

The Future of Inter-Korean Relations in 2012 Under Kim Jong Un

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The report on Kim Jong Il's sudden death via North Korean TV broadcast at noon, on December 19, 2011 was shocking to the world, but, on the other hand, his death could be a blessing for peace on the Korean peninsula. There were many speculations and wishful thinking associated with his death. As a matter of fact, the 17 years of the Kim Jong Il era just passed, and Kim Jong Un era as a new leader of North Korea has just begun. There are so many scenarios about the future of Vice Chairman Kim Jong Un. The fact is that Kim Jong Un position as a supreme leader of the DPRK has been gradually consolidated. We all have been waiting for the warm spring on the Korean peninsula. Now is the time for the two Koreas to take the bold initiative to search for a path to peaceful inter-Korean relations.

Hostile Interaction between the two Koreas in 2011

Let us now briefly review South-North Korean relations in 2011. Inter-Korean relations have been literally frozen for the past four years since President Lee Myung-bak took office in 2008. Especially inter-Korean relations for the last two years have been a continuation of the zero-sum game with no significant compromise and concessions between the two Koreas since the ROK imposed its economic sanctions against the DPRK (North Korea) on May 24, 2010, due to the Cheonan ship sinking incident in March 2010.

In retrospect, South-North Korean relations in 2011 could be characterized as hostile confrontation lacking inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation. The two Koreas must share a joint responsibility for keeping such hostile relations. North Korea's insincere attitudes about the Cheonan ship incident and the denuclearization process, and South Korea's irresponsible "strategic patience" strategy were major factors contributing to intense tensions on the Korean peninsula. In the first half of 2011, if South Korea had considered North Korea's proposal for inter-Korean dialogue and reconciliatory gestures, inter-Korean relations would have been markedly improved.

In the second half of 2011, a limited dialogue between the two Koreas began, reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula. The two Koreas discussed various issues relating to

the Mt. Kumgang tourism and property management on July 13, and the 1st South-North Korean high-level meeting was held at the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on July 22-23. The 1st U.S.-DPRK high level nuclear talks were held to exchange views on the issue of the resumption of the long-stalled Six-Party Talks. In August, North Korea rejected the South's proposal for providing humanitarian assistance to flood victims in the North.

In the meantime, as ROK President Lee Myung-bak's hard-line policy toward the North was under attack and his policy change was strongly demanded by political leaders and civic organizations in the South, new Unification Minister Yu Young-ik was appointed on August 30. Yu emphasized flexibility in Lee's North Korean policy, separating the Cheonan ship incident from North Korea's denuclearization issue and began to take a flexible approach to improve inter-Korean relations in the non-political and humanitarian field, providing food aid to North Korean infants and toddlers. In addition, the 2nd inter-Korean high-level talks were held in Beijing on September 21.

In 2011, the Lee government consistently demanded North Korea's apology for the Cheonan ship incident and its attack on Yeonpyeong Island, and asked North Korea to sincerely demonstrate its commitment to the denuclearization process under the September 19, 2005 denuclearization agreement. Nevertheless, Lee's North Korea policy failed to produce tangible results.

Pre-steps as Obstacles to the Resumption of the Six-Party Talks

The Six-Party Talks, consisting of the U.S., China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas, failed to reach a verification protocol in early December 2008. Since then, the Six-Party Talks have been long stalled for over three years. But international efforts have consistently been made to resume the long-stalled Six-Party Talks, especially among the four parties, the U.S., China, and the two Koreas.

With the resumption of the six party processes, hopes for improving inter-Korean relations are high. However, ROK's consistent demand for an apology for the Cheonan ship and Yeonpyeong Island incidents has been a stumbling block to reopening of the Six-Party Talks.

China as a host of the Six-Party Talks made a new proposal for a three-step process for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks: South-North Korean talks→U.S.-DPRK talks→the Six-Party Talks. The ROK maintained earlier that this process could not begin without North Korea's apology for two incidents. The ROK position on an apology issue has been somewhat softened, but the U.S. and the ROK have still strongly demanded the North's sincere commitment to the denuclearization process.

In the meantime, the U.S. and the ROK attached three new pre-steps for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks: (1) suspension of the uranium enrichment program (UEP) in operation; (2) return of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to North Korea; (3) moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile tests.

These three pre-steps have now become key obstacles to the resumption of the long-stalled Six-Party Talks. In my view, without an improvement in inter-Korean relations, there would be little progress in the denuclearization process on the Korean peninsula. Thus, it is necessary and desirable to create a favorable atmosphere for North Korea's policy change. Without two Korea's fundamental policy changes, there will be little chance to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

The Four Scenarios of the South-North Relations in 2012

In a statement issued by the DPRK's National Defense Commission on December 30, North Korea severely condemned President Lee Myung-bak and will not deal with the Lee government. Thus, it appears that inter-Korean relations will be icy at the beginning of 2012. However, in mid-and long-term, an improvement in inter-Korean relations in the Kim Jong Un era could be expected. I would propose the four scenarios regarding the future of inter-Korean relations in the post-Kim Jong Il era. I would also evaluate which one of these scenarios is the most realistic and probable under the present circumstances.

The first scenario is the continuance of the status quo with hostile confrontation on the Korean peninsula. Kim Jong Un position as a supreme leader is in the process of soft landing. Without changes in North Korean policy, it is still uncertain about an improvement in inter-Korean relations in 2012. The North realistically needs the South's food aid and capital investment. It wants to resume the Mt. Kumgang tourism and to lift South's May 24 (2010) economic sanctions on North Korea, which really deteriorated North Korean economy. It appears that there will be little improvement in inter-Korean relations without North Korea's policy changes. Thus, North Korea may rather wait until a new president favoring North Korea is elected in presidential elections in December 2012. North Korea under Kim Jong Un is likely to launch propaganda campaigns against the ruling Grand National Party in the South Korean parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012.

