

U.S.-Korea Relations: Looking Forward, Looking Back

**by Stephen Noerper, Senior Associate,
The Nautilus Institute**

The June 13-15 inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il spoke to the possibility of dramatic forward progress in inter-Korean relations and advanced President Kim's commitment to end the Cold War on the Korean Peninsula. The historic meeting drew unqualified support from the United States and other regional actors, but also raised questions on the future of the U.S. military presence on the Peninsula. U.S. and South Korean officials voiced support for a future role for U.S. troops, but public protests in South Korea and suggestions by Washington conservatives indicated growing debate on the scope and type of U.S. presence. Despite official proclamations to the contrary, pre-summit reports indicated some divergence between U.S. and South Korean policymakers on agenda topics, with the United States (and Japan) concerned about nuclear and missile issues and South Korea keen on leading with economic cooperation and family visitations.

The quarter also was notable given the 50th Anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War. Citing the U.S. and South Korean shared sacrifice of a half-century ago, U.S. President Clinton initiated three and a half years of observances in Washington ceremonies. South Korean President Kim Dae-jung welcomed ten thousand Korean War veterans from twenty-one countries with public tributes, but parades were canceled and ceremonies subdued given the recent summit and South Korean public interest in that direction. North Korea refrained from making any comment about the anniversary, a marked departure from previous years. Controversy over the Nogun-ri massacres and the pace of attendant investigations, the 20th Anniversary of the Kwangju massacres, protests over U.S. test ranges, the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and a U.S. carmaker bid for Daewoo Motor Company all reflect future challenges in managing U.S.-Korean relations.

Progress with North Korea

The United States continued its support for the South Korean policy of engaging North Korea in its bilateral relations with North Korea and through mini- and multilateral initiatives. In turn, North Korea continued its diplomatic opening and progressed not only to the table with South Korea, but with several external actors as well. The United States continues to regard North Korea as a principle security threat, with U.S. Pacific Forces Commander-in-Chief Admiral Dennis Blair describing it in an early April press briefing as the world's "single most dangerous

place.” So too, in the wake of the historic inter-Korean summit, U.S. officials expressed cautious optimism tempered with reminders of the DPRK nuclear and missile potential.

To that end, the United States met with North Korea in Rome late May to discuss DPRK nuclear and missile programs, as well as other bilateral issues. North Korea has agreed to restart formal missile talks with the United States, scheduled for July 10-12 in Kuala Lumpur. U.S. Coordinator for Counterterrorism Michael Sheehan suggested, in mid-April, conditions that North Korea must meet to secure removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. Although the United States redesignated the DPRK on that list May 1, North Korea remains set on removing itself, thereby opening the door for financial assistance from international lenders.

The United States announced its intent to follow-through on the lifting of sanctions against North Korea in the wake of the inter-Korean summit. Notice of the formal easing of sanctions appeared in the June 19 *U.S. Federal Register*, and President Clinton announced the move the following day. North Korea responded with a promise to maintain its moratorium on long-range missile testing, but urged the U.S. to lift sanctions completely. The DPRK also announced its intent to send nominal head of state Kim Young-nam to New York for the autumn United Nations Millennium summit. Of particular note in the diplomatic wordage surrounding U.S.-DPRK relations, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright announced in mid-June that the United States government was abandoning the term “rogue state” in referring to the DPRK and other “states of concern.”

The U.S. and North Korea also registered forward progress in cooperation on the return of U.S. remains from the Korean War. In mid-May, North Korea agreed to resume talks on the excavation of remains. A five-day meeting between the United States and North Korea took place in Kuala Lumpur and led to the departure of a team of U.S. investigators to the DPRK June 27.

The United States provided positive momentum toward engaging North Korea through multilateral initiatives such as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), whose representatives met in Japan in mid-May and in Hawaii in late June. In this setting, the United States, South Korea, and Japan expressed support for inter-Korean dialogue and common approaches toward North Korea.

Ambassadorial meetings at the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) took place in late June, addressing General Electric’s turbine-supply and labor expense concerns. GE’s earlier request for the United States to provide for legal claims involving the North Korean light-water reactors (LWRs) represented a potential stumbling block. The U.S. State Department Special Envoy for North Korea described the indemnification demand as unusual. U.S. officials considered applying Title 85, Section 84, a law indemnifying companies taking part in nuclear clean up to protect firms participating in the LWR project.

U.S. House Resolution 4251, the Congressional Oversight of Nuclear Transfers to North Korea Act of 2000, mandates congressional approval for any nuclear equipment or technology transfer,

further complicating the KEDO effort. In mid-April, the U.S. announced sanctions against DPRK and Iranian entities involved in Scud missile technology transfer. That and a lack of North Korean transparency on the amount of pre-1994 harvested plutonium led South Korean observers to note potential “hurdles” in improved U.S.-DPRK relations. On a more positive note, U.S. inspectors returned to North Korea in May to reinspect the underground site at Kumchang-ri.

