collapse in seven stages.¹

* Paper Presented at the Seoul Foreign Correspondent's Club (August 22, 2007).

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¹ ΔPhase 1: resources are exhausted. ΔPhase 2: maintaining social infrastructure becomes difficult because of lack of resources. ΔPhase 3: the influence of the central government collapses because local feudal territories emerge that are controlled independently by local party officials and war lords. ΔPhase 4: Kim Jong Il tries to suppress these local authorities when he believes that their power has grown too big. ΔPhase 5: an active resistance by the local party officials and war lords against the central government arises. ΔPhase 7: a new national leadership emerges.

The new found autonomy of local entities and the development of an independent system is causing major changes in the ideological consciousness and loyalty of the North Korean people. As Kim Jong Il's leadership is falling short of the noble, extraordinary, and absolute aura and concept of "the Dear Leader," his legitimacy has been severely undermined and the people are increasingly getting angrier at the circumstances, incompetence, even the hypocrisy and falsehoods of Kim Jong Il.

A popular song that was written in North Korea to idolize Kim Jong Il, "Our Dear General, where Are You?" now seems to be sung with a different underlying meaning: "Dear General, where are you, and what are you doing while the people are starving?"

Kim Jong Il's "military-first politics" is a strategy where Kim relies on the military, which is loyal to him, because the working class has turned its back on his leadership. This policy was a reaction to the collapse of the Socialist Bloc, which was brought on by popular uprisings. The North Korean leadership is well aware that history has proven that the working class does not prefer socialism, and therefore changed its regime from a socialist institution to a military oriented one.

However, as the "Hardship March" continues, the question remains, "How long will the North Korean military pledge loyalty to Kim Jong Il?" for the soldiers themselves are exhausted. The only alternative is to shift the policy towards reviving the economy.

The Shift Is On: From 'Military-First Politics'(선군정치) to a 'Strong and Powerful Nation'(강성대국) Politics

New policies are essential to revive the crumbling North Korean economy. After the official inauguration of Kim Jong Il in September 1998, North Korea has put forward a new ruling ideology of building a "strong and powerful nation," where economic development is the highest priority. In this light, North Korea has made several changes to accommodate more economic oriented policies.

The summit between the two Koreas in June 2000 provided a good environment in which North Korea could focus on its economy. From 2001, the motto of "New Thinking" was put forward along with a plan for economic development that involved improving economic productivity and establishing an information technology (IT) industry. Other economic policies included the designation of the Shinuiju Special Administrative Region and the July 1st, 2002 economic management reform.

However, after the second nuclear crisis emerged in October 2002, North Korea was once again put into confrontation with the United States. An economic development oriented policy could not be pursued under such circumstances. North Korea proceeded to adopt “military-first politics” as its highest ruling ideology, and pursue the development of nuclear weapons as it continues its confrontation with the United States.

Now that a road map for improving relations with the U.S. has been created--that is, the February 13 Agreement--North Korea believes that the international environment is favorable enough for it to shift from its security oriented policies to economic oriented ones.

There are a few reasons why North Korea responded positively to the offer of holding an inter-Korean summit. The primary one is economic: North Korea desperately needs economic assistance from South Korea, and furthermore it needs to integrate its economic cooperation with the South with its own economic oriented policies.

North’s Summit Meeting as a Stepping Stone to the U.S.

Pyongyang also wants to create an environment that will lead to an improvement in U.S.-DPRK relations. Under the current circumstances, the core of North Korea’s survival strategy is to accelerate rapprochement with the U.S. in order to solve both its security concerns and economic problems simultaneously.

North Korea’s strategy of trying to maintain its regime by improving relations with the U.S. is similar to survival strategies of other socialist nations. In the 1980s and early 1990s, most took the common path by reintegrating into the capitalist world system. The socialist states were originally outside the system; but because of the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the capitalist system, their economies became depressed. To escape, these former socialist states reintegrated into the system. China was the first to pioneer this path, and the Soviet Union followed with perestroika, Vietnam with Doi Moi, and finally the nations of Eastern Europe with their own policies.

Immediately after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, North Korea tried to establish diplomatic ties with Japan and South Korea in 1990-1991 in order to reintegrate into the capitalist world system. In September 1990, North Korea drew up the “three party joint statement” with Japan, and held the first meeting concerning diplomatic ties on January 30, 1991. Through a total of eight meetings until November 1992, the issue of diplomatic ties between the two nations made tremendous progress.

