

North Korea-South Korea Relations: Slow, Stopped, or Stop-go?

by Aidan Foster-Carter
Leeds University, UK

First, a confession. Because of travel commitments, this article was first drafted in mid-March. Its tone thus reflects the chill in inter-Korean ties at that time. But I did note that “surprises can never be ruled out” – and sure enough, on March 25 came the news that senior presidential adviser and ex-unification minister Lim Dong-won, the architect of the Sunshine Policy, will go to Pyongyang in early April as South Korean President Kim Dae-jung’s special envoy. That falls in the next quarter, so it would be wrong to preempt it now. At first glance it looks driven by concerns about the U.S., such as the Pentagon’s leaked Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) and U.S. President George Bush’s refusal to certify that North Korea is fully in compliance (except at the Yongbyon site) with the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework. While hope springs eternal even in this jaded breast, we shall see if this visit, unlike its many predecessors, ushers in a new phase and a sustained peace process – or is just the latest stop-go.

Winter is Kim Jong-il’s favorite season; the traits he most hates are compromise and surrender. The Seoul daily *JoongAng Ilbo* carried these and other insights (favorite color? Red, of course) into the North Korean leader’s tastes, quoting the February issue of the DPRK literary monthly *Chosun Munhak*. Kim is also cited as detesting flattery and sycophancy, so his 60th birthday on Feb. 16 must have been misery for him. Called *hwan’gap*, this anniversary is traditionally a big one in Korea, and North Korea celebrated it with all its customary pomp and circumstance. More of the same is due in April for the 90th birthday of his late father Kim Il-sung. Such grand events tend to render the DPRK even more introverted than usual and thus weigh against hopes that it might emerge from its bunker and seriously re-engage South Korea any time soon.

Maybe the dear leader’s seasonal preferences account for the long chill that has settled on inter-Korean relations. Someone who equates compromise with surrender would in any case have a problem with the kind of sustained negotiating process, with both sides yielding ground, that the world hoped had finally begun with the June 2000 North-South summit. Twenty-one months later, this seeming breakthrough must now regretfully be filed away with all the other false dawns: 1972, 1985, and 1990-2. Each time, it looked as if North Korea was seriously ready to talk; for a few months or years, talk it did. But every time, although much was said, little was really done. In all cases, sooner or later Pyongyang pulled out, leaving the Peninsula never quite unchanged, yet far less so than had been hoped. Witness the fact that each time talks start, it is from scratch. The 1985

agreement was ignored in 1991, and that in turn was sidelined at the 2000 summit. Despite an overused Korean proverb – *sijaki banida*: the first step is half the journey – only the second step, if and when it ever comes, will prove that a real peace process is at last under way.

Straws and Sensitivities

Even the current South Korean government, nine months away from a presidential election that it looks set to lose, now seems readier to accept that Kim Jong-il, through action and inaction, has definitively and fatally rained on Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy. Some clutching at straws continues. Movement is seen on the northern side of the stalled cross-DMZ road-rail link and for a moment hearts leap in Seoul. The fiercely anti-communist KCIA of old would be startled to hear its cleaned-up successor, the National Intelligence Service (NIS), earnestly tell the ROK National Assembly on Feb. 26 that not only the North's economy but even its human rights are improving. Both might be true; yet the suspicion persists that, as ever, what the Blue House wants to hear sets the agenda. Similarly, much that might upset North Korea has vanished from the NIS website and that of Koreascope, believed to be of the same provenance. *Vantage Point*, Seoul's main English-language monthly on North Korea, was switched from hawkish military intelligence types at *Naewoe Press* to the official *Yonhap News Agency* under Kim Keun, a DJ trusty. It is still scholarly and useful, but with an equal and opposite bias from before. It will be intriguing to see which way these jump if from next year South Korea's next president is, as widely expected, either the main opposition leader Lee Hoi-chang or some other conservative.

As readers may surmise, broad longer-term ruminations like this mean there is sadly little news to report on inter-Korean relations currently. As of mid-March, the two sides had not officially met this quarter. Neither – though surprises can never be ruled out in this area – did there seem any immediate prospect of improvement. On this, the official mood in Seoul shifted palpably during the quarter. After many appeals to Pyongyang to resume both inter-governmental talks and the family reunions organized by the Red Cross, on March 4 Unification Ministry sources said there will be no more official South Korean proposals unless and until the North takes the initiative.

