The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Korea's Two North-South Summits and the Future of Northeast Asia: Back to the Future

Bruce Cumings

This is a revised version of a paper that was prepared for the Conference in Commemoration of the June 15 South-North Joint Declaration, Kim Dae Jung Peace Center Seoul, June 12, 2008.

A major purpose of this conference is to take stock of the June 2000 summit with the benefit of eight years of hindsight, also to examine the achievements of the October 2007 summit, and to assess where we are today in relations with North Korea. My perspective is obviously an American one, and I am deeply interested in where Korean affairs might go after the inauguration of a new American president only eight months from now. But I am afraid I sometimes overestimate American influence on Korean affairs. I think recent years have demonstrated that when Korean leaders want something badly enough, and stick to their policies and principles, they can directly or indirectly influence American leaders toward adopting similar policies. And so I want to make one major point that I will come back to in the end: Presidents Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun persisted with their engagement policy toward Pyongyang through five years of intense American pressure, criticism, and provocation, and ultimately were vindicated when the Bush administration turned 180 degrees and also adopted an engagement policy. Why this happened is still something of a mystery, but it certainly did happen.

Today we also have the spectacle of a new Korean administration trying to cozy up to the United States by invoking a hard line on North Korea, even as President Bush himself has given up that hard line, and talking about "ten lost years" as if this will sound good in Washington, but without a lot of apparent thought given to Bush's unpopularity (the lowest rating of any president since modern polling began), or the likelihood that the next American president will not be a Republican. This will sound like a partisan statement, but sometimes one political leader has a grip on realities and another one does not, and I think this is one of those cases. Everywhere else in the world people are counting the days until this failed Bush administration leaves Washington—but not in the Blue House. Newly-inaugurated President Lee Myung Bak could barely contain himself in his haste to meet Bush and confront Pyongyang—and meanwhile Bush had turned away from his hard line on North Korea.

The 2000 Summit

We are here to commemorate President Kim Dae Jung's far-reaching changes in North Korea policy that culminated in the Pyongyang Summit of June 2000, where the two Korean heads of state shook hands for the first time since the country's division in 1945. In my judgment as an historian President Kim did more to change policy toward the North than any previous South Korean or American president, in spite of Seoul facing a far greater immediate threat than anyone else. At his inauguration in February 1998 President Kim pledged to "actively pursue reconciliation and cooperation" with North Korea, and declared his support for Pyongyang's attempts to better relations with Washington and Tokyo—in complete contrast with his predecessors, who chafed mightily at any hint of such rapprochement. Kim Dae Jung explicitly rejected "unification by absorption" (which was the de facto policy of his predecessors), and in effect committed Seoul to a prolonged period of peaceful coexistence, with reunification put off for twenty or thirty more years. He became the first Korean president to call for an end to the many American economic embargos against the North in June 1998, during a visit to Washington.

North Korea waited a year to test Kim Dae Jung's resolve, and a couple of submarines and several dead infiltrators washed up on the South Korean coast—suggesting that hardliners might be trying to disrupt North-South relations. But by mid-1999 it was apparent that Pyongyang viewed President Kim's "sunshine policy" as a major change in South Korea's position. Its attitude toward Washington also began changing. Long determined to get the U.S. out of Korea, it appeared that at least some North Korean leaders want American troops to stay on the peninsula, to deal with changed international power relations (especially a strong Japan and a strong China), and to help Pyongyang through its current economic difficulties.

The Sunshine Policy came from President Kim's long study of the North-South problem, and from a recognition that NK wouldn't collapse and therefore had to be dealt with "as it is," rather than as we would like it to be. One of the few virtues of getting older is to see whether one's predictions are any good or not. Since the East European regimes fell in 1989-90, many experts have predicted the collapse of North Korea. Since that time I have argued that North Korea will not collapse for three reasons: (1) the primary reason is its independent army of great numerical strength, and the absence of foreign troops on its territory—unlike most of the East European communist regimes in 1989; (2) because the North has always been an anti-colonial or anti-imperial nationalist entity as well as a communist state, and the indigenous or Korean nationalist elements of the regime have been particularly strong since the 1960s; and (3) because the two Koreas fought a war against each other, unlike the two Germanys, and this makes their relations very different, and makes the conflicts between them very hard to resolve. Asian communism in Korea, China and Vietnam was fertilized with the blood of anti-colonial nationalism, as the literateur Chong In-bo often told American 60 years ago, and that is the basic reason why the Asian communist governments of North Korea, China and Vietnam remain in power.