With South Korea, the North concluded the Basic Agreement in December 1991, and to implement it, three joint committees were formed, thus rapidly improving relations with the South as well. In 1992, both Koreas simultaneously gained membership in the United Nations. In tandem with these measures, on December 28, 1991, North Korea announced its plans to build special economic zones in Rajin and Sonbong, thus making clear that it intended to develop relationships with the capitalist states.

All this came to a halt when North Korea's nuclear issue was raised in November 1992. As the United States raised suspicions of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, DPRK-Japan relations and DPRK-ROK relations retreated back to their previous Cold War status, while the construction of the Rajin-Sonbong Economic Special Zone became jeopardized.

As the series of plans to open the country to the outside world came to a halt, the North turned to the United States to improve relations with it. It seems that North Korea has concluded that since the U.S. is the global hegemony, establishing diplomatic ties with Japan and entering the capitalist world system are impossible without improved relations with the United States. Accordingly, Pyongyang ignored Seoul and Tokyo and concentrated all its efforts on negotiations with Washington. It also utilized the nuclear weapons program as a bargaining card during these negotiations.

After intense negotiations, the two were able to produce the Geneva Agreement in 1994. However, the implementation of those agreements did not proceed. This was partially because when the Non-Proliferation Treaty was permanently renewed in 1995, North Korea's missile development issue was newly raised, and the subsequent confrontation adversely affected the confidence in the Geneva Agreement.

North Korea was able to bring the U.S. back to the negotiating table when it fired a long-range Taepodong missile in August 1998, and the United States decided to create a comprehensive solution concerning North Korea's nuclear and missile issues in October 1999 with the Perry Report. Yet this report was unable to be implemented due to Republican party opposition in the United States. Thus Pyongyang abandoned its previous strategy of dealing directly with Washington and turned to Seoul by responding positively to the North-South summit meeting of June 2000. It changed its previous strategy of dealing exclusively with the United States, and chose a tactic where it could talk to Washington indirectly through Seoul. In October 2000, four months after the summit meeting, North Korea sent a special envoy, Cho Myung-rok, to the United States and was able to reach a joint communique with the U.S. In accordance with these new agreements, President Clinton agreed to visit North Korea while Madeleine Albright, the then U.S. Secretary of State, went to Pyongyang to prepare for his visit. These were major achievements.

However, with the election of President George Bush, President Clinton's visit to North Korea never materialized and U.S.-DPRK relations once again deteriorated.

There are some interpretations suggesting that the second North Korean nuclear issue raised in October 2002 was actually part of the Bush administration's effort to gain support for its war in Iraq by framing North Korea as another terror-supporting country, despite the opposition of the United Nations, France, Germany, and other close European allies.

One of the reasons why North Korea failed to normalize relations with the United States is because it made the mistake of using the nuclear card in its negotiations. However, the bigger reason lies with Washington's intentions, which were manifest in its policies toward North Korea. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the U.S. had lost its target, its "enemy state" in which to deploy its Missile Defense (MD) against. North Korea's launching of its missiles and attempts to develop nuclear weapons made it a perfect alternative. The labels the North received are well-known: "rogue nation," "the axis of evil," and an "outpost of tyranny." In this context, the United States has claimed that the U.S. can talk, but not negotiate with the North.

In this situation, North Korea's unilateral giving up of the nuclear program could not have changed the U.S.'s attitude toward North Korea because the U.S. would raise other issues such as conventional weapons and human rights issues as preconditions for normalization of relations.

To create difficulties for the United States and force it into holding negotiations, North Korea pushed forward with its missile launches and nuclear weapons test in July and October of 2007, respectively. As North Korea had wished, the United States agreed to participate in a dialogue with the North, and as a result, the February 13 Agreement was concluded.

North Korea's nuclear weapons experiment is not the only reason why the U.S. took part in the February 13 Agreement. North Korea no longer needs to be a target, due to the changes in the Middle East. The extension of the war in Iraq, the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan, the nuclear issue in Iran, and the general conflict with the Islamic regions has intensified to the point where there is now a clear and concrete enemy for the United States. It no longer needs North Korea to be its imaginary enemy.

At the same time, the United States is currently reviewing its policy of maintaining the status quo on the Korean peninsula, namely the divide and rule policy. This is because under this policy there is a limit to how powerful an ally South Korea can be. It seems that the U.S. wants South Korea to develop both economically and diplomatically to the extent that it can be a stronger ally along with Japan, as the United States is currently building a multilateral security cooperation regime in Northeast Asia.