Slow and Steady Is Seoul's New Stance

The same day, a meeting of the ROK's National Security Council produced the headline: "NSC to bring North to table slowly." Ministers reportedly favored a steady approach in consultation with other concerned powers, above all the U.S. This was one of those quarters where the most significant events cross-cut *Comparative Connections'* bilateral boundaries. Even at the best of times, inter-Korean ties cannot be considered without factoring in the U.S. role: not only due to the ROK-U.S. security alliance, but because Pyongyang regards U.S. positions as paramount. So President Bush's Jan. 29 designation in his State of the Union address of North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq, as an alleged "axis of evil," predictably did nothing to make Pyongyang more inclined to sit down with

either Washington or Seoul. Many in South Korea reckon it is not just Kim Jong-il who has cast a cloud over Sunshine, but “friendly fire” from Washington as well.

All in all, slow and steady is Seoul’s only option at the moment. A further, domestic reason for this, as press comment noted, is that any hasty overtures to Pyongyang at this time, even if they bore fruit, risk being interpreted as electioneering and so could cause a backlash. Thus even if Kim Jong-il suddenly decided to visit Seoul after all, Kim Dae-jung – who spent most of 2001 asking him to fulfill this pledge – would now think twice before agreeing. What in 2000 or even in 2001 would have been received with optimism, now risks only deepening cynicism. In any case, the Dear Leader will now wait and see who next occupies the Blue House – all the way until February 2008. Lee Hoi-chang, the current favorite, has been called a “human scum” by DPRK media for his criticisms of the Sunshine Policy as appeasement. He would be less generous than Kim Dae-jung and more insistent on reciprocity. Yet even he did not endorse Bush’s “axis of evil” phrase.

Kumgangs and Goings

In the absence of any official contact, the inter-Korean main event this quarter was due to be a meeting of civic groups at Mt. Kumgang in late February to celebrate the lunar new year: not an official holiday in the North, unlike the South, though Kim Jong-il’s birthday partly substitutes. The last such gathering, held in Pyongyang last August, generated a furious row in Seoul after a few Southern leftists danced to the North’s tune; it caused the resignation of Unification Minister Lim Dong-won, the architect of Sunshine, and the collapse – for the second time – of the ruling Millennium Democratic Party’s coalition with the small right-wing United Liberal Democrats.

This time the government was taking no chances and banned 40-odd activists from attending. A further 216 made the trip and were already at the North’s mountain resort when the Northern preparatory committee summarily announced that the event was off. Southerners who stayed and remonstrated gathered that the last-minute order had come from Pyongyang. The DPRK statement blamed “rightist forces” in South Korea and the U.S., claiming absurdly that pressure from the latter was responsible for the 40 fellow-travelers being forbidden. More moderate NGOs on their return opined that such big events were no longer worth the risk, as cancellation cost too much time and money (even though the Unification Ministry shoulders the financial burden).

Meanwhile, smaller-scale and lower-key civilian exchanges – the lasting and wholly positive legacy of the Sunshine Policy, whose momentum no future government in Seoul will now stop – also continued; although not altogether smoothly. On March 7 the Seoul daily *Chosun Ilbo* reported that Pyongyang was currently putting off all Southern visitors, except business ones. The latter continued to ply a modest trade. January’s total was \$28.2 million, comprising \$20.8 million in Northern exports and \$7.4 million from the South, although \$4 million of the latter was aid rather than trade. One hundred fourteen firms were involved, 40 of whom had goods made up in the North (processing on commission or POC). This volume, around \$300 million annually, has persisted for several years now. For South Korea it is minute, but for the North these exports are

second only to what it sells to Japan. The potential is much greater if only a project like Hyundai's proposed export zone near Kaesong – which had planned exports rising to \$20 billion a year – ever got off the ground. But as with all the schemes agreed at or after the June 2000 summit – not least an inter-Korean road and rail link, essential if Kaesong were to become a Shenzhen – when or if this will happen is now uncertain.

The future of Kumgang itself as a resort has also been in doubt, with falling tourist numbers and Hyundai Asan's losses rising as a result. Seoul's belated and contentious decision to prop up the project stems the red ink, or transfers it to the taxpayer. On March 3, the Korea National Tourism Organization (KNTO) finalized a deal to buy Hyundai's Kumgang hotel and spa for 46.2 billion won. This would take KNTO's total stake to 76.6 billion won (almost \$60 million), and enable Hyundai to pay most of its fee arrears to Pyongyang. But boosting numbers will be harder: Kumgang's novelty has worn off, and subsidized trips for the elderly and students do not sound like a recipe for profitability.

Football or Food?

Although on paper the omens are not good, it is North Korea's nature to spring surprises. What might it have up its sleeve? Brent Choi (Choi Won-ki), one of Seoul's most astute Pyongyang-watchers, reckons Kim Jong-il may not let slip his last chance with Kim Dae-jung entirely – as he did with then-President Clinton, by failing to start missile talks sooner. Writing in *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Choi suggests that Kim “could mix informal cultural and economic contacts with more formal political ones ... to keep aid and revenue flowing without sacrificing his pride.” Specifically, a Northern football team might come South during the World Cup in June; while Southern tourists head to Pyongyang to see Arirang, North Korea's biggest ever mass-game spectacular.

