

# WebMemo



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## Seoul's Impetuous Summit Initiative

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Seoul's agreement to hold an inter-Korean summit is premature because North Korea has made insufficient progress in its denuclearization to justify any reward. South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun's attempt to secure his legacy and influence coming presidential elections risks undermining multinational efforts to denuclearize North Korea and could strain Seoul's relationship with Washington, in the long term undermining the U.S.–South Korean military deterrent to the North's lingering threat. A North–South summit could boost South Korean public approval for unilateral aid to Pyongyang, weaken support for the conservative opposition party in December's presidential election in South Korea, and reduce domestic support for the presence of U.S. troops. The Bush Administration should counsel Seoul that unilateral, uncoordinated diplomacy benefits Pyongyang and increases suspicion of Roh's motives.

**A Secret from Washington.** Seoul announced on August 8 that President Roh would engage in a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il from August 28 to 30. Although Kim Jong-Il is obligated under the terms of the 2000 inter-Korean summit joint statement to visit South Korea for the second summit between the nations, Roh acquiesced to travel to Pyongyang. It is indicative of Roh's eagerness that he failed to insist on holding the summit in the Kaesong special economic zone in North Korea to highlight the flagship initiative of Seoul's engagement policy.

South Korea informed the U.S. only a few hours prior to the announcement, signaling that Seoul is

freelancing on peninsular issues and not coordinating with its key ally. The head of the National Intelligence Service, South Korea's intelligence agency, traveled twice to North Korea in secret to engage in preparation negotiations. This is consistent with South Korean actions prior to the 2000 summit, when the Kim Dae-Jung administration alerted the U.S. Embassy in Seoul only one day prior to announcing that summit.

The Bush Administration had cautioned Seoul not to give benefits to Pyongyang without imposing conditions. South Korean officials assured Washington that its engagement efforts would remain “one step behind the Six-Party Talks process,” but they now appear to be many steps ahead. U.S. officials have privately commented that restraining Seoul from getting too far ahead of its allies is a concern and a challenge.

It is unlikely that Seoul made a secret cash payment to induce Pyongyang to the meeting, given the scrutiny that followed revelations that the Kim Dae-Jung administration paid at least \$500 million to secure the 2000 summit. But Kim Jong-Il does not cooperate for free; thus the Roh Moo Hyun administration probably offered some inducement, such as new developmental aid or expansion of existing

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South–North economic projects. President Roh has talked of a “Marshall Plan” for North Korea, overlooking the fact that the U.S. program to rebuild post-World War II Europe was initiated *after* the demise of the totalitarian Third Reich.

**A High-Stakes Game.** President Roh’s typically high-risk political maneuver appears designed to alter South Korea’s political landscape, which currently favors the conservative opposition’s presidential candidate. Although relations between Roh and the ruling Uri Party have become frosty, he wishes to prevent a conservative successor from countermanding his progressive policies. A summit is unlikely to affect the outcome of the election but could shift the vote by several percentage points—a significant move if the election proves close. According to some polls, up to 25 percent of the electorate is undecided in its support for a political party and presidential candidate.

The perception of progress conveyed by a Roh–Kim summit could match the unrealistic euphoria which gripped South Korea after the 2000 summit. This would increase pressure on Washington to prematurely normalize relations with Pyongyang and remove North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism before it has fulfilled its obligations under the Six-Party Talks’ Beijing Agreement.

Seoul announced that the two Koreas’ leaders will hold serious discussions on establishing a permanent peace regime on the peninsula to serve as a “stepping stone for the establishment of a peace framework on the Korean Peninsula.” Washington should remind its ally that a peace treaty must be negotiated by *all* the relevant parties, including the U.S. and China.

Although there may appear to be little reason to delay a formal end to the Korean War, the threat that

North Korea’s conventional forces pose to South Korea should be addressed first. This could be accomplished by requiring a thinning out of North Korea’s massive array of artillery and maneuver units close to the demilitarized zone and by implementing other confidence- and security-building measures.

But Roh’s tactics risk backfiring with a South Korean electorate that has become more skeptical of North Korea since Pyongyang’s missile and nuclear tests last year. Public opinion polls show that while support for engaging North Korea remains high, South Koreans want greater reciprocity from Pyongyang. A lack of tangible concessions would play into the prevalent perception that Roh is engaged in a self-serving political gambit.

**Conclusion.** If Roh presses for a North Korean commitment to tangible progress toward denuclearization by the year’s end, then a North–South summit will be a useful adjunct to the Six-Party Talks. It is more likely, however, that the meeting will provide only a patina of progress, and it could actually endanger multilateral efforts to pressure Pyongyang to divest itself of its nuclear weapons. Moreover, a summit could pressure the U.S. to ease its stance on North Korea’s compliance prior to receiving diplomatic benefits. On the other hand, resistance by Washington could lead to a resurgence of anti-American emotion amongst the South Korean populace, which already considers the U.S. indifferent to the fate of South Korean hostages in Afghanistan. Washington will have to tread carefully to rein in Roh’s initiatives without alienating the South Korean populace.

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