

North-South Korean Talks: Where They Stand

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The Current State

The food crisis and miseries of North Korea seem to be the central axis around which Seoul-Pyongyang relationship is revolving. While the four-party talks at the governmental level are stumbling over the participation of Pyongyang, the non-political talks between non-governmental agencies have managed to produce results. Negotiators of the International Federation of the Red Cross from both sides met in Beijing and reached an agreement in late May. The South Red Cross agreed to send to the North 50,000 tons of corn, wheat flour, instant noodles, milk

powder, and cooking oil by the end of this coming July.

The delivery is being made through three points along the Chinese-North Korean border starting from June 12.

Does this food aid mean that one step progress has been made toward dialogue and reconciliation between the two Koreas? The history of relations between Seoul and Pyongyang suggests the opposite. There have been several major reconciliations depending on the international environments and domestic political needs on both sides, but those reconciliatory moves soon

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revealed their temporary nature.

The same pattern is being repeated as of now. In the middle of June, just several days after the South Korean Red Cross began to send food stuff to the North, the North Korean army issued a statement that its 1.1-million-strong military forces were ready for a “final battle” with the U.S. and South Korea as a warning against the recent South Korean amphibious exercises. Pyongyang has almost routinely shown this kind of reaction whenever joint military exercises between U.S. and South Korean armed forces occur. Thus, creation of reconciliative mood does not necessarily lead to an actual improvement of the N-S relationship. On the contrary, in many cases Seoul’s reconciliative moves have been met by steep and rough responses from Pyongyang, which are followed by a retaliatory posture by Seoul. This has again strengthened mutual distrust between the two Koreas.

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First of all, the four-party talks have still not taken off. The meetings for explaining the purpose of the four-party talks in New York early this year did not result in any meaningful measure for actually initiating the talks. Pyongyang wanted to draw a guarantee of food aid before going further with participating in the four-party talks. Seoul refused Pyongyang’s demand to avoid a situation where progress in the four-party talks depended on food assistance for the North. For the moment, we will have to wait a little more to see the concrete output of the preparatory talks among Seoul-Pyongyang-Washington currently going on at the working level. Even though a certain agreement for the agenda and schedule of the talks is emerging, it is quite questionable if that agreement could be observed.

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Pyongyang was worried that knowledge that food assistance was donated by the South might be hazardous to maintaining the pretense of the superiority of its system. Pyongyang even refused to use a direct route across the armistice line to transport the food, but instead preferred to use a route that goes through the Chinese territory. Moreover, even in the midst of widespread famine, it boasted its military preparedness by parading through the streets of Pyongyang to show off its military power. Some observe that it was designed to show that Pyongyang is capable of provoking war as the last resort if enough outside support is not coming. Pyongyang could have also been

aiming at showing off its strength to protect and preserve its system among the North Korean people. If the intention was to display its military capability toward Seoul and Washington, their calculation is that only the force would ensure concessions from the enemy.

But other side of the story is that Pyongyang has worsened its reputation as an anachronistic dictatorial regime. This has brought contempt upon the Pyongyang leadership and denial of food aid on the part of Seoul. Even pure humanitarian considerations would have had to go through security filters so that food assistance would not be diverted to strengthening the military force of North Korea. The lack of consensus on whether to allow the voluntary collection of food or money to send the food to help the northern brethren reveals the nature of the North-South conflict as having multiple, contradictory elements mixed up. Pyongyang has been playing a political game in trying to rake in as much food aid as it can by appealing to the international society, while it spends a great amount of money to build expensive buildings and monuments. Moreover, there have been reports of civilian food aid being transferred to military use. Thus, food aid is not simply a reflection of a humanitarian cause but it has also become an object of political judgments as to whether it is wise to deliver the food to the North. On the other hand, the obvious facts that: 1) people are starving; 2) the first victims are the

children, people of old age and those of lower social strata; 3) the politics-first policy toward the famine is not good for the reputation of South Korea have led Seoul to take the middle road and agree to send food at this Beijing meeting.

Third, in the short term, reconciliatory moves might have negative impacts both in the North and the South in terms of domestic politics. In the North, Kim Jong-Il is expected to assume his father's position this year, probably after July. Even if Kim would like to show that his formal ascension to the supreme position is the beginning of a new era, it will be difficult for him to give up the military-first strategy in order to maintain a power base within the country and also to utilize military capability as leverage for political influence in the international scene. In this setting, reconciliation is hard to come by. In a closed system like the Pyongyang regime, moves to open the system and to build a new frame of interchange with the South pose the greatest risk to the maintenance of the system. The widespread famine might suddenly develop into widespread complaints against the ruling circle and cause disturbances. This is a possibility that cannot be ignored given the reports that the orders of the central government are not being respected very much due to its failure to supply the basic requirements of life. North Korean people are reportedly saying that "it was not this bad when the Supreme Leader (Kim Il-sung) was alive."

In the South, the election factor works against more active pursuit of reconciliation. The presidential election is scheduled for the coming December, and the outgoing government is not able to achieve any significant result on matters related to the North-South relations. The opportunity to score a major achievement in the North-South relationship will be left for the new president. It is also well known that the "north wind"—that is, the anti-communist social mood—is advantageous to the conservative-oriented ruling party rather than the opposition party, and that ruling party has always benefited from taking a hardline posture against Pyongyang. In this respect, Seoul is not expected to orient itself to the softline attitude toward Pyongyang this year.

The Structure of North-South Korean Relationship

It is not just current trends that make us believe that the North-South relationship will not be improving soon. The structure of confrontation itself makes it hard to resolve the differences between the two Koreas. They are not in conflict over some tradable goods, but over an issue that could affect the survival or extinction of the Pyongyang regime. Pyongyang has had to play a hard game to preserve its existence in this post-Cold War era. Observing how a small portion of concessions could easily lead to

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a system collapse in the Eastern bloc, Pyongyang opted for a hardline policy and refused to open the system. It repeated its old Cold-War strategy of confrontation. This strategy worked in ensuring light-water reactors. By withdrawing from the NPT and refusing international scrutiny of its nuclear facilities, Pyongyang was rewarded with light-water reactors. This set the pattern of Pyongyang's foreign policy. By provoking military confrontation along the armistice line, Pyongyang tried to prove that 1953 Armistice Agreement was practically nullified, and thereby urged the U.S. to establish a new peace system while excluding Seoul in the process. This "exclude-Seoul" policy in determining the future of the Korean peninsula stirred up anger and caused a hardline policy on the part of Seoul.

Moreover, Seoul has had a bitter experience in dealing with Pyongyang. Instead of showing gratitude for rice aid from Seoul in the summer of 1994,

Pyongyang responded rather harshly as it forced a rice-carrying South Korean ship to hoist a North Korean flag. It turned out that there was a mistake in communications between Pyongyang and Seoul on the details of delivery, but this was conceived as an insult by most South Korean people. Since then, any suggestion of helping North Korean people has been criticized as being too naive toward Pyongyang. This has resulted in the lack of consensus in Seoul on what to do about the famine in the North.

Many have sympathy for the sufferings of the North Korean brethren, but within the decision-making circle, warnings of caution have been dominant. Despite the difficulties of the North Korean people, Seoul has had to be cautious due to the possibility of diverting South Korean food for military use. Seoul does not want to feed the hungry fox. By opting for the aggressive line, Pyongyang has lost the opportunity to take advantage of supportive mood of the South.

Political strategic thinking is also dominant in the South. The four-party talks, proposed last year to discuss any problems related to the peace and future of