Nick Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute has distinguished himself by getting this exactly backwards for the past eighteen years, ever since his June 25, 1990 Wall Street Journal editorial titled "The Coming Collapse of North Korea." But he is hardly alone: this has been a Beltway consensus through three administrations. So far the North has not collapsed, and so I must have been right about North Korea. But history has a way of contradicting everyone's favorite beliefs; that's why Hegel wrote of the cunning of history. The point is that President Kim's policy effectively dealt with this reality: nine years after the Berlin Wall fell, the North had not collapsed, and had to be dealt with "as it is." After a major reevaluation of U.S. policy toward the North in 1998-99, William Perry's report on this process said the same thing.

A second element of realism was this: Kim Dae Jung came to believe that North Korea does not oppose a continuing U.S. troop presence in Korea if Washington were to pursue engagement with Pyongyang rather than confrontation (U.S. troops would continue to be useful in policing the border, i.e. the DMZ, in assuring that the South's superior armed forces don't swallow the North, and in keeping Japan and China at bay). At the summit Kim Jong Il confirmed this view, telling Kim Dae Jung directly that he did not necessarily oppose the continuing stationing of U.S. troops in Korea—what is required is for the US to play the role of "honest broker" between the two Koreas.

Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang, August 2000

In this sense, President Kim's proposals constituted the first serious attempt in 50 years to achieve North-South reconciliation within the existing Northeast Asian security structure. They also envisioned a way for the U.S. to retain its security commitment even after unification (Secretary of Defense William Cohen said in June 1998 that the U.S. wanted to keep troops in Korea after unification), and thus maintain a balance of power between China and Japan. Reconciliation between the two Koreas without requiring the US to remove its troops from the peninsula would lead to a big reduction in the tensions and volatility of the Korean peninsula, while enabling the U.S. to continue a modest encirclement or containment of China, and to keep Japan from developing a strong and independent military force.

I have been a critic of the stationing of American troops in Korea for many years, mainly for two reasons: first because those forces inevitably supported the military dictatorships that afflicted the ROK from 1961 onward, and second because the presence of these troops made any real change in North-South relations impossible. But the ROK is now a democracy, the Sunshine Policy has been successful, the US opened many-sided talks with the North, and so Koreans in both South and North can look upon the U.S. as a guarantor of Korean security vis-à-vis China, Russia and Japan. Anyway, this is not a question of right and wrong, but a question of whether the current situation is preferable to the endless conflicts and divisions of Cold War policy--and I think it clearly is much more preferable, and from a realpolitik standpoint, this is a security strategy that works to satisfy both American and Korean security concerns. It is also a strategy that could envision or accommodate a reunified Korea without requiring major changes in security structures. We could not say that about previous South Korean or American policies. Whether Koreans will want American troops to remain for many more decades is another question, of course, but it is a question for Koreans to decide. In any case, these two principles constitute the realpolitik core of "sunshine," a strategy often derided as naïve.

The sharp changes in North Korea policy accomplished by Kim Dae Jung and the Clinton administration were immediately challenged by George W. Bush, within weeks of his inauguration in 2001. Seven years later, the Lee Myung Bak administration appears to think that a daunting rupture occurred between the ROK and the U.S., and that it was the fault of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun—thus requiring the new administration to repair relations with Washington. The Bush administration seemed to think so, too, by inviting President Lee to the presidential retreat at Camp David—in total contrast to the disastrous reception Bush gave to Kim Dae Jung in March 2001.

