

Beyond the Political Controversy over The North-South Summit Talk

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The North and South Korean governments officially announced on Aug. 8th that the leaders of the two countries, namely, the Chairman of the National Defense Commission Kim Jong Il and the President Roh Moo Hyun will hold a Summit Talk from Aug. 28th till 30th. “The Summit is particularly significant to two Koreas, since it will enable the two to frankly speak to each other about issues surrounding the peace settlement on the Korean peninsula and establish a firm foothold for building a peace regime”, a high-ranking official from the Presidential Office said. He added that both sides “will be discussing a new plan that will advance the Peninsula one step further in inter-Korean exchanges and economic cooperation both in terms of quality and quantity.” Later at the preparatory meetings of the Summit Talk in Kaesong, it was agreed that President Roh will visit by an overland route using Gyeonguiseon, a railroad that connects Seoul and Sinuiju.

However, from Aug. 7th till 18th, floods swept away most parts of central area of North Korea, including Pyongyang, causing tremendous damages, and soon North Korea facing restoration problems suggested on 18th that the Summit is deferred to the beginning of Oct and specific schedule is set at South Korea’s convenience. The government decided to accept the proposal and informed North Korea of readjusted schedule for Pyongyang visit as Oct. 2-3, which was then agreed by the North.

The Significance and the Agenda of Summit Talk

President Roh has reiterated over time that he would try to hold the Summit Talk regardless of time and a venue if it is possible and necessary. He has also emphasized that the Talk would be meaningless, if it was to be held without any relation to resolving the nuclear crisis. The government views that the kernel of the Summit is whether or not the Summit will be any helpful in addressing nuclear problems as well as making practical progress in South-North relations. Since the announcement of the second-ever North-South Summit Talk, the government of South Korea has defined its standpoints on the upcoming Talk as below. ① The government will do its utmost to come to terms with the North on the resolution of nuclear problems and the peace settlement of the Peninsula. The task that cannot be missed out for the government to normalize its relations with the northern partner is to ensure the peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula, ② The most important thing that the two Koreas should do, and actually could do is to build trust and confidence in each other. The core driving force to promote trust-building between two countries is to expand and reinforce economic cooperation. Economic cooperation is a long term investment for security and peace in the Korean peninsula. The two governments should set an outlook based on this long-term view, and develop a new cooperative way whereby economic cooperation and security·peace rotate one another. In this sense, the upcoming Summit will be a significant opportunity for forming a cornerstone of the hope above.

The agreement of the second South and North Summit Talk reads that the Summit would be “of weighty significance in opening a new phase of peace, prosperity and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula by furthering the South and North relations to a higher level.” This says that peace, prosperity, and reunification are the key agenda at the Summit. Considering the fact that the Summit comes amid efforts of North Korea to disable its nuclear programs, positive outcomes for peace are much expected.

As the nuclear abandonment takes place together with building a peace regime in Korean peninsula, the positive role of both countries is required. In this sense, the top officials of two countries need to reaffirm their political will to achieve peace in peninsula, through a ‘Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula’ and also announce ‘Joint Efforts into Easing Strained Relations and Achieving Permanent



Peace Settlement'. South Korea could draw up a kind of Marshall Plan for North Korea that will comprehensively support them to restore and open up the economy. Along the way of carrying out initiatives for promoting economic cooperation and unity between the two sides, both will have more chances to establish a structure whereby peace and prosperity rotate one another. In addition to this, if a specific agreement for solving the pending humanitarian issues is reached, the Talk will substantially contribute to the confidence building between the two. Especially, North Korea's determination is a must in solving the issues of high concern in South Korea, such as military hostages and South Korean abductees. In terms of reunification scheme, two parties are required to agree on developing a habit of cooperation by forming joint mechanisms in possible areas first, such as economy and socio-culture, while reconfirming what had been compromised at the 1st Summit Talk.

