

Peace on the Korean Peninsula: Whose Problem Is It?

Kim, Keun-sik

Professor of Political Science, Kyungnam University

This year marks the 11th anniversary of the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration. Inter-Korean relations are at an all-time low; we can only hang our head when we think of how far we've fallen from the spirit created by the June 15, 2000 reconciliation and cooperation. Recently, South Korea has been caught up in the "he said, she said" drama with North Korea, with the North threatening to publicize what was discussed during the secret inter-Korean meeting and the South adamantly denying the charges. The impasse has completely severed relations between the two Koreas—they are unable to sit at the table together for even a simple dialogue.

The June 15 joint declaration entailed a spirit that encouraged improvement of inter-Korean relations and national reconciliation. In spite of this, the June 15 spirit has become debilitated with unrelenting mutual hostility and animosity, leaving the two Koreas helpless as they wait for a third-party to come forward to untie the Gordian knot and bring peace on the Korean peninsula once again. At this moment, it is China and the United States, not the two Koreas, who are at the forefront of trying to bring peace to the divided nation.

The shelling of Yeonpyeong Island of last year sparked a military confrontation, leaving the North and the South on the verge of war. The international community including China and the United States called for a cool-headed assessment of the situation. China, in order to alleviate the tension, made an official announcement requesting for a meeting between the representatives of the Six-Party Talks. The United States also expressed its apprehension about the intense altercation between the two Koreas. The meeting at the Blue House between Lee Myung-bak, the U.S. Ambassador to Seoul and the U.S. Armed Forces Commander in Korea prior to the ROK military exercises (i.e., live firing drills) has already been widely reported. Despite the dissuasion from the international community, the Lee administration continued with the exercises, which eventually led to the UN Security Council to express its concerns. This chain of events and accumulation of tension led both China and the US to voice their concerns over the possible outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula. Ultimately in January of this year, China and the US concurred at their summit on the serious need to improve the inter-Korean relations and mollify the tension. The peace and stability on the peninsula has become a top agenda for these G2 nations.

Notwithstanding the recommendations by Beijing and Washington, the North-South relations continued to disintegrate. In fact, the two nations have relinquished any hopes to resume talks. At the moment, peace on the Korean peninsula has become a serious concern for the neighboring countries and the role of third countries is being accentuated, rather than the actual parties involved -- North and South Korea. After Kim Jong Il's recent visit to China, the defense minister of China affirmed that, "China is doing all it can to discourage North Korea from any further provocation," emphasizing China's commitment with North Korea and peace on the Korean peninsula. The three meetings that took place this year between the leaders of the DPRK and China were unprecedented, exemplifying the ever-growing intimacy between the two fraternal nations, as China provided necessary assistance and support to deter additional military provocations from North Korea. China is utilizing multiple measures

to dampen North Korea's crisis-making and peace-threatening behaviors.

If China is engaging in an effort to contain North Korea, the United States is employing both direct and indirect approaches to moderate the excessively antagonistic North Korea policy of the South Korean government. Last year after the sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette *Cheonan*, the incumbent Lee administration declared that it would resume psychological warfare against the North. North Korea responded with blasting refutation, threatening that it would fire back. Soon after, South Korea announced that it would bolster its firepower along the demilitarized zone. Walter Sharp, Commander of the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea, conveyed Washington's misgivings about these series of events in the escalation of tensions between the North and the South. When inter-Korean military talks collapsed after the *Cheonan* incident, China and the United States proposed a three-step process as a possible solution to revive multilateral negotiations involving denuclearization, bilateral US-DPRK talks, and Six-Party Talks. This mirrors Chinese and U.S. trepidations over the heightened tension on the peninsula engendered by the severance of dialogue between the two Koreas. This, the worst state of confrontation since the Korean War, has led to the current woe. The prospect for peace on the peninsula is in the hands of third parties; it is no longer Korea's prerogative.

Despite the concerns and efforts of China and the US, the inter-Korean relations remain at their nadir, threatening and disrupting the peace. The South Korean government established the Northwest Islands Defense Command to tighten the military alertness to demonstrate its resolve to prevent the reoccurrence of what happened at Yeonpyeong Island. In response, North Korea has threatened to shoot at the loudspeakers broadcasting anti-communist propaganda, as well as to fire at random South Korean border cities for sending propaganda leaflets to the North. In addition, when the North Koreans discovered South Korean soldiers were using the portraits of Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un for target practice and shouting "destroy the North Korean army and bring down the Kims"—both behaviors considered as serious attacks on the dignity of the leadership of North Korea—they promised to take "merciless military retaliatory measures." Both the supreme commander of the (North) Korean People's Army and government spokesperson issued a statement that North Korea will not look idly upon the recent acts of provocation by the South Korean government. Amid taut relations and heightened military tension, South Korean marines accidentally fired at a civilian jetliner, mistaking it for a North Korean military aircraft. This incidence epitomizes the severity and the magnitude of the current tension on the peninsula.

This poor scorecard of inter-Korean relations is a direct product of the severed line of communication between the two Koreas. Inter-Korean relations had operated as a catalyst and a safety valve in prevention of tension on the Korean peninsula. Albeit this fact, the Lee Myung-bak administration's persistent hard-line policy against North Korea has led to a complete breakdown of inter-Korean relations which in fact has led to the loss of our engagement and leadership rights to promote peace on the peninsula. Third parties are now in charge. We need to step forward and reclaim our rights to manage and settle the issue ourselves. The military tension must revert to peace. Ways must be explored to enhance peace and protect our land from threats. The means to do these lie in the improvement of inter-Korean relations.