Pew, Gallup, and domestic Korean polls uniformly show a sharp spike in unfavorable views of the United States, clearly dating from the advent of the Bush Administration in January 2001 and especially the "axis of evil" address in early 2002, and the deaths of two young girls when they were accidentally run over by a US military vehicle in June 2002. Many subsequent demonstrations and candle-light vigils led up to the surprise election of Roh Moo Hyun in December 2002. Critical views of the U.S. also helped his party win a majority in the National Assembly in 2004. But amid this "anti-Americanism," some 30 percent of the Korean population continued to express a desire to emigrate to the US, and in a 2003 poll fully 45 percent of college students (presumed to be the vanguard of "anti-Americanism") said they would choose American citizenship over Korean citizenship. [1]

In the early 1990s, by contrast, nearly 70% of Koreans polled held favorable views of the US, and only about 15% were clearly negative. In 1994 this figure dropped to 57%, largely because of the June 1994 crisis with North Korea, but it returned to previous levels until the 1997 financial crisis (which also led to a brief spike in anti-Washington sentiment). In 2001 a Potomac Associates study found that 59% of Koreans were positive (47%) or very positive (12%) toward the US, 31% were neither positive nor negative, only 10% were "somewhat negative," and none were "very negative." [2]

This orientation underwent "a sea change" after Bush came to power, according to William Watts of Potomac Associates, as 53% remained somewhat or very favorable, but 43% became somewhat or very unfavorable. According to Gallup Korea, among Koreans in their 20s only 22% were somewhat or very favorable, and fully 76% were somewhat or very unfavorable; this was also the only age group in which a majority (66%) wanted US troops to withdraw from Korea. In late 2002 Gallup Korea showed a majority negative view of the US across all classes and ages of Koreans, and dramatically lowered levels of trust in the USA. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey found in May 2003 that 50% of Koreans held an unfavorable view of the US, but among younger groups, fully 71% of those aged 18-29 had unfavorable views. More surprising, Pew determined that among those who had unfavorable views of the US, fully 72% expressed "general hostility toward America" rather than opposition to American policies. (This may suggest a hardening of negative attitudes over time, or it may be a mere blip.) Of course, all this made Korea no different from other American allies and friends: Germany fell from 78% favorable views to 45% during the same period, France went from 62% to 43%, and Turkey collapsed from 52% to 15%. [3]) Nonetheless, Koreans still trusted the US much more than Japan. [4]

In my view nearly all of the growth in anti-Bushism has come about because of (1) an abrupt shift in Washington's policies toward the North, (2) continuity in South Korea's Sunshine Policy from 1998 to early 2008, and (3) fears that South Korea could be drawn into a new war with the North. As Seoul pursued a deepening reconciliation with the North, Washington reacted in opposite ways: first it jumped on that bandwagon (Clinton) and then it abruptly dismounted (Bush). The "war on terror" and the invasion of Iraq provoked deep strains with Seoul for a variety of reasons, including a lack of proper consultation in moving American troops from Korea to Iraq, and a new policy of using US troops stationed in Korea in a regional conflict that might involve China. For these and other reasons the

deepest estrangement in their history emerged between Seoul and Washington—but it happened because of sharp policy change in Washington.

Bushism and Korea

We can understand these difficulties in Korean-American relations better if we examine three defining moments that occurred as the year 2002 drew to a close: the publication of the National Security Council's preemptive doctrine in September; James Kelly's visit to Pyongyang in October, where he accused the North of having a second nuclear program; and the election of Roh Moo Hyun in December. The preemptive strategy—later called "the Bush Doctrine"—raised the possibility that a new Korean War could erupt without Seoul's approval or support; the second signaled the beginning of another long and still unresolved stalemate between Washington and Pyongyang, along with the possible manufacture of five or six atomic bombs in addition to the CIA's longstanding estimate that the North has one or two weapons; and the last change brought to power the first president in South Korean history with no experience with or attachments to the United States.

The acute danger in Korea—which South Korean leaders immediately grasped—was that the Bush doctrine conflated existing plans for nuclear preemption in a crisis initiated by the North, which have been standard operating procedure for the U.S. military for decades, with Bush's desire to preemptively attack regimes he does not like. American commanders in the South have long worried about a war accidentally breaking out through a cycle of preemption and counter-preemption, and retired commanders of our forces in Korea were privately appalled by the new doctrine. A few months after the new doctrine became public, a close advisor to President Roh told Bush administration officials that if the U.S. attacked the North over South Korean objections, it would destroy the alliance with the South. Leaders in Seoul repeatedly sought assurances from Washington that the North would not be attacked over Seoul's objections or without close consultations. (It is my understanding that the Roh Moo Hyun administration did not get those assurances.) Since the North can destroy Seoul in a matter of hours with some 10,000 artillery guns buried in the mountains north of the capital, one can imagine the extreme consternation that the Bush doctrine caused in Seoul. These difficulties were aggravated by Donald Rumsfeld's decidision to move 9,000 soldiers from Korea to Iraq, with the barest consultation, and concluding that the huge American base at Yongsan would be moved well south of the Han River, out of harm's way. When I visited Seoul in August 2003 a prominent official told me that relations between the two militaries had never been worse.

