

The Importance of Trust in Inter-Korean Relations

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Trust between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) should be established and strengthened through each side honoring and keeping the promises they have made. Yet, recently, North Korea did not honor an agreement to hold a series of working-level consultative meetings aimed at dealing with three issues: clearing of settlements, connection of railways and roads, and flood prevention in the Imjin river basin. As the day for the first meeting neared, officials in Pyongyang called for a change of venue and a new date to be set. Citing "national instability from the impeachment" in the South, North Korea asked that the meeting for clearing settlements, which was scheduled to take place in Paju in the South, be moved to Kaesong in the North. Likewise, the talks originally scheduled in Kaesong to deal with the linking of railways and roads and flood prevention in the Imjin river basin was delayed due to Pyongyang taking umbrage at ROK-U.S. joint military exercises.

This kind of behavior from North Korea is neither surprising nor new. Since the signing of the historic June 15th Joint Declaration, Pyongyang has either postponed or canceled some fifteen different meetings. A variety of different reasons are likely to be behind these cancellations such as ROK-U.S. joint military exercises, U.S. policy toward North Korea, and the 9-11 terrorist attacks and the resulting war in Iraq. These factors also influence ROK policy and statements made by officials in Seoul which can lead to North Korea's dissatisfaction with the state of inter-Korean relations. Even with the fifth round of ministerial-level talks, Pyongyang sent a message on the very morning of the meeting stating that for "various circumstances" its delegates could not come to Seoul. Most North Korea watchers who have observed Pyongyang's capriciousness indicate that behind these excuses is a need for the regime to tighten internal solidarity, establish national cooperation, increase anti-American sentiment and apply pressure to South Korea and the United States. Afterwards, DPRK officials raise the stakes in negotiations. One cannot but wonder to what extent the North has valid reasons for delaying and canceling meetings and if the true intentions beneath the surface are helpful to officials in Pyongyang.

The two Koreas have already agreed not to let each other's domestic and internal issues interfere with inter-Korean relations. However, with North Korea's demand to move a meeting to Kaesong because of the impeachment issue and by suggesting that the current political crisis in the South threatens the implementation of the June 15th Joint Declaration, Pyongyang is merely arguing for arguments sake that the impeachment problem is not only a ROK issue. This shows little consideration for Seoul's current predicament and is a one-sided attitude of North Korea that lacks in diplomatic protocol. The impeachment is strictly an internal issue of the South and regarding it otherwise violates the already agreed upon principle of not allowing domestic issues to interfere in relations between the two Koreas.

Pyongyang's objection to military exercises in the South is also unconvincing. After the June 15th Joint Declaration and between 2002 and 2003, the North cooperated and participated fully in six different meetings despite the fact that military exercises were ongoing. Particularly, during the Ulji Focus Lens joint military exercises, the North participated in the 2003 Taegu Universiade Games. Therefore, citing military exercises as a reason to delay meetings is untenable. In addition, the military exercises in the South are not being carried out in preparation for an attack on the North. They are intended purely as self-defense measures and it is only natural that a nation would conduct such exercises. The defensive nature of the drills can easily be verified through simple observation.

This year marks the fourth anniversary of the June 15th Joint Declaration. In many respects, inter-Korean relations continue to develop and strengthen. However, if Pyongyang continues to delay and cancel meetings without valid reasons, Seoul's willingness to help its neighbor is likely to suffer and this will become a stumbling block on the path toward inter-Korean reconciliation—the principle objective of the June declaration.

The basic spirit of the June 15th Joint Declaration is not the kind of "tightly closed cooperation" emphasized by Pyongyang's insistence that all issues are to be solved "solely by the two Koreas." The declaration embodies the spirit of inter-Korean reconciliation, peace on the Korean peninsula, and national unification. The pursuit of inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation will establish peace which is necessary for beginning a process of unification. After the joint declaration, inter-Korean cross-border visits and other exchanges continued to increase. Last year alone the number of

people visiting between the North and the South reached more than 16,000 and total trade amounted to over 700 million dollars. Yet, there is still a need to balance these developments in inter-Korean cooperation and exchange with progress in the military sector. It is clearly evident that cooperation and exchange have become the means to ensure peace on the Korean peninsula. The six-party talks should resume as soon as possible in order to bring the nuclear issue to a peaceful conclusion and inter-Korean military-level talks aimed at alleviating remaining tension should commence.

It is essentially a contradiction when North Korea tries to justify not honoring even the smallest of agreements. The foundation for continued reconciliation and cooperation is a strong sense of trust between Seoul and Pyongyang. Inconsistency in the North's words and deeds only weakens the South's justification and willingness to engage in dialogue and cooperation which could lead to a boomerang effect ultimately causing losses for the North.

It is important that Pyongyang takes even the smallest promises seriously and upholds all agreements in order to provide Seoul with good faith and trust. Despite any benefits North Korea receives internally from not carrying out agreements with the South, such behavior has a negative effect on South Korean officials and citizens and should be understood as detrimental to inter-Korean relations.

The month of May will be the beginning of the blue crab fishing season. At the thirteenth round of ministerial-level talks held in early February this year an agreement was reached to hold meetings with defense officials in order to prevent the recurrence of accidental military clashes in the West Sea. However, after two months, Pyongyang has still not responded to the South's proposal to open such meetings. Last season, the two Koreas experienced military conflict in the West Sea. Particularly in June 1999 and again in June 2002, there were serious naval clashes involving the loss of innocent life. If another incident occurs on the West Sea, South Korean citizens are likely to spurn the idea of continued reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea. It is imperative that Pyongyang joins the working-level consultative meetings as soon as possible and it is hoped that these talks will provide an opportunity to move beyond the mistrust of the past.