

Unification of the Koreas:A Way Ahead

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On 4 October 2007 the two Koreas - the Republic of (South) Korea (RoK) and the Democratic Republic of (North) Korea (DPRK) made momentous announcement from Pyongyang. It said that they had “agreed to resolve the issue of the unification of the two Koreas on their own initiative”, in accordance with the “spirit of the Korean people themselves”. This then has set a milestone to what can clearly be seen to give an impetus to the beginning of the end of the current ‘armistice regime’, on the divided Peninsula since 1953, to which ironically, the Koreas were not the signatories. This historic future-setting accord was finalised after several days of parleys in Pyongyang, the DPRK capital between President Roh Moo-hyun of RoK and Chairman Kim Jong-II of the National Defence Commission of DPRK1.

From the past hesitancy, foot-dragging, an ambience of distrust and ambivalence, the two leaders, in sharp departure, said that they “recognise the need to end the armistice regime, and instead, build a permanent peace regime” as fulcrum of “reunification — oriented agreement” to achieve “co-prosperity”, at the same time, “transcending the differences in ideology and systems”. Important as these clauses were, the still vital component followed as the two antagonists agreed to “closely work together to end military hostilities, create a maritime peace zone, mitigate tensions and guarantee peace in the Peninsula”.

In yet another important extension of this newborn spirit of what may be called entente cordiale Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-II vowed to reunite the divided families and send a joint cheering team to the Beijing Olympics, next year.

Tour D’Horizon2

The signing of the historic agreement on 15 June 2000 at Pyongyang by the then South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung and the North Korean President Kim Jong-II had done more to the cause of the reunification of Koreas than the storming of the Berlin Wall by the Germans in 1990. For half a century, the four kilometre deep Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) astride the 242 km 38th parallel that divides the Koreas since the signing of the Armistice in 1953, the two countries have seen some of the worst tensions in their history. Often, it has been a slanging match in verbal propaganda.

To recall, in June 1950 as hostilities broke out, the UN established a Commission on Koreas for ‘re-establishing the national independence of Koreas and the withdrawal of the occupying forces’. Three years later the UN Commission replaced it for ‘Reunification and Rehabilitation of Koreas’. This curious set-up became a victim of the Cold War and achieved nothing and was wound up by 1972 when both Koreas agreed to explore the issue bilaterally. More developments took place as both the Koreas, till then with only ‘observer status’, were made full members of the General Assembly in 1991. Their signing of an agreement on ‘Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Cooperation and Exchanges’ followed this and yet the Peninsula remained one of the most ‘dangerous flash points’ in the world.

The story of the Korean effort to reconcile after 1991 has been one of deep distrust bordering on open hostility as also of melodrama. US President Bill Clinton threatened North Korea with ‘returning it to the stone age’ and the State Department branded it as one of the ‘rogue states’ with a ‘recluse’ head of state. In addition, the Americans insisted on their presence in South Korea through the Combined Forces Command (CFC) or UN Command.

North Korea also had its share of keeping the pot boiling. Having signed the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1991, it backtracked from honouring the commitments. Fuel to the fire was added when it sold its indigenously produced M-10 missiles to Pakistan, Iran and Libya. The USA retaliated by deploying the Patriot Defence System in the South. However, brokering by the former President Jimmy Carter improved the prospects of dialogue for reconciliation. Kim Il-Sung, the father of Kim Jong-II continued to outwardly appeal to the South to hold the ‘summit’, declaring that he, in reciprocation, would not only freeze his nuclear programme but also cut his military strength3. A similar gesture had also been made by the South as its President often said that he was always prepared for the ‘summit’, since it would change history.

There were other players who had roles to play in this drama. China, Russia and even Japan. China openly supported North Korea especially in its days of economic difficulties in the mid-1990s. It also refused to support the USA sponsored UN sanctions against the North and publicly reiterated its relations with North Korea, as close as ‘lips and teeth’4.

If the Chinese showed solidarity with the North, the Russians were not far back. From 1994, Russian President, Boris Yeltsin spared no effort to champion the Korean cause. So much so he demanded a new security system in the world where the one-up-man-ship of the USA could be contained and neutralised. His successor, Vladimir Putin, made a ‘quiet’ visit to Pyongyang in the first week of June 2000. The Japanese, nonetheless, were exacerbating their own fears of the North Korean intransigence owing to its missile tests in the Sea of Japan. The Peninsula had thus turned into skulduggery of international politics, akin, very much to the scenario that divided the two Koreas after World War II.

Although after the demise of the former USSR, and the supposed end of the so called Cold War, the Americans had assumed the role of the ‘Sole Super Power’ of the 1990s they, pragmatically accepted, what observers called ‘the New Asian Reality’, and began to covertly support the ‘Korean reconciliation’5. Accordingly, the USA was mellowing down its attitude towards China, North Korea and its old enemy Vietnam. Of utmost significance was renewal of the ‘Most Favoured Nation’ status to China, despite the Chinese rebuff of the so called ‘human rights violations in Tibet, Xinjiang and elsewhere in China’. Acknowledging the vital role the Chinese played in maintaining an essential equilibrium in Asia, the USA was banking on its support to even compel the DPRK to abandon its nuclear weapons programme and sign the NPT and CTBT. So a climate conducive to holding of the ‘summit’ for which both the Koreas had clamoured for the past 50 years, worked out in the new Millennium.