I remember being skeptical of the intelligence behind Bush administration claims in October 2002 that the North now had a second nuclear weapons program, using Highly-Enriched Uranium (HEU). But when I showed up for a university conference on North Korea in Washington shortly after James Kelly returned from Pyongyang, a bipartisan assemblage of experts (many from the Clinton administration) assured everyone that the information was solid, and that an "intelligence community" consensus had emerged that the HEU program was most worrisome. Pyongyang, they said, had gotten on Pakistani arch-proliferator A. Q. Khan's gravy train, buying and putting in motion a bunch of HEU centrifuges that could yield a uranium bomb.

As it happened U.S. intelligence on the North's HEU was no better than it was on Saddam Hussein's WMDs, but it took five years to find that out. In the immediate aftermath of the February 13th, 2007 agreement between Washington and Pyongang Joseph DeTrani, a longtime intelligence official, informed a Senate committee that intelligence agencies now pegged reports of the North's HEU weapons program at only "the mid-confidence level," which is jargon for information that can be interpreted in various ways, or isn't fully corroborated. Pyongyang had indeed purchased thousands of aluminum tubes: but it turned out that these tubes weren't strong enough to use in the high-speed rotors necessary for centrifuges. Evidence of these modest purchases had been transformed by Washington analysts into "a significant production capability" in 2002; since that time, however, the U.S. had turned up no evidence of the "large-scale procurements" that would be necessary for an HEU bomb program. Other officials said the degree of the North's progress toward an HEU program was unknown; they did import some centrifuges from Pakistan—a mere twenty of them, as it turned out, when thousands are needed for production purposes—but no one knew what had happened since: so now the intelligence "consensus" had turned into "the HEU riddle." [5]

Bush Decides That Kim Dae Jung and Clinton Were Right, After All

Given what happened in 2002, one would never have predicted the warming of relations between George W. Bush and Kim Jong Il that became manifest in the February 13, 2007 agreement on denuclearization—a watershed the origins of which remain very murky. It will be remembered that Pyongyang celebrated American Independence Day in 2006 by blowing off seven missiles, including one long-range Taepodong 2 and several medium-range rockets, and followed that up with its first nuclear test in October. There isn't much question that the North saw all this as a sharp response to Bush's pressure on them. This led to United Nations sanctions supported for the first time by the DPRK's old allies, Russia and China (although Chapter VII sanctions went through only after Moscow and Beijing made sure that they carried no implication of being backed by military force).

Taepodong 2 missile

We also remember that Bush does not "reward bad behavior," had always rejected direct talks with North Korea, and had stuck the North into his "axis of evil"—while hurling various insults at Kim Jong Il ("pygmy") and telling Washington insider Bob Woodward that he "loathed" Kim and wanted to topple his regime. "We don't negotiate with evil," Vice-President Dick Cheney averred in 2004—"we defeat it." Yet the February agreement got hammered out in highly secret direct talks between Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan in Beijing and Berlin, and was then presented to the Six-Party Talks for ratification (this China-sponsored modality was always a fig leaf for getting Washington and Pyongyang to talk to each other, but it has had the effect of greatly enhancing China's diplomatic reach in the region).

The back-to-the future quality of this agreement can be appreciated in the list of achievements: mothballing, disabling and dismantling the North's plutonium reactors, relaxing sanctions and embargoes that Washington has laid on the North for decades, taking it off the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, readmitting UN nuclear inspectors, getting a peace agreement finally to end the Korean War, and moving toward normalization of relations. All of these were accomplished or being negotiated when Bush came into office, but the Clinton administration had also worked out a plan to indirectly buy out the North's medium and long-range missiles; it was ready to be signed in 2000 but Bush let it fall between the stools, and today the North retains all of its formidable missile capability.

