

THE KOREAN SUMMIT-WHAT IS SUCCESS?

Recently I met two groups of Korean diplomats. Both groups asked me the same question in Korean, "As an American, what do you think about the summit meeting between the two Korean leaders? Will it be successful?" Before I begin to answer this question, I should tell you that one group of diplomats came from Seoul, the other from Pyongyang. You see, regardless of whether you are in Seoul or Pyongyang, the concern is the same. After all, the summit will determine the fate of Korea. This concerns all Koreans, regardless of whether they live north or south of the DMZ.

Whether the summit is successful depends on how the Korean people define success. Already, both North and South Koreans have made it clear - a successful summit requires that all foreigners, especially those from the superpower, not interfere with the summit. The summit was arranged by the leaders of North and South Korea to discuss issues of greatest concern to all Koreans - national reconciliation and reunification. Foreigners have no right to pressure either the Seoul or Pyongyang governments to discuss any other issues such as nuclear and missile proliferation. The two Korean governments can always discuss these and similar security issues later.

Now let us shift our focus to Pyongyang and Seoul want. For the Korean people, defining success for their summit is a very complicated. The Korean people are ruled by two very different governments, an authoritarian government in Pyongyang and a democratic government in Seoul. But the cause of complexity is not in Pyongyang. Kim Jong Il is the absolute ruler of North Korea so he alone will decide what he wants for a successful summit. All other North Koreans have no ability to influence the matter.

In Seoul, the situation is the exact opposite because of its democratic government. While Pyongyang has too few politicians, Seoul has too many. For many weeks, everyone in Seoul has been debating the meaning of success - politicians, journalists, professors, farmers and office workers, students and housewives. This is excellent - freedom to debate is a fundamental pillar of a free society.

But let us be frank. Even in a democratic society, there are times to stop the debate and to support the decisions of the elected political leadership. Citizens should join together, regardless of their political point of view, and support their government's policy position.

Now is the top to stop arguing and to start supporting President Kim Dae Jung. Supporting him will greatly improve the chances that the summit will be successful. North Korea, like other nations, does not like to negotiate with weak leaders. Look at the cases of the United States and Japan. US negotiations with North Korea stalled after President Clinton encountered severe criticism from the American people and the members of Congress because of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Clinton's errors and the subsequent criticism of his eroded his political power. North Korea concluded there was little to be gained from negotiating with his Administration since he lacked the political support in Washington to fulfill any promises he might make to North Korea. A similar situation has developed in Japan. The Japan-North Korea talks were suspended shortly after Prime Minister Mori replaced Obuchi. Mori's inability to rally broad popular support

has severely weakened his ability to lead the Japanese people. Instead of negotiating with Mori, Pyongyang appears willing to wait and see whether Mori can increase his power or if he will soon be replaced by a politically stronger prime minister.

So if the people of South Korea want a successful summit, they should send a strong president to Pyongyang. In a democracy like South Korea, the people decide whether their president will be strong or weak. If the people support him he will be strong. Otherwise he will be weak. Only a strong South Korean president can successfully negotiate with North Korea's strong authoritarian leader Kim Jong Il.

The test of a truly democratic society is whether the people understand their own power. In a democracy, the people have the right to speak freely and to serve their country and to support their elected leaders when the leadership is representing the nation's interests in crucial negotiations. Now is the appropriate time to support President Kim Dae Jung to help ensure that the summit will be successful.

Koreans must also be realistic. For half a century they have been at war with each other. For more than half a century, their nation has been divided. It would be unrealistic to expect quick solutions to these very complex problems.

Expecting too much to soon will only intensify frustration and disappointment, increasing tensions between the two Koreas. Instead, if we restrain our expectations of what can be achieved at the summit, we will increase the chances of success and reduce the risk of frustration.

This summit should be seen as a beginning, the first step in a long, difficult process toward reconciliation. Maybe it would be best for both sides, Seoul and Pyongyang, to begin by confirming their areas of common agreement - the July 4, 1972 Joint Statement and the Basic Agreements of 1991.

Kim Jong Il, however, owes all Korean people, particularly Kim Dae Jung a concrete gesture of good will. Since his inauguration as the president of South Korea, Kim Dae Jung has worked to convince Kim Jong Il of the sincerity of his efforts to begin national reconciliation. President Kim has back his words with concrete actions, particularly in the area of economic cooperation. Now, in a highly visible act of sincerity, the older Kim Dae Jung is traveling to North Korea to meet the younger Kim Jong Il. If Kim Jong Il is truly sincere about wanting reconciliation, he should prove this by permitting the members of separated families resume meeting one another.

All Korean people, south and north, want a successful summit. Kim Dae Jung has done all he can to achieve this goal. Now the people and South Korea and Kim Jong Il must do their parts to make the summit successful.

Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones, Director, Northeast Asia Project, Mercy Corps International