It became evident from the fact that by 20 June 2000 the US Government ended its 50-year-old sanctions on North Korea. In a dramatic overture it even played semantics and redesignated its so-called brand of ‘rogue states’ (that included DPRK, Iran and Libya) as ‘states of concern’! To formalise the on-going improvement a Pyongyang Agreement was also signed in mid 2000.

Achievements of the Pyongyang Agreement

The Agreement aimed at both short term gains and long term prospects of eventual reunification and included resolving the humanitarian issues, such as exchange of refugees and the POWs of the Korean War, cultural intercourse, inter-border movement of separated families and exchange of educational and technical know-how, besides plan for development of North Korea. It did more. It seriously began to discuss the broad concept of reunification of the two Koreas on the ‘tentative templates’ forwarded by the two countries – the ‘confederation’ and ‘federation’.

For, the Agreement had stated specifically, there was a ‘common element in South’s concept of ‘Confederation’ and North’s formula for a loose form of ‘Federation’. Thoughtfully, the Agreement refrained from introducing contentious issues of the US Military presence in the South and the nuclear programme of the North. It was observed that the ‘final reunification’ as and when agreed and implemented, would of its own accord, find a solution to connected issues.

The Steady March but often Stumbling

By July end, the news came of both the Governments having progressed further in their march towards reconciliation and unification. Hot line was established between the Army Headquarters of the two armies; the Korean citizens from both the North Korean and the South Korean side established a liaison office at the DMZ to facilitate crossing of the border. All these portended a keen desire between the two governments to progress and not stagnate, as for instance, in the current case of the Peace Process between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The largest gain for North Korea also occurred with incredible speed: the US removed trade and other sanctions; and it was admitted as the newest member of the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), thus virtually ending the isolation of the country. Another step forward came when 180 athletes of two Koreas wearing their common crested ‘Unified Korea’ marched together at the Sydney Olympics. They set the pace for a sporting ‘integration’.

Then followed the award of a Nobel Peace Prize to South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung in October 2000 for, what his citation said, the ‘unprecedented effort for peace and reunification of the Koreas’. By the end of the year, railway line linked the two systems over the DMZ. That further helped reduce the DPRK’s 50 years isolation.

The UNO too played its helpful role in creating and coordinating the activities of the like-minded and influential groups, which came to be known as the ‘six-party negotiating team’ and was tasked to progress the talks. Consisting of the USA, Japan, Russia, China, DPRK and ROK, with UN playing its intermediary role, the ‘consortium’ of the ‘Six-Party’, began to resolve the diplomatic impasse on the denuclearisation of the North, restricting its missile programme, and even talks of general reduction in its Army. A non-nuclear DPRK, it was contended, would eventually join the democratic South. For the DPRK the lure of gains of economic stability and prosperity were offered.

Sadly, mutual distrust reappeared; as occasionally as flashes of hope and optimism. The Americans began once again to call the DPRK regime as ‘evil’ and renewed its threat to ‘decimate’ the North. In this uncongenial atmosphere, Kim Jong-II while on an official visit to Moscow, bluntly asked the USA to ‘withdraw its troops and missiles from the South, if it wanted to see the Peninsula de-nuclearised’. On his part, he promised to suspend the DPRK’s ballistic missile programme ‘until 2003’. Significantly, Russia supported the Jong-II’s move and generously agreed to extend the Siberian Railway to Pyongyang. The Chinese, the great ally of Pyongyang since the Korean War, continued to liberally help it.

In sum, the period between 2001 and 2006 has been one of ambivalence where allegations of ‘bad blood’, ‘axis of evil’, distrust and unreliability fluctuated between DPRK and USA on the one hand and the RoK often freezing its material support to an impoverished DPRK, on the other. In frustration, it seems in retrospect, the DPRK resumed its production of missiles and fired seven missiles on 5 July 2006. This was condemned by most of the Western World, India maintaining a discreet silence about the same. So tension ebbed and rose in the Peninsula, as of the earlier times. Reconciliation looked a distant possibility; reunification only a dream.

If the human negotiations thus far, precluded any tangible degree of success, nature seemed to play its silent part. There came the worst floods in the North in August 2006 that killed over 50,000 and rendered 2.5 million people homeless. The extent of damage was so voluminous that the DPRK needed urgent external economic help. Combined with it also arose the realisation that the country was running low on its fuel supply and some of the essential maintenance services had begun to suffer. The four members of the ‘Six-Party’ offered immediate help with a ‘price tag’: DPRK accept total ‘denuclearisation’, ensuring that the existing nuclear facilities are ‘disabled’ under IAEA within a specified time. As expected, with this demand, negotiations dragged on for another four to five months.