Why did George W. Bush decide to make a deal with the North, even to the point of possibly holding his own summit with Kim (according to Washington gossip at the time)? Clearly the Congressional elections in 2006 dealt a deathblow to Bush's fond hopes of a Republican ascendancy in the new century, and turned him into the lamest of lame ducks. His core of support has evaporated at home and abroad: most of the neo-conservatives (Paul Wolfowitz, John Bolton) are gone, soon his twin poodles Tony Blair and Abe Shinzo were also gone, and he is alone with a newly empowered State Department (and an embittered Vice-President). Also, of course, why did the North make a deal? In late 2006 I thought Pyongyang's strategy was to become a declared nuclear power, suffer through sanctions for the next two years, and then hope to deal with the next American president. Something happened not in Pyongyang but in Washington, as Christopher Hill got a free hand to deal with Pyongyang.

The most likely explanation is not Bush's weak political standing or the departure of neo-conservatives or a sudden end to internal squabbling, but a decision that Iran was the greater proliferation threat: if a Libya-like deal could be gotten with North Korea through give-and-take diplomacy, that would put tremendous pressure on Teheran to negotiate away its nuclear program; if Bush decided to use force against Iran (probably the leading subject of Washington scuttlebutt until a new intelligence estimate in late 2007 [6]), the North would have to be neutralized or simply forgotten. At this writing it is still impossible to know if this is true, and clearly right-wingers like Bolton still want to settle the hash of both Pyongyang and Teheran. [7] In any case the Yongbyon reactor is again frozen and partially dismantled, a major achievement only in the back-to-the-future sense, and we are still waiting to see if the North will give up its nuclear program and if Washington will normalize relations with Pyongyang.

The Second Summit: Reconnecting the Sinews of the Northeast Asian Political Economy

The second summit meeting in October 2007, between President Roh Moo Hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il, came about primarily because of the warming of relations between Washington and Pyongyang, exemplified by the February 13, 2007 agreement. But the summit had its biggest impact in the significance of the economic deals that the two leaders concluded—something that most commentary on the summit missed. President Roh's pet project has been to fashion the Korean peninsula into the "hub" of Northeast Asia, and in pursuing that he wants to begin to erase two lines that have blocked the emergence of a robust economy in the middle-western part of the Korean peninsula, thus to serve as a bridge between Japan and China: the 38th parallel, which runs right through the heart of the ancient Koryo capital of Kaesong, and the DMZ, which excludes the port of Haeju and its surrounding area from economic interaction with its near Korean neighbors, Seoul and Inch'on (not to mention with China across the Yellow Sea). As it happens, history offers much testimony to the logic of Roh's plans because they continue a regional pattern that dates back almost a century: Korea as the hub or bridge between Japan and China—except that hierarchy is reversing, as China's economy continues to roar ahead.

Kim Jong Il and Roh Moo Hyun in Pyongyang

The twentieth century had a curious and mostly unnoticed effect on Northeast Asia: it reversed a relationship between China, Korea and Japan that dated back to antiquity. When Westerners "discovered" East Asia, these three nations arrayed themselves in a loose hierarchy: China at the top, Korea in the middle, Japan not at the bottom but somewhere beyond Korea—less close to China, less firmly in the realm of East Asian civilization. This pattern of international relations in Northeast Asia was the past and present for as long as anyone could remember, predating recorded history. But it was not to be the future. In the brief period from the Meiji Restoration in 1868 to the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1895, Japan succeeded in establishing itself as East Asia's modern leader; soon Korea was colonized and the last Chinese dynasty collapsed. What caused this reversal? More than anything else, it was Japan's ability to industrialize more rapidly than its neighbors, and then to subject those same neighbors to its imperial strategies (rather than putting colonies in, say, Africa).

Northeast Asia

Defeat in World War II did little to change this pattern, because (with much American help) Japan was able to reindustrialize quickly, while Korea and China were divided and war-torn, and the communist sides were blockaded and cut off from interaction with the world economy. American planners sought to take advantage of this historic hierarchy through Secretary of State Dean Acheson's "great crescent" strategy, which would revive Japanese industry, reintroduce it economically to its former colonies, and link it to oceans of Middle Eastern oil then sloshing into the world market (from fields mostly controlled by the U.S. and its allies). Japan could resume its economic prowess while remaining dependent on the U.S. for oil and for defense. This strategy worked brilliantly, as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan soon sported growth rates that were the envy of the world. So when the Cold War ended, the (truncated) Northeast Asian hierarchy established a century before still remained. Today it still exists, but it is quickly eroding and may soon be reversed.