If the February 13 Agreement is implemented, Pyongyang will abandon its nuclear ambitions and normalize relations with Washington and Tokyo--fulfilling its long-time dream of establishing normal relations with the United States. The history of post-Cold War North Korea could be described as a history of brinkmanship to improve relations with the United States.²

The second inter-Korean summit will be a stepping stone for North Korea to realize this dream. After the summit with the South, the North may send an invitation letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice around November or December. This will lead to the restoring of relations between the two countries which had stalled after Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang in November 2000.

It is assumed that the first summit meeting in 2000 was planned so that Cho Myung-rok could go to Washington; the second summit meeting is planned so that Secretary Rice can be invited to Pyongyang.

Announcing the End of Its Nuclear Ambitions: A Move that Will Satisfy All

The golden move that Kim Jong Il could make during the upcoming inter-Korean summit meeting would be to commit--either verbally or in writing--to abandon North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. The possibility of a written agreement is low. But it is likely that Kim Jong Il will try to gain as much as possible by announcing in front of President Roh Moo-Hyun and the media that "in accordance with the will of the late Kim Il Sung, North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons"--an explosive exclamation indeed.

Up until now North Korea had utilized the possibility of abandoning its nuclear program as a negotiating card (with the United States) by deliberately being ambiguous. But as the February 13 Agreement--a comprehensive approach by the U.S. concerning the North Korean nuclear issue--has been concluded, and the agreements are in the process of smooth implementation, it is likely that North Korea will make a strategic choice that will guarantee its security assurance and economic revival by abandoning its nuclear programs. Through experience North Korea has realized that there is a great deal to gain from the United States, Japan, and South Korea if it gives up its nuclear weapons; and a great deal to lose through sanctions and damages if it keeps its weapons--the BDA financial sanctions being a poignant example. It is now time for the regime in Pyongyang to make a strategic choice between collapse and survival.

² Some might misunderstand the intentions of North Korea, believing that since it uses its conflict with the United States as an ideology for internal solidarity, it does not wish to improve relations with the United States; on the contrary, one must be cognizant of the dual nature of North Korea.

The summit meeting between North and South Korea may increase the U.S. confidence in the North and accelerate the speed of negotiations by dramatically expressing North Korea's commitment to abandon in its nuclear ambitions on a diplomatic stage on which the attention of the international community is focused. This is the most timely opportunity for declaring its will to give up its nuclear weapons--an opportunity Kim Jong Il has been waiting for a long time.

Second, declaring its will to give up its nuclear weapons would be a chance for North Korea to receive maximum political and economic rewards from the South, since it is conceding to the South Korea's greatest demand. It is also a tactic that will keep the South Korean government under the illusion that it had received a commitment from the North to give up its nuclear weapons. Of course, perpetrating this illusion will allow the North to gain as many rewards as possible from the South.

Third, Kim Jong Il will try to transform his image from a military adventurist who threatens humanity into a peace maker by proclaiming the elimination of these weapons. This will no doubt be received enthusiastically by the international community.

A proclamation that North Korea will give up its nuclear ambitions is an inevitable choice at this summit, that is if the North wants to normalize relations with the United States and receive economic aid, plus the construction projects to build light water reactors, which are all in accordance with the September 19th joint statement and the February 13 Agreement. These measures will bring tremendous benefits to North Korea if these commitments are reiterated during the summitry. ³

Epilogue

To sum up, there are many goals that North Korea hopes to achieve through the holding of a second inter-Korean summit, and those goals will likely be successfully implemented.

What South Korea will gain through the summit is unclear, and will depend on the response from North Korea. It is expected that North Korea's commitment to giving up its nuclear weapons would be a tremendous accomplishment. However, the South Korean government is uncertain whether Kim Jong Il will announce his intention to do so at this time.

³ For detail, see Jae Jean Suh, "North Korea's Strategic Decisions After the February 13 Agreement," Policy Forum Online, Nautilus Institute, April 10, 2007.

The one clear reason why the South Korean government is pursuing a summit is it would like to come to an agreement about a new model for economic cooperation between the two Koreas. At his celebratory remarks on August 15, President Roh Moo-Hyun claimed that “rather than the short-term, temporary cooperation schemes of the past, a virtuous circle of mutual benefits must be established where economic development of the North will be channeled as a new engine for growth in the South.” The goal is to build a model of economic cooperation that is beneficial for both North and South Korea, replacing the one-sidedness of the interaction we have seen in the past.

This goal is in some part compatible with North Korea’s survival strategy. However, as the nuclear problem is yet to be resolved, it will take some time before South Korea gains any benefit from economic cooperation policies.