



Gateway to Inter-Korean Summits

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Winston Churchill coined the term “summit” in the early 1950s to define meetings between leaders of great powers in the Cold War. While summits have allowed needed personal contacts for leaders, they may result in an illusion of mutual understanding. As the Lee Myung-bak administration comes to a close, the issue of a North-South summit has again been raised in light of North Korea’s disclosure of the secret inter-Korea meetings in Beijing, where North Korea alleged that South Korea offered cash in return for a series of summits. With tensions and provocations between the two sides at a new high and South Korea’s demand for an apology for the acts of last year unmet, the leak raises the question of the timing and utility of a summit.

The Prelude to a Future Inter-Korean Summit

The idea of an inter-Korean summit originated in 1981 with a proposal by Chun Doo-hwan. Though the idea of an inter-Korean summit goes back to the early 1980s, momentum did not build until Kim Il-sung accepted Kim Young-sam’s proposal in 1994. However, the first inter-Korean summit would have to wait due to Kim Il-sung’s sudden death. In June 2000, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il met for the historic first summit. Roh year with-jung issued the “Berlin Declaration” calling for Moo-hyun visited the North for the second summit in October 2007.

The first summit focused on a ‘peace first’ policy of integration through economic interdependence. Although light on substance, it was portrayed as groundbreaking for reinforcing the mutual intent of peace and reunification. The summit aligned the fundamental objectives of North Korea extracting economic concessions and South Korea moving towards rapprochement.

The second summit was muddled with mixed messages of denuclearization and economic cooperation. Moreover, the summit was subject to election politics by taking place two months prior to the presidential election. Nevertheless, the ultimate objectives of the two Koreas aligned as North Korea gained economic concessions while South Korea expanded its economic projects.

Implications of Recent Summit Failure

Compared to Kim and Roh, Lee has a more practical but narrow summit objective. The recently proposed summit suggests that Lee diverted from his ‘Vision 3000’ policy of denuclearization and focused on reviving the inter-Korean relations after the 2010 provocations.

The two Koreas’ objectives in their attempt at a third summit differed fundamentally and created a policy mismatch. South Korea’s ultimate goal was to avoid future military confrontations and obtain an apology. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted South Korea’s Minister of Unification, Hyun In-taek, saying that “the core of the meetings was to hear North Korea admit, make an apology, and guarantee no reoccurrence of such events.” On the other hand, North Korea’s objective was to solicit economic concessions, appease Beijing, and build on Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un’s propaganda.

Given the unique nature of inter-Korean relations, election politics and legacy-building cannot be ignored in summit diplomacy. However, Lee’s driving force is focused on practical and short-term objectives, such as an apology and alleviating immediate tensions. Moreover, Lee has already established his legacy with the EU-Korea FTA, KORUS FTA, hosting of the G-20, hosting of the Nuclear Security Summit in 2012, green growth, and improvement in the economy.

The attempted summit implies that Lee bet on a radical improvement in inter-Korean relations, which failed due to the North’s diplomatic breach. The cost of a future summit will be higher in light of the North’s summit revelation, Cheonan, and Yeonpyeong, and Lee will see diminished value in pursuing future summit prospects during his term.

Future Summit Approaches

If summit prospects under Lee are dim, are there alternative approaches to inter-Korean summits that the next administration should consider? First, summit objectives from both Koreas should be clear and aligned. North Korea’s summit objectives of

economic concessions and propaganda have remained constant while South Korea's objectives have evolved over Kim, Roh and Lee. In order to align with the North's economic objective, the South should focus on projects rather than direct aid. This will establish long-term incentives for both Koreas while moving towards North Korea's economic development rather than aid dependency.

Second, the two Koreas should move towards regularized summits. Ad hoc meetings have largely been symbolic while the propaganda value of summits diminishes over time. Efficiency will be established with annual meetings between foreign and defense ministers respectively to lay the groundwork for one presidential summit per administration for confidence-building and commitment renewal. Any successful summit and cooperative strategy must be institutionalized in order to have consistency and measurable impact.

Third, summits should occur in the first half of the presidential term. Summits in the second half could fall victim to electoral politics. Moreover, implementation of agreements reached in the latter half of an administration will be challenging as the next administration takes over with a new agenda and priorities.

Fourth, summit locations should rotate. Kim Jong-il promised a return visit to Seoul after the first summit, which did not come to fruition. Continuing the trend of summits in Pyongyang will only strengthen Kim Jong-il's legitimacy.

Finally, inter-Korean summits should be conducted in coordination with other stakeholder countries. The current diplomacy efforts of North Korea are parallel to the post-2000 summit era when Kim made trips to China and Russia before or after the summit. Coordinating with China and Russia will clarify North Korea's summit diplomacy objectives.

Inter-Korean summit diplomacy has evolved, but it is here to stay. Pyongyang has worked hard to change the playing field via inter-Korean summits by pursuing a strategy of regime sustenance while displaying a level of cooperation. The task for South Korea will be to use consistent and systematic summit diplomacy as a tool to instill leverage on North Korea.