The North is certainly keen to attract tourists and their money. Arirang has its own websites, in Japanese even. Yet as with the Olympics 14 years ago – when, admittedly, the political climate was very different – the DPRK was offered a piece of the soccer action. It chose to look this gift horse in the mouth and mount Arirang as a rival (dream on) instead. With each side now busy ensuring that its own big event goes smoothly, it is very late to start talking exchanges. Still, if at the last minute Kim Jong-il does show willing, Kim Dae-jung will do his best to oblige.

Aid is a surer bet. One consequence of Pyongyang's on-off tergiversations on dialogue last fall was that 300,000 tons of grain offered by Seoul did not get sent. But this is one offer that the North truly cannot afford to refuse, utterly dependent as it remains on outside food aid. By the end of February, this year's UN World Food Program (WFP) appeal of \$215 million was only 25 percent funded; this time last year, 50 percent had been secured. Donor fatigue and Afghanistan are factors.

Seoul has pledged 100,000 tons of grain and delivery began in March. It may yet give much more, for reasons other than charity. South Korea is awash in rice, yet Southerners eat ever less of it. Last year's bumper harvest – even the North had its best crop in five

years – sent prices plummeting, prompting angry protests by farmers. Stockpiles now top 1.4 million tons, and the government wants to clear at least half of this before this year's harvest adds to the pile. The obvious answer, as suggested by the state-run Korea Rural Economic Institute on March 7, is to send most or all of it North. Even the Grand National Party (GNP), mindful of the farming vote, supported last year's grain offer. In the past Seoul has also sent fertilizer, which would have to arrive by May to be of use. How far to try to extract some political *quid pro quo* from Pyongyang will, as ever, be a matter for debate.

The food gap between the two Koreas was starkly highlighted in an ROK government report in March. Last year, 47 million South Koreans wasted more food than 23 million North Koreans ate – 2 million tons of vegetables, 1 million tons of meat and fish, half a million of grain, 200,000 tons of fruit and more: totaling 4 million tons and costing \$300 million to dispose of. Meanwhile Northern consumption was 3.9 million tons, most of which was basic staple grains. Statistics such as these cut two ways. The South can easily afford to feed the North – but come reunification, how could the North ever catch up?

Fugees in da House: From Trickle to Flood?

The past quarter's torpor in inter-Korean ties was rudely shattered in mid-March by a salutary reminder that states are not the only actors. The well-publicized entry of 25 North Koreans into the Spanish Embassy in Beijing on March 14, swiftly followed by deportation to Manila and on to Seoul, focused attention once more on DPRK refugees in China – and the growing militancy of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) campaigning on this issue, which means this thorny trilateral issue will not go away.

Unlike last July, when a similar group entered the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees' Beijing office, China moved quickly to settle the immediate issue. But like then, predictably, it also reacted by reportedly cracking down on refugees in its border regions. Activists like the ubiquitous Norbert Vollertsen, the German doctor expelled from North Korea in 2000, threaten to continue such stunts – including disrupting the World Cup in South Korea in June – to highlight what they see as China's suppression and South Korea's complicity in discouraging defectors. While the Sunshine Policy has played down this and all North Korean human-rights issues, the opposition GNP has said that, if it takes power next year, it will be more robust on the question. If so, this will pose new challenges for not only North-South but also Sino-Korean ties.

The latest incident also forces South Koreans to confront their own ambivalence. Pious talk of reunification does not help the few (under 2,000) Northern defectors in their midst, who mostly find life hard. What then if a German scenario suddenly bumps the numbers up to 23 million?

Envoi

“The people’s happiness is my happiness.” Thus Kim Jong-il, in the above mentioned interview. He added that his goal in life is to create a lasting legacy. As Kim Dae-jung’s presidency limps toward a sadly lame-duck conclusion, at least the Nobel peace prize winner’s place in history is secure. Kim Jong-il will be remembered too – but the question is: for what? There is still just time to retrieve something of the June 2000 summit’s high hopes. But the clock is ticking fast.

Chronology of North Korea-South Korea Relations January-March 2002

Jan. 2, 2002: South Korea’s unification minister says his ministry’s prime goal this year is to realize Kim Jong-il’s visit to Seoul, but that this can be neither guaranteed nor predicted.

Jan. 4, 2002: The ROK’s National Intelligence Service (NIS) reports that 583 North Koreans defected to South Korea last year, almost twice as many as in 2000.

Jan. 4, 2002: Pyongyang is reported as opposing plans of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) for a satellite communication link between South Korea and the consortium’s nuclear reactor site at Kumho, North Korea.

Jan. 6, 2002: Seoul denies a local press report that it plans to offset Hyundai Asan’s losses on the Mt. Kumgang tourism project from the Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Fund.