China's double-digit growth since its turn outward in the 1970s, South Korea's technological and industrial breakthroughs making it world-competitive in steel, ships, autos and now high technology, the collapse of nearly all Cold War barriers to economic exchange, and Japan's stagnation over the past nearly twenty years have sown the seeds of a reversal of the Northeast Asian hierarchy, led by Japan since the 1880s. It will, of course, be a long time before China matches Japan at anything besides absolute GNP figures; its technology is Third World by comparison. Korea, however, competes head-to-head with Japan and the U.S. in many lucrative industrial and high-tech fields. By bringing North Korea into that equation, Seoul can gain tremendous comparative advantages in labor (at a fraction even of China's low wages), product cycle rationalities (marrying North Korean labor to declining chaebol enterprises), geographic contiguity (Seoul-Inch'on-Kaesong as a vibrant core of the peninsular economy), and an end to the threat of conflict and actual skirmishes in the West Sea, which has been detrimental both to the South and the North.

The summit agreements seek to open up this western ocean presumably demarcated by a watery (and unilateral) extension of the DMZ into the Yellow Sea. That will help South and North to damp down naval clashes and ramp up crabbing harvests. Much more important, though, is to link the populous, productive, highly centralized city-state called Seoul and the hugely successful new airport at Inch'on, with the growing export zone in Kaesong, the nearby port of Haeju and the Ongjin Peninsula, and the historically wealthy Hwanghae region. Before Korea's division this region to the west between Pyongyang and Seoul was the most dynamic economic area of northern Korea (whereas the eastern reaches of the DMZ run into mountains and places always remote from Seoul). As a fine dissertation done at the University of Chicago by Michael D. Shin (who now teaches at Cambridge University) demonstrates, in the 1920s a budding Korean elite of moderate nationalists, cultural figures, entrepreneurs, educators and Christians formed a nascent middle class with great influence in this same region—which also happened to be agriculturally wealthy, raising the only double-cropped rice above the 38th parallel.

After the summit agreements we can envision for the first time since 1945 a regional economy developing between Pyongyang and Seoul that would be a real powerhouse, and a bridge between Japan and China giving Korea much leverage and benefit. This can also develop quite nicely without threatening Kim Jong Il's rule, because the transformation will bring new wealth to North Korea and can be confined to the southwest region (as one vast "export zone"). The analogy with China's opening is direct, too, because exporting developed there in the same coastal Treaty Ports and capitalist enclaves that Mao always denounced.

Likewise, if the train lines really are hooked up from Seoul to Uiju (as the Summit projected) a vast caravan of containers can transit through the North and on to China, Russia and all the way to Europe. This is a very cheap kind of transport compared to the much slower sea routes, and here is one "containment policy" that won't threaten Pyongyang—because people won't be getting off and the North will make a lot of money in freight fees. Most people do not realize how absolutely critical container shipping has been to East Asian growth since the 1960s, but you can learn about it in Marc Levinson's excellent new book, The Box. Americans see Hanjin containers moving down the tracks all the time; I often wonder if they know where they come from. Perhaps North Koreans will soon see those same boxes moving across their territory by the thousands.

The real achievement of this summit was to kill three birds with one stone: to engage the North in economic exchange that will help its economy grow, feed its people and continue to erode its old system; to finally begin the erasure of the DMZ and the 38th parallel, at least in the west; and to reinsert the DPRK's southwest back into its modern regional habitat in the Northeast Asian political economy. Everything depends on the implementation, of course, but it may not be long before South Korean businessmen revisit the Ongjin Peninsula (which sits below the 38th parallel) and travelers take fast (and no doubt sealed) through trains from Seoul to Uiju, and thence to the rest of the Eurasian continent. This is a different kind of achievement than Kim Dae Jung's in 2000, and follows on the first summit, but the political economy at the root of it is unquestionably the direction in which Northeast Asia is going, and will go through this century.