On the broader multilateral front, the United States and South Korea provided support for North Korea’s bid to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). In May, ARF representatives agreed in principle to North Korean admission. Forward progress occurred on non-governmental fronts as well, with the May 19 visit of Reverend Franklin Graham to Pyongyang evidence of enhanced informal contacts. Elsewhere on the aid front, the United States pledged 50,000 tons of wheat for North Korea to the World Food Program (WFP), an addition to the 400,000 metric tons of food aid pledged since last July. On a less positive note, the U.S.-based relief organization CARE announced in April that it would withdraw from the North Korea aid consortium by the end of June.

Inter-Korean Summit Support and the Evolving Troop Issue

From the time of its announcement, the United States voiced “full” support for the historic inter-Korean summit. President Clinton described the announcement as “testimony to the wisdom and long-term vision of President Kim Dae-jung’s engagement policy,” congratulating “both leaders on the decision to meet.” He later lauded the summit as testimony of U.S. success at continually insisting on inter-Korean dialogue. Secretary Albright “warmly” welcomed the announcement. U.S. State Department analyst John Merrill, in a personal capacity, expressed hope that the summit marked “the start of continual high-level inter-Korean contact.” A United States Forces Korea (USFK) Command spokesman announced the suspension of live strafing and bombing exercises in South Korea “to contribute to peace initiatives” during the summit.

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il agreed to ease the conflict and to eventual reunification through 1) independently solving the reunification problem; 2) a federation or confederation scheme; 3) joint efforts on humanitarian issues, including family visitations and return of prisoners; 4) economic cooperation; and 5) future dialogue. Suggestions of a Seoul-Pyongyang hotline, a notable confidence and security-building measure, followed the summit. In offering bipartisan support for the summit process, Grand National Party (GNP) head Lee Hoi-chang and President Kim Dae-jung agreed to reciprocity from North Korea and parliamentary oversight. Questions surrounding U.S. influence, the placement of security issues on future agendas, and rationale for U.S. theater or national missile defense will mount as North and South Korea move forward in their dialogue.

During the summit, President Kim Dae-jung reportedly advised North Korean leader Kim Jong-il of the necessity for a continued U.S. troop presence, not only for stability on the Peninsula but in Northeast Asia at large. ROK Ambassador to the United States Lee Hong-koo described discussions of U.S. troops as a “long way off.” U.S. officials also were quick to defend the necessity for continued presence. Visiting Seoul in late June, Secretary of State Albright

described U.S. troops as “evidence of American interest.” However, Senator Jesse Helms and others raised the question of how long U.S. troops might stay, and South Korea witnessed several protests against U.S. troops.

On June 6, some two thousand villagers and activists clashed with riot police, demanding closure of the U.S. military’s Kooni range near Mae Hyang, southwest of Seoul. Protests of the range have continued. May protests surrounding the 20th Anniversary of the Kwangju massacres saw distribution of anti-American leaflets. Also in late May, South Korean autoworkers and students protested the U.S. troop presence and possible U.S. carmaker takeover of ailing Daewoo Motor Company.

The controversy over the Nogun-ri War massacres during the early days of the Korean War increased over the quarter, with the South Korean government in early April demanding full U.S. cooperation in the probe of reported atrocities. Declassified U.S. military documents and witnesses revealed that ROK soldiers and police executed two thousand political prisoners without trial in the early weeks of the Korean War, leading some Korean observers to describe the U.S. as having condoned the killings. In early May, South Korean experts visited the U.S. Defense Department and counterparts, securing a U.S. commitment to make available veterans’ testimonies surrounding the shootings at Nogun-ri. Mid-May saw the *U.S. News and World Report* and *Stripes.com* question the authenticity of Associated Press (AP) Pulitzer-winning reports on Nogun-ri, leading to an AP rebuttal, reaffirmation by the Pulitzer committee, and angry reactions from South Korea’s Nogun-ri Massacre Incident Committee. A principle in the story recanted his claim in late May, leading to further confusion. June 6 reports of Air Force strafing approved just prior to the events prompted further questions about the actions of U.S. forces during the early stage of the conflict.

In early June, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff released Joint Vision 2020, which posited fundamental shifts in strategic thinking from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific region and suggesting a dilution of the current Status of Forces Agreements (SOFA) among the United States and Japan and the United States and South Korea. SOFA remains a point of contention in current U.S.-ROK relations, and several incidents involving U.S. military personnel on the Peninsula have led to increased public outcry.

A former ROK vice unification minister stated in mid-May that the DPRK and ROK were close to war in 1994. Former South Korean President Kim Young-sam elevated concerns about the near outbreak of hostilities in his late May contention that he had stopped President Clinton from launching June 1994 air strikes against North Korea, criticizing the United States for “planning to stage a war with the North on our land.”

