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AMERICA'S SUPPORTING ROLE IN BRINGING PEACE TO THE KOREAN PENINSULA

EDWARD NEILAN

An inter-Korea summit to take place in June in Pyongyang could mark a critical turning point in negotiations on the Peninsula and in U.S. policy. South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, whose party emerged from April's parliamentary elections without an outright majority, is hoping that the summit will receive the full support of his opposition in the parliament. But this is not certain, since the opposition has raised suspicions that Kim's government had agreed to the summit as a last-minute election ploy in exchange for undisclosed concessions. If such concessions turn out to be unacceptable, the summit will be little more than a photo opportunity. Some South Koreans also are concerned that Kim Dae-Jung's visit to Pyongyang could help to legitimize Kim Jong-Il's regime.

The United States, which has led the way in negotiating with the North in the past, has long sought direct North-South dialogue. It has been unsuccessful primarily because the process requires the commitment of both Koreas. As the summit draws near, the best way for the United States to facilitate the inter-Korea reconciliation process is to step back from the lead role and instead provide enlightened diplomatic leadership behind the scenes, allow pressure to increase in Seoul for the factions to unite, and maintain a secure environment for the negotiations.

Pre-Summit Preparations. On April 10, the two Koreas agreed to hold direct talks for the first time since the Peninsula was divided in 1945. Discussions at the summit should include economic cooperation, tension-reducing peace measures, and the

reunion of separated family members. Though governments around the world heralded the significance of this event, the announcement met with some skepticism in Seoul, since it came just three days before the parliamentary elections. Leaders of the largest opposition parties, the Grand National Party and United Liberal Democrats, accused President Kim Dae-Jung of orchestrating the announcement to bolster support for his Millennium Democratic Party. Grand National Party leader Lee Hoi-Chang, in particular, voiced suspicion that undisclosed concessions had been made in return for the timely agreement; North Korea, after all, repeatedly demanded that Seoul meet certain conditions, such as an end to policy coordination with Japan and the United States and the repeal of a National Security Law used to suppress pro-North sympathizers.

Despite news of the summit, Kim's party won only 115 of the 273 seats in the parliament, giving a plurality of 133 seats to the Grand National Party. Unless Kim can form a coalition with other minor opposition parties when the parliament forms on

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June 1, progress on important state policies including reunification could be problematic. At a minimum, this means significant compromise. To develop a more cooperative political climate, Kim met with Lee on April 25—only the third time in three years. Lee, a bitter rival after losing the presidential election in 1997, agreed to support the summit but made it clear that he would oppose any pre-summit agreement made by Kim.

Post-election politics in Seoul complicate the issue of reconciliation, yet the business sector remains optimistic. Anticipating that the summit will reduce the risks of doing business with Pyongyang, if not create new opportunities, some conglomerates have begun to explore ties with the North. The Hyundai group said it would begin shipping idle equipment to North Korea and launch Internet-related operations to develop business ties. Samsung Electronics Co., which started to develop computer software with its North Korean counterpart, the Korean Computer Center, has signed a contract to start production on various consumer electronics appliances. Thus, the pressure for a successful summit is growing.

Less Is More. Before the summit announcement, Pyongyang avoided dealing directly with Seoul, preferring instead the diplomatic recognition of Washington. The Clinton Administration made numerous economic concessions to keep Pyongyang in the negotiations—over the past five years, in fact, the United States became North Korea's primary benefactor, providing \$645 million in aid.

This approach may have slightly diffused tension in the region, but the only way to establish a meaningful peace is for the two Koreas to work together. Thus, it is time for the United States to facilitate closer bilateral relations between the two states by adopting a supporting role, providing diplomatic leadership behind the scenes while maintaining a secure regional environment. This summit offers the United States an opportunity to begin its transition to a supporting role without appearing to abandon the process altogether.

Now that the North has agreed to direct talks, the United States must allow the South to take the initiative. Limiting America's profile will increase pressure on the political factions in Seoul to unite in order to create a workable plan for a peaceful resolution. The international spotlight on the summit also is pressuring Lee Hoi-Chang and President Kim to compromise despite their personal and policy differences: Neither man wants to be seen as the reason the June summit fails to make progress.

The United States could help to create the conditions for success by showing the North that its most viable option for long-term economic survival is to cooperate with the South. Drawing a contrast between the policy of disciplined quid pro quo engagement and South Korea's more open "sunshine policy" would highlight both the value and the spirit of the South's investments in the process. It could also lead Kim Jong-Il to appreciate the South's generosity and reciprocate its overtures to peace by agreeing to meet in Seoul for a second round of talks. For the United States, a policy of reciprocity would be more effective in holding Pyongyang to its promises in the 1996 Agreed Framework to limit its nuclear ambitions.

This does not mean that America's role in the region should diminish in importance. The presence of U.S. troops along the demilitarized zone and extended deterrence are important in ensuring a secure region. The United States should reaffirm its security guarantees to provide Seoul some flexibility in negotiating peace and facilitating eventual reunification.

Conclusion. Getting Korean domestic political forces and foreign interests to come together for a peaceful solution to the hostilities on the Peninsula is no easy task. One certainty, however, is that quiet U.S. diplomatic and security leadership is crucial to the process. Adopting a supporting role may prove to be the most effective approach to giving the Koreans the freedom and consequent responsibility they need to bring about lasting peace.

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