Back to the Future—Because China is Near

The past seven years have seen an astonishing spectacle in which an American president zig-zagged from gratuitous insults thrown at the North Korean head of state, to charges of new nuclear programs based on flimsy evidence, installing the North into the axis of evil and allowing advisors to make open threats of war against the DPRK while doing little if anything as the North kicked out UN inspectors, manufactured nuclear weapons, tested both A-bombs and missiles, that is, as the North succeeded in provoking world outrage while showing it would not bend to Washington, Beijing or Moscow (just what hardliners in Pyongyang wanted, no doubt). Then suddenly both sides climbed down from their polarized positions and jumped on Bill Clinton's decade-old merry-go-round of give-and-take diplomacy. If we stipulate that North Korea won, that it got what it wanted, this was no more than what it had offered to do a decade ago: trade its nuclear program for aid and normalized ties to the U.S.—a proposition endlessly denied and derided among Washington pundits and the neo-conservatives of the Bush administration.
The successful diplomacy of the late 1990s was led fundamentally by Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae Jung, who finally convinced Bill Clinton that Pyongyang would give up its nuclear program and its missiles in return for a new relationship with the United States. The U.S. could have its cake and eat it, too, President Kim thought, because Pyongyang would not object to the continued stationing of American troops in the South if the U.S. normalized relations with the DPRK. Washington could lose an enemy and gain a neutral North Korea if not a friend or an ally—against China, against a revived Russia, and as a check on Japan's future course. Bill Richardson, once a close friend of the Clintons who dramatically endorsed Barack Obama at a critical point in the 2008 presidential primaries, traveled to North Korea in April 2007 and reported on his return that North Korea sees itself "eventually as an ally of the United States; in other words, as an ally against China. They see themselves as playing a strategic role as a buffer between the U.S. and China." [8] (It is more likely that Pyongyang hopes to play the U.S. off against China, much as it did Moscow and Beijing in the long years of the Cold War.)

There is no way to know if this new thinking has had an impact on President Bush, but it is a logical American strategy for 21st-century Northeast Asia, just as the 2007 Summit etched a new political economy for our time. In any case a bizarre sequence of events has placed George W. Bush closer to Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy than to his own North Korea policies in the period 2002-2006. Maybe he will even shake hands with "evildoer" Kim Jong Il before he leaves office. If so, well: better late than never.

Bruce Cumings teaches in the History Department and the Committee on International Relations at the University of Chicago and is the author of the two volume work The Origins of the Korean War and North Korea: Another Country. He is a Japan Focus associate. Posted at Japan Focus on September 3, 2008.

Notes

[1] Link.
[2] Meredith Woo-Cumings in David I. Steinberg, ed., Korean Attitudes Toward the United States (M.E. Sharpe, 2005), pp. 62-63; Pew Global Attitudes Project.
[3] Pew, ibid.
[4] William Watts in Steinberg, pp. 268-72; also Pew, ibid.
[5] David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "U.S. Concedes Uncertainty on Korean Uranium Effort," New York Times (March 1, 2007), pp. A1, A10.
[6] Zbigniew Brzezinski is reported to have gotten into an argument with Brent Skowcroft at a Washington dinner party, after Brzezinski asserted that Bush was planning to strike Iran's nuclear facilities; after a lot of debate people were asked for a show of hands, and of the eighteen prominent people there—including former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto—only two supported Skowcroft's demurral. See Steven Clemons, "Why Bush Won't Attack Iran" (September 19, 2007).
[7] A very murky brouhaha developed over an Israeli air strike against Syria on September 6, 2007, targeting a possible plutonium reactor being built there, with Bolton and others claiming that the North was transferring nuclear materials of some kind to Syria, and others saying the Korean shipments were the usual missiles and parts that they have long traded to Damascus. See Mark Mazetti and Helene Cooper, "Israeli Nuclear Suspicions Linked to Raid in Syria," New York Times (September 18, 2007), and The Nelson Report (Samuels International Associates, September 14, 2007), cnelson@samuelsinternational.com.
[8] Kim Dae Jung also gave a speech in Washington on September 17, 2007, reiterating his views on how a DPRK-US rapprochement would check and contain China.

Created by Datamomentum