

A dismal anniversary of the Korean summit

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21 June 2001

A year ago the first-ever summit meeting between the leaders of North and South Korea in Pyongyang was greeted with euphoria in official circles and the media. Editorials waxed lyrical on the prospects for peace on the Korean peninsula. Business delegations trooped off to North Korea to examine the potential advantages of the country's cheap labour and authoritarian rule. And South Korean President Kim Dae Jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing about the rapprochement.

The anniversary last week of the June 15 summit was decidedly more subdued. The North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has not returned the visit and there are no definite plans for him to do so. High-level official meetings of the two Koreans have ceased. Investments have failed to materialise, the two rail systems have not been linked and even the much-vaunted tours organised by Hyundai to North Korea's Mount Kumgang are in financial difficulties.

In the week before the anniversary celebrations, tensions escalated sharply when North Korean cargo vessels sailed through the strait between South Korea and Japan. As the area is part of South Korea's territorial waters, the ships were in violation of the truce signed at the end of the Korean War. Just days before, the North Korean navy fired on a South Korean fishing vessel that had entered in disputed waters.

In South Korea, the rightwing Grand National Party (GNP) seized on these events to lash Kim Dae Jung once again over his alleged softness towards the North. When radio transcripts of the exchange between a North Korean cargo vessel and the South Korean navy were leaked to the press, the opposition rhetoric went up another notch. According to the transcript, the North Korean ship insisted its passage through South Korean waters had been agreed at last year's summit. While Kim Dae Jung denied the claim, the GNP is calling for the dismissal of the defence minister and an investigation into the "secret deal" with the North.

Public support for Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" towards North Korea appears to be waning. A recent opinion poll conducted by the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* newspaper and Gallup Korea found that only 34 percent were in favour as compared to 44 percent against. Last year the vast

majority of Koreans, many of whom have not been able to visit or contact their relatives for nearly 50 years, genuinely welcomed the prospect of an end to the tensions on the peninsula. But in the absence of concrete results, the GNP and opposition press have been able to stir up hostility towards the North.

The international media invariably pins the responsibility for the lack of progress on North Korea. Although the term "rogue state" is no longer in common use, Pyongyang is still routinely depicted as secretive and suspect. But the main obstacle to the further development of relations between the two Koreas has been on the other side of the globe—in Washington.

Under Clinton, talks had begun with the North, culminating in the visit of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang last December, with the aim of opening up North Korea to US investment and strengthening US strategic interests on the vital Korean peninsula. The new Bush administration, however, abruptly called a halt to negotiations with the North and instituted a lengthy review of relations.

Extreme rightwing elements of Bush's Republican Party had been highly critical of the previous administration's policy towards North Korea. Clinton was berated for being too soft on Pyongyang even though he engaged in a provocative series of moves aimed at putting constant pressure on North Korea over its missile and nuclear programs.

Reflecting the agenda of the Republican right, Bush bluntly told Kim Dae Jung during a meeting in March that he had "some skepticism about the leader of North Korea" and doubted the value of any agreements reached with Pyongyang. His officials have repeatedly vilified North Korea in order to provide a pretext for plans to develop a National Missile Defence shield.

Bush's comments, combined with the halt in US talks with North Korea, effectively undermined Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine policy. Without the active support of the US, any advance made by Seoul in its diplomatic and economic relations with the North could be rapidly undercut by the actions of Washington. Not only does the US maintain

37,000 troops in South Korea, but only recently under Clinton did Washington begin to relax its economic blockade against the North, maintained since the Korean War.

Bush's hard line on North Korea came under considerable fire from sections of the US political establishment, including from his own father. The former president George Bush hosted a seminar on North Korea in April at his presidential library in Texas where, according to the *New York Times*, he indicated his support for talks with Pyongyang and told his audience that he believed his son "would do the right thing".

Bush senior also passed on a letter to the president written by one of his former advisers, Donald Gregg, a Korean specialist, arguing that US interests in North East Asia would be damaged if the US administration did not reopen negotiations with North Korea. Gregg was expressing concerns in the ruling elite that the US could miss out on opportunities which would be seized by its rivals. A number of European powers have already established diplomatic relations with North Korea and a European Union delegation recently visited Pyongyang for talks.

After a protracted policy review, President Bush finally announced on June 6 that his administration would seek to negotiate with Pyongyang. He directed his national security team to "undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda" that included "verifiable constraints on North Korea's missile programs and a ban on its missile exports, and a less threatening conventional military posture." One of his goals, Bush said, was to allow North Korea to "demonstrate the seriousness of its desire for improved relations."

Stripped of its diplomatic niceties, the thrust of Bush's statement was aggressive and uncompromising. His call for a "broad agenda" signified the placing of additional demands on Pyongyang. Previously North Korea had agreed to negotiate over its missile and nuclear programs but not over its conventional military forces. Moreover, there is every indication that more hurdles will be erected as the US "allows" Pyongyang to prove its seriousness. The statement puts the onus on North Korea to demonstrate its bona fides while committing the US to very little in return.

Shortly after Bush's announcement a meeting took place at the UN between relatively junior officials of the two countries to establish the framework for talks. But as the South Korean ambassador Sung Chul Yang commented, "Starting at a low level means delay. Starting at the bottom is not serious. How did you [the US] start the opening with China? With Kissinger and Nixon... In the past three years there was phenomenal progress. But now it's stalled and we don't like it."

After the initial contacts, North Korea predictably reacted with anger to the basis proposed by the US for negotiations. Speaking on state radio last weekend, a North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesman accused the US of setting the agenda for the talks unilaterally and refused to consider any talks over its conventional forces unless the US removed its troops from the Korean peninsula. "[W]e cannot construe this otherwise than an attempt by the US to disarm" North Korea, he said.

Skepticism about the talks is no doubt reinforced by concerns that Bush's offer is nothing but a manoeuvre aimed at forcing a negative reaction from North Korea in order to "prove" to critics in the US, including the president's father, that negotiations with Pyongyang are not viable.

All of this cast a pall over meetings in South Korea held to mark the anniversary of last year's summit. Kim Dae Jung was left appealing rather lamely to Kim Jong-il to schedule his much-delayed trip to the South. "I hope that Chairman Kim Jong-il's return visit will occur within this year," he said in a radio broadcast.

At a so-called peace forum on Cheju Island last weekend, the South Korean president received hearty messages of support from former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and former Japanese prime minister Yasuhiro Nakasone as well as from President Bush's father, who said he felt "confident" that the US would "play a strong and constructive role in helping to bring a new era of peace and reconciliation to all the Korean people, in the North and in the South."

"Every new American president needs to take time to assess where he stands in terms of foreign policy issues inherited from his predecessor," the former president said, adding that he had done exactly the same in relation to the Soviet Union. "My summit with President Gorbachev on Malta soon followed and the rest is history."

While the message may carry some weight in rightwing circles in the US and South Korea, it is hardly likely to reassure North Korea about his son's intentions. The Pyongyang bureaucrats have repeatedly indicated their willingness to open up North Korea to the capitalist market but only so long as they can retain power. By pointing to the Soviet Union, Bush senior simply underscores the fact that the US strategy is to bring about the collapse of the North Korean regime.



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