The second scenario is the anti-status quo with the military provocations, thereby leading to military crisis on the Korean peninsula. If North Korea's efforts to improve inter-Korean relations and DPRK-U.S. relations in its own terms fail, and if Kim Jong Un position becomes weakened, North Korea may resort to limited military provocations on DMZ and/or on West Seas near Northern Limit Line in order to consolidate Kim's power position. However, the DPRK is unlikely to take military

actions against a South Korean naval ship just like the Cheonan ship incident in March 2010. If so, it means an all-out war on the Korean peninsula. Nevertheless, it is highly probable that the DPRK is likely to launch a satellite into orbit to commemorate the Kim Il Sung's 100th birthday in April 2012.

The third scenario is a limited improvement in inter-Korean relations. North Korea is likely to respond to South Korea's flexible and reconciliatory gestures, thereby improving limited inter-Korean relations. In 2012, the two Koreas need the resumption of inter-Korean dialogue for a political stabilization to discuss pending issues, such as separated family reunion in exchange of food aid, the resumption of the Mt. Kumgang tourism, and expansion of the Kaesong industrial complex. If the stalled Six-Party Talks resumed and inter-Korean relations improved, South Korea is likely to lift May 24 economic sanctions partially and/or totally. In this scenario, another important variable is the progress in the six party processes. Sooner or later, the 3rd U.S.-DPRK high-level talks will be held to confirm an oral agreement on food aid to North Korea in exchange for its suspension of the UEP operations. The resumption of the Six-Party Talks will contribute to an improvement in inter-Korean relations.

The fourth scenario is the normalization of inter-Korean relations through complete reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas. There will be an inter-Korean summit through high-level secret contacts beyond the limited improvement of inter-Korean relations. The probability of holding an inter-Korean summit is low, for President Lee Myung-bak's term is one year left, and the summit idea is politically sensitive in South Korean election year. In addition, North Korea under Kim Jong Un may not be ready for an inter-Korean summit.

Which scenario is the most realistic and probable? In my view, all things considered, the third scenario appears to be highly probable. The reasons will be discussed below.

The Future of the Korean Peninsula in 2012

In the post-Kim Jong Il era, there are so many questions regarding the future of inter-Korean relations, the Six-Party Talks, the U.S.-DPRK relations and North Korea's openness and reform. These are some of key issues to be dealt with by Kim Jong Un himself.

As discussed above, there are the four scenarios about the future of inter-Korean relations in the Kim Jong Un era. Which scenario is the most realistic and highly probable. In my view, the third scenario appears very likely due to the following factors.

First of all, with the death of Kim Jong Il, Lee Myung-bak's hard-line policy toward North Korea has been incrementally changing, showing flexibility in his policy and opening window of opportunity for improving relations with the North. Despite North Korea's severe condemnation of Lee Myung-bak, he has sent charm signals to a new North Korean leadership, showing a political will to compromise and effectively managing a crisis situation on the Korean peninsula in the aftermath of Kim Jong Il's sudden death. The DPRK needs to reciprocate Lee's charm gestures.

Secondly, in the Kim Jong Un era, North Korea's policy of reform and openness could be adopted. Vice Chairman Jang Sung Taek, Kim Jong Un's uncle and official patron, and Jang's associates are reform advocates and pragmatists who may have friction with the conservative military. It is desirable that a favorable international environment need to be created, so that the moderates surrounding Kim Jong Un can take pragmatic approaches to economic reform, denuclearization and unification policy.

Thirdly, the resumption of the stalled Six-Party Talks seems to take place soon. Prior to his sudden death, Chairman Kim Jong Il appeared to make a deal with the United States. The U.S. and the DPRK had reportedly reached an oral agreement on suspension of UEP operations in exchange of 240,000 metric tons of food assistance to North Korea. The 3rd U.S.-DPRK high-level talks, which were scheduled on December 22, 2011, but postponed due to sudden death of Kim Jong Il, is likely to be rescheduled soon. With successful resumption of the long-stalled Six-Party Talks, the denuclearization process will be on right track soon.

In the first half of this year, U.S.-DPRK relations could be rapidly improving with the resumption of the Six-Party Talks. Along with the denuclearization process moving forward, a Korea peace forum among the U.S., China and two Koreas will be held to conclude a Korean peninsula peace treaty replacing the 1953 Korean armistice agreement.

A series of changes in Northeast Asia surrounding the Korean peninsula may not take place without a political will to make compromise among members of the Six-Party Talks. Especially the two Korean leaders must play a key role in creating a peaceful environment through constructive dialogue in which a warm spring on the Korean peninsula will come. Thus, now is an opportune time for the two Korean leaders to take bold steps for modifying their existing policies which would breed confrontation between the two Koreas.

Every year in March, the ROK-U.S. joint military exercises (Key Resolve) scheduled to be conducted could breed North Korea's hostility. As a result of negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea, U.S.-ROK joint military exercise was cancelled only once in 1992. The 3rd U.S.-DPRK talks will be held soon followed by the resumption of the Six-

Party Talks on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in the spring of 2011. Seoul Nuclear Security Summit in March will also be held. It is desirable that no resolution condemning North Korea be adopted nor Key Resolve military exercise be conducted. These measures require the U.S. and the ROK to make a bold decision, eventually contributing to peaceful inter-Korean relations and the denuclearization process in coming months. <The End>