Policy Implications

Popular memory and perceptions play key roles in the conduct of international relations. Early in the quarter, ROK Unification Minister Park Jae-kyu described the summit as marking “an end to the Cold War confrontation and a starting point to create a new history of reconciliation and

cooperation.” As the inter-Korean dialogue progresses and the Peninsula commits to a new security architecture, South Korea and the United States will reexamine and re-justify fundamental aspects of the U.S.-Korean relationship.

The impact of new realities on policymaking is visible, with confusion over the state of the U.S.-ROK missile talks evidence of new challenges confronting the alliance. At the conclusion of the quarter, U.S. press reports stated that the United States had approved South Korea extending missile ranges to 300 kilometers, but that the ROK had opted not to pursue this program at present in order to not offend North Korea. According to South Korean press accounts, however, Seoul categorically denied this, stating that negotiations were still underway and that complications existed over U.S. technical demands.

In sum, the inter-Korean summit speaks to opportunities for the United States and South Korea to advance relations with North Korea and to contribute to a more stable and prosperous Northeast Asia. The summit marks an evolution toward reaching a Korean détente and at long last dismantling the infrastructure of national division. Yet, that path is fraught with new, extensive, and expensive challenges. To better address those challenges, the United States and South Korea must work toward true partnership, with each nation mindful of the intricacies of and demands upon policymaking in the other. As a new, more fully independent, and ultimately enlarged Korea emerges, Seoul and Washington must strive if not always toward agreement, at least toward understanding and acceptance of differences.

Chronology of U.S.-Korea Relations

April-June 2000

Apr. 4, 2000: U.S.-based CARE announces withdrawal from North Korea aid consortium.

Apr. 10, 2000: ROK and DPRK announce June summit meeting in Pyongyang.

Apr. 12, 2000: General Electric asks U.S. for indemnification for light water reactors in North Korea.

Apr. 13, 2000: ROK Parliamentary elections leave the Grand National Party 133 seats and the ruling Millennium Democratic Party with 115 seats in new, smaller 273-seat National Assembly.

Apr. 13, 2000: U.S. Coordinator for Counterterrorism Michael Sheehan announces DPRK is “likeliest candidate for removal” from U.S. list of state-sponsors of terrorism if certain conditions met.

Apr. 20, 2000: American Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Korean Industries announce joint investment committee for North Korea to facilitate business operations and investment.

Apr. 22, 2000: ROK and DPRK initiate summit preparatory talks at Panmunjom

Apr. 24, 2000: ROK Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Lee Joung-Binn, Defense Minister Cho Seong-tae, U.S. ambassador Stephen Bosworth, and General Thomas A. Schwartz meet to coordinate their stance on the inter-Korea summit.

May 1, 2000: South Korean experts begin six-day visit to United States on Nogun-ri War massacre.

May 8, 2000: Australia restores full diplomatic ties with North Korea.

May 12, 2000: U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral consultations in Japan offer “unqualified support” for inter-Korean summit.

May 15, 2000: *U.S. News and World Report* and *Stripes.com* question accuracy of the Associated Press Nogun-ri reports, prompting controversy in United States and South Korea.

May 15, 2000: U.S. House of Representatives pass Congressional Oversight on Nuclear Transfers to North Korea Act of 2000 (HR 4251).

May 24, 2000: U.S. and DPRK meet in Rome to discuss DPRK nuclear and missile programs.

May 24, 2000: Former ROK President Kim Young-sam contends that he stopped President Clinton from launching June 1994 airstrikes against North Korea.

Jun. 7, 2000: U.S. and DPRK begin five-day meeting in Kuala Lumpur on U.S. War remains.

Jun. 8, 2000: President Clinton and ROK President Kim meet in Japan following late Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi’s memorial service.

Jun. 13-15, 2000: Historic inter-Korean summit occurs between ROK President Kim Dae-Jung and DPRK leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang.

Jun. 16, 2000: ROK National Security Advisor Hwang Won-tak visits Secretary of State Albright and DPRK policy team.

Jun. 20, 2000: President Clinton announces lifting of DPRK sanctions. North Korea calls for complete lifting and promises to maintain moratorium on long-range missile tests.

Jun. 23-25, 2000: Secretary of State Albright visits South Korea.

Jun. 25, 2000: Commemoration ceremonies in the United States and South Korea on 50th Anniversary of the beginning of the Korean War.

Jun. 27, 2000: Twenty U.S. investigators visit DPRK to conduct war remains searches.

Jun 28, 2000: U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Subcommittee meets in Washington.

Jun, 29, 2000: President Kim Dae-jung reaffirms the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance and role of U.S. forces in South Korea in deterring war on the Korean Peninsula.

Jun. 29-30, 2000: U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Coordination Oversight Group (TCOG) meets in Honolulu.