Jan. 8, 2002: North Korea invites the South’s Council for Reconciliation and Cooperation to Pyongyang to discuss a joint lunar new year event.

Jan. 15, 2002: South Korea’s Red Cross returns three Northern fishermen, rescued at sea by a Russian merchant ship and dropped off at the Southern port of Chinhae, via Panmunjom.

Jan. 17, 2002: Kim Dae-jung says he has had a report that the North may be resuming work on cross-border rail links.

Jan. 21, 2002: South Korean opposition leader Lee Hoi-chang says he opposes official aid for the Mt. Kumgang tourism project absent concessions by North Korea.

Jan. 21, 2002: A joint meeting of the government, political parties, and social organizations in Pyongyang expresses its intention to re-establish inter-Korean dialogue at all levels.

Jan. 23, 2002: The ROK Unification Ministry reports that last year 1,686 one-way North-South sea voyages (down 18.7 percent) carried 837,000 tons of cargo (up 19.1 percent).

Jan. 29, 2002: Jeong Se-hyun, a former vice minister and NIS special advisor, replaces Hong Soon-young as unification minister.

Jan. 30, 2002: South Korea gives \$19 million to provide 100,000 tons of corn to the North via the WFP.

Feb. 5, 2002: DPRK media confirms that North and South have agreed, at a working meeting in Pyongyang, to hold a joint lunar new year festival at Kumgangsan toward the end of February.

Feb. 5, 2002: South Korea's new foreign minister, Choi Sung-hong, calls on North Korea to resume talks with both South Korea and the U.S.

Feb. 6, 2002: Pyongyang radio urges South Koreans to protest U.S. President George Bush's visit to Seoul.

Feb. 7, 2002: The unification minister says South Korea will seek to open a direct air route to the KEDO's reactor site at Kumho in North Korea for workers and emergency medical teams.

Feb. 9, 2002: Ten North Korean defectors arrive in South Korea via "a third country" (usually China), bringing this year's total to 54.

Feb. 19, 2002: A Korean People's Army sergeant defects across the front line near the South's new Dorasan rail station, just a day before Presidents Bush and Kim Dae-jung visit the same spot.

Feb. 26, 2002: Over 200 South Korean activists leave Seoul for lunar new year celebrations at Mt. Kumgang.

Feb. 27, 2002: After arriving in Kumgangsan, the Southern delegates learn that Pyongyang has cancelled the joint event.

Mar. 3, 2002: A DPRK statement blames the breakdown of the planned joint lunar new year event on the U.S. and anti-reunification forces in South Korea.

Mar. 4, 2002: The South's Unification Ministry says that if the North agrees to resume family reunions, it will consider Mt. Kumgang as a venue.

Mar. 8, 2002: Hyundai Asan says it has paid \$1.3 million in tourist fees to North Korea.

Mar. 8, 2002: The unification minister says Seoul may restrict travel by Northern defectors after one returned to the North for his wife, was caught, and reportedly shot, but escaped again.

Mar. 8, 2002: South Korea said it will send anti-malarial drugs and equipment worth \$700,000 to North Korea next month via WHO.

Mar. 8, 2002: god (gee-oh-dee), a South Korean boy band, are to visit North Korea later this month and plant trees as goodwill envoys of the New Millennium Life Movement, an NGO.

Mar. 10, 2002: North Korean tourism officials visiting Japan reportedly want up to 10 flights daily between Seoul, Pyongyang, and Beijing during the World Cup and Arirang festival.

Mar. 14, 2002: Twenty-five North Korean refugees seek asylum in the Spanish Embassy in Beijing.

Mar. 15, 2002: China allows the 25 North Korean refugees to be flown to Manila, Philippines.

Mar. 18, 2002: The Twenty-five North Korean refugees – six families and two orphan girls – arrive in Seoul.

Mar. 18, 2002: *Rodong Sinmun*, North Korea's ruling party newspaper, questions the possibility of inter-Korean dialogue while U.S.-DPRK relations remain aggravated.

Mar. 19, 2002: Senior presidential secretary Lim Dong-won warns that 2003 could see a new security crisis as in 1994. He also reveals that 150 Southern firms are operating in North Korea, and some 800 South Koreans are living in Pyongyang, Kumgang, and the Sinpo nuclear site.

Mar. 19, 2002: An ROK Red Cross youth delegation, returning after handing over gifts worth \$470,000 at Nampo port, says North Korea has asked for Southern fertilizer aid.

Mar. 25, 2002: Both Koreas announce simultaneously that ROK senior presidential secretary Lim will visit Pyongyang in early April as Kim Dae-jung's special envoy.

Mar. 26, 2002: North Korean media condemn joint air combat exercises of U.S. and South Korean troops as a "frenzied exercise in preparation for air battle."