

THE KOREAS SUMMIT: RUNWAYS, REUNIONS AND RECONCILIATION

When North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-Il, made a surprise appearance at the airport on 13 June to greet the president of South Korea, Kim Dae-Jung, for the first ever summit meeting between the leaders of North and South Korea, the euphoria for a breakthrough in relations began to build. When the summit ended two days later, the platitudes began. Kim Dae-Jung called the summit "the most important event in Korean history". The international media were also captivated, with *The New York Times* calling Kim Jong-Il "cherubic" and *The Economist* referring to a newfound "Kimaraderie".

There was a certain sense of the surreal as the two leaders met on the runway of Pyongyang airport. Observers commented on the contrasting dress-sense of the two, and the following car ride from the airport into the city allowed South Koreans and others a glimpse into the rarely-seen world of North Korea. Kim Jong-Il, the North's 'Dear Leader', was certainly on a charm offensive, with beaming smiles and familial handshakes for Kim Dae-Jung. One observer described Kim Jong-Il's efforts as the "best public relations makeover of the century". Indeed, Kim Jong-Il tried hard to dispel his recluse reputation, informing reporters that he had travelled widely overseas, including to Indonesia, and enjoyed watching South Korean television (although, it might be concluded, perhaps not the American Armed Forces service).

But while glimpses of the psyche of North Korea's leader were fascinating, the success of the summit will be judged by its outcome. The two leaders agreed on a Five-Point Accord, dated 15 June, negotiated over a three-hour long meeting. While the issues dealt with are specific, the language is vague. National reunification is to be progressed in an independent manner, combining the perspectives of both North and South. Mutual trust will be built through economic cooperation. The first test of the new relationship will be cross-border family reunions for about 200 people and an agreement on ex-political prisoners in the South that are prevented from returning to North Korea.

Five Point Accord

1. The South and North have agreed to resolve the question of reunification independently and through the joint efforts of the Korean people, who are the masters of the country.
2. For the achievement of reunification, we have agreed that there is a common element in the South's concept of a confederation and the North's formula for a loose form of federation. The South and the North agreed to promote reunification in that direction.
3. The South and the North have agreed to promptly resolve humanitarian issues such as exchange visits by separated family members and relatives on the occasion of the August 15 National Liberation Day and the question of unswerving Communists serving prison sentences in the South.
4. The South and the North have agreed to consolidate mutual trust by promoting balanced development of the national economy through economic cooperation and by stimulating cooperation and exchanges in civic, cultural, sports, health, environmental and all other fields.
5. The South and the North have agreed to hold a dialogue between relevant authorities in the near future to implement the above agreements expeditiously.

While the Accord has received widespread support, both in South Korea and abroad (Japan expressed "great satisfaction" at the outcome of the summit), there has been criticism. The opposition Grand National Party (GNP) in South Korea welcomed the Accord but pointed out that it did not contain any security guarantees, any mention of North Korea's missile programmes or nuclear ambitions, nor any discussion for the return of South Korean prisoners held by the North. It was suggested that Kim Dae-Jung compromised on the detail of the Accord simply to achieve agreement. However,

some members of the GNP have been uncomfortable with the conservative response of their party. Despite Kim Dae-Jung's desire to secure bipartisan support for reunification efforts, it seems that the Five-Point Accord may mark the beginning of both inter and intra-party political negotiation over future progress.

Other observers have highlighted the vague language of the Five-Point Accord, suggesting that it might even be a backward step from the detailed language on mutual recognition and security guarantees in the 1992 'Basic Agreement' between North and South Korea, which has now largely lapsed. It seems clear that the North and South can agree on less than in the past, but are perhaps more interested in moving forward at an incremental, but agreed, pace.

The first test of the Accord has indeed been passed. Around 200 people will meet for family reunions at the border between North and South Korea on Liberation Day, 15 August. The details of this reunion were agreed between representatives of the Red Cross from both North and South Korea. Both are hoping that this reunion will be the first of many and a permanent cross-border meeting point can be established.

The second test, political prisoners, will certainly prove more challenging. Kim Dae-Jung will be under domestic pressure to ensure that concessions he made at the summit are not repeated. An exchange of prisoners, or at least a working compromise, will indicate that both sides are prepared to advance the reconciliation process.

Reconciliation will be advanced by national economic development in a balanced manner through cooperation. North Korea is seeking solutions to its economic malaise and while aid and transfers will be sought, Kim Jong-Il suggested during his visit to China that he might be interested in a Chinese-style opening up of the North's economy. South Koreans say that North Koreans have sharp business acumen, but the limitations of *juche* (self-reliance) have been exposed. How balanced development, opening up, and cooperation will proceed is uncertain. How North Koreans will exploit any opportunities to engage in Southern-style business practices is certainly not clear, either.

If South Korea supports economic development in the North, if the process of reconciliation allows sanctions on the North by Japan and the US to be fully lifted, and if the North Korean economy is given regional

opportunities, the scenario of North Korea collapsing will soon disappear. In the 1990s it was not clear if North Korea could sustain itself economically, cope with a series of poor harvests and natural disasters, or make a smooth Communist dynastic-style transfer of power from Kim Il-Sung to his son. Economic questions remain, but Kim Jong-Il's leadership is rigidly secure (although rumours of factionalism and even rebellion, like good court intrigue, remain). Reunification by compromise on both sides is more likely than reintegration by the South of a collapsing North. Of course, much uncertainty remains as to how the reunification perspectives of North and South are to be reconciled.

An important regional issue, during and after a reunification process, will be the 37,000 US troops currently stationed in South Korea. Regional states, Russia, China, and Japan also have an interest in this issue. The US position was summed up by Secretary of State Madeline Albright when she stated that any withdrawal or reduction of US forces would be "premature at this stage". Kim Dae-Jung informed his opposite at the summit that "the American forces are necessary as a stabiliser for the peace in Northeast Asia even after the establishment of peace on the peninsula". Kim Jong-Il showed "substantial understanding" of this position at the summit but subsequently backed away. The continued presence of US forces in South Korea will surely be a major negotiating point during the reunification process. It may also become more of a domestic issue in South Korea as well.

Russia, China and Japan have their own perspectives on a continued role for the US on the Korean peninsula (and in the region generally) and these are often multifaceted. For China, reunification would remove the rationale for US troops. However, China is concerned with the broader strategic picture and any power vacuums that a US withdrawal might create. The Korean peninsula has been historically positioned at the sharp end of relations between China and Japan, and this is unlikely to change. The regional interests of the US and Russia complete a strategic quadrangle.

The end of the Cold War has not diminished the role of the two Koreas as the focal point of regional politics and strategic manoeuvring. As a reunification process takes shape, Russia, China, Japan and the US will all be involved. Despite the goal of reunification in an independent manner between North and South Korea, the peninsula will remain at the intersection of both competing and complementary regional relationships.