Whirlpool of Political Disputes

South Korea is mostly welcoming the news on the soon-to-be-held 2nd Summit Talk. The Talk, however, is being yet again drawn to the political whirlpool. Grand National Party, South Korea's dominant opposition party, blasted that "We oppose the inter-Korean Summit, which is taking place at an inappropriate time and venue and through opaque procedures." It continued on saying that "with the presidential election coming in just four months, it (the Summit) is more likely a political ploy to stop the regime change by disturbing the current status." Some conservative media suggested that there is a possibility that the news on North Korea's flood disaster, the cause for the delay of holding the Summit Talk, could have been exaggerated.

Some politicians and media who object to the Talk are bringing up the problems in terms of the following aspects. First, they point out that the agenda was not decided in the process of negotiating to hold the Talk, and the top priority on the agenda should be the nuclear problems. But "even in the case of the 1st Summit Talk, the discussions about formalizing agenda also begun after, not during the process of agreeing to hold the Talk. The government is trying and indeed preparing already to work out the agenda, and the preparations will proceed smoothly based on the

experiences of past Talks and cooperation. President Roh knows better than anybody else that nuclear issues are very critical. What needs to be clarified here is that, however, the 2nd Summit Talk is not solely about nuclear issues. The Summit Talk will be all the more meaningful, only when it addresses more comprehensive issues, not to mention the nuclear issues, with a bigger objective that is a practical advancement in the South-North relations” the government explains.

The fact that the venue for the Talk is not Seoul, but Pyongyang is also at issue. The objectors of the Talk contend that the process of preparing the Talk is not transparent. The government however refutes that the contents are what matters more than the formality, and the assertions about the transparency of procedures are absurd, lacking reasonable grounds thereof. According to the government, the negotiations were carried out not in an open way because of the sensitivity of the matter, yet the Talk was definitely pursued through an official channel, namely, the head of National Intelligence Service as a special envoy, designated by the president. There were no secret payments or agreements behind the negotiations, the government says. In fact, preliminary dealings could not possibly take place, since whatever that is agreed between the North and the South is required to be approved by the National Assembly according to the Law on the Development of South-North Relationship.

The Grand National Party is calling the Talk as an ‘election stunt’, ahead of the Dec. presidential election. The government remains firm, however, refuting the argument that the Talk is an important event that will decide the country’s future, therefore it should not be judged by any political yardstick. The 1st Summit Talk was held three days prior to the 16th general election, and as the result of the election, the Grand National Party became the first party in the National Assembly.

The representative of the Grand National Party on Aug. 21st suggested that the Talk is postponed saying “The Talk is better dealt with by the next government or in cooperation with the newly elected President after the poll.” This was soon criticized by the President's Office that “it is a presumptuous statement, especially when the election has not even come yet, showing no respect for the nation’s current system, but such an arrogance that they think they have the government at their beck and call.”



Rising Expectation of the 2nd Summit Talk

Under the military dictatorship, anti-communism and anti-North Korea were used for oppressing democratic movement and extending the authoritarian governments. Since the democratization, reunification issues have been the targets for political disputes. A bipartisan cooperation for the reconciliation and preparation of reunification between the two Koreas are still too far to reach. Some foreigners said that he could not understand the reality of the Korean Peninsula where one race shares the same blood, language and history, but still remains divided because of the ideology created by external superpowers. We wonder why it rings in ears of us even more today.

Regardless of the disputes between the government and the 1st opposition party, however, most of Korean people expect the 2nd Summit Talk to promote the North–South reconciliation and cooperation, and facilitate peace settlement in the Korean Peninsula. First of all, the two top leaders need to declare to the world their willingness to participate proactively in international collaboration for the peace building in the peninsula through denuclearization. Simultaneously, they are urged to broaden economic cooperation of the North and South on a full scale that has been processed restrictively. When the two leaders announce that peace and economy complement each other, that would contribute to the dismantlement of Cold War in the peninsula and the establishment of North–east Asia community. The Summit Talk also should reach an principal agreement on resolving such humanitarian issues as kidnappings to the North, prisoners of war, separated families both since and during the Korean War. Ahead the those historic missions, if South Korean politicians misuse the 2nd Summit Talk politically, they will be blamed by the international community as well as Korean people for the their negligence of historic opportunity. (29th Aug. 2007)