All the while, the ‘carrot and stick’ policy remained in vogue. Lured by a prodigious offer of economic aid, DPRK agreed finally in February 2007 to shut a key 5.5 MW nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, where it is believed to have produced six to ten nuclear weapons. The aid promised was 50,000 tons of fuel from the USA, China, Russia and South Korea for the denuclearisation, after inspection by the IAEA within 60 days. Another six months of frustrating negotiations continued. But finally DPRK agreed to ‘disable’ its nuclear facilities for nine lakh (9,00,000) tons of heavy fuel and other aids.

Then came the breath-taking news of the two Korean heads of states meeting in Pyongyang in early October 2007 and setting the tone and stepping up the pace for a durable peace and express their resolve to ‘reunify the Father Land’ – re-enacting thus, the scene one saw at the ‘Berlin Wall’ of 1989-90. The situations and the scenarios were different but the emotions, sentiments and the euphoria, if not the hopes, appeared much similar: the ‘Reunification of the Fatherland’.

What did the October 2007 Breakthrough Achieve ?

These are summarised in the succeeding paragraphs6.

Quest for Peace Treaty

In brief, leaders seek formal end to Korean War. The leaders of the North and South Koreas have signed a joint declaration calling for a peace treaty to replace the 1953 ceasefire and armistice. The DPRK agreed to end its nuclear plans, also seeks to expand projects to reduce tension across the world’s last Cold War frontier. They pledged to seek summit with the USA and China on formal peace treaty.

Economic Cooperation.

- (a) Set up special district in North’s port city of Haeju, regular maritime transport service with South and create joint fishing zone.
- (b) Expansion of Kaesong industrial park where 44 South Korean firms currently operate using cheap North Korean labour.
- (c) Transport Links. Resumption of regular freight train services between Munsan and Kaesong.
- (d) Repair of highway joining Pyongyang and Kaesong.
- (e) Refurbishment of railway between Kaesong and Sinuiju on the Chinese border.
- (f) Air Travel. Direct flights between Seoul and Mount Paektu-Peak, sacred to all Koreans.
- (g) Olympic Games. Inaugural run of the train joining Seoul and Sinuiju will transport joint North and South cheering squads to 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Final Objectives and Probable Time frame

In examining, three factors need to be taken into account: the common factor of culture, the ideological differences that have been set over the period and the suggested mode of political integration of the future.

Undoubtedly, there have existed the advantages of one language besides religious faith in latent form in the North, which is practised in full in the South. Then there are wide economic and trade differences. Over the years the social values have also grown to be different. But if events of June 2000 and October 2007 are an indication of change, then change in every sphere of a United Korea seems possible, despite hiccups and occasional border violations.

Inevitably, the real blocks to progress towards reunification limit to three major factors: the ideological barrier; the nuances and interpretation of ‘Confederation’ and ‘Federation’ and finally, the still pre-eminent role the USA would want to play in a unified Korea.

In the matter of ideological differences, it is Kim Jong-II who was expected to take longer to mellow down. He will be vulnerable during the period of transformation from his own diehard Communists, especially the military. Transformation of autocracy to democracy is often a long process despite the declared ‘transcending the ideological differences and systems’, but given a suitable climate it could be swift, as happened in Russia and East Germany.

The issue that would, in fact, need careful resolution is of an even ‘Confederation’, which will signify a union of Koreas where power sharing will be the central issue. Both the states will have to surrender their individual sovereignty to a designated central authority. How much of residual power each will retain would assume importance. Any ticklish issue might once again retard the final solution for years. Additionally, a unified Korea is strategically beneficial to the USA, not only for trade but also for containing China and improving its influence with it. The USA is, therefore, expected to insist on participation in the process. Properly managed, it might accelerate the reunification process too.

The positive role played by the four supporting powers besides the UNO in achieving an incredible and enviable breakthrough would also have to be durable, lending their positive and constructive role to achieving reunification. They have been inseparable to the cause and would remain indispensable to a bright future. Any effort to be myopic in this regard would embitter DPRK; shatter hopes of reunification and peace in the 54 year old imbroglio.

Dwelling on optimism and even clairvoyance7, we need to note with tremendous satisfaction that of the several milestones to be crossed for eventual peace and reunification, two most important ones have already been crossed. Reunification of the Hermit Kingdom, as DPRK has been known since 1950s, with democratic South Korea is conjecturally on the horizon by 2025. It is the year when the world hopes to see several atlas changing and map redrawing events. While the Middle East, Chechnya and other regions in conflict would meander through long and labyrinthine processes, the two Koreas, at least, would have ‘buried their history of war scars and pain of division’8.

At this moment, a quote from the US President John F Kennedy might facilitate summing up. Speaking during his inaugural address, he said: “there is a Chinese proverb saying that each generation builds a road for the next. The road has been built for us and I believe, it is incumbent upon us to build our road for the next.”

Now that Seoul and Pyongyang are connected, it is hoped, the DMZ will be moved into the dustbin of history. This feat in reconciliation and probable reunification of the Korean Peninsula has a lesson to offer. Frustrating though the road to success has been, it proved that ‘preventive diplomacy’, one of the goals of the UNO, could successfully find solutions to vexed and seemingly intractable problems. The future world has a lot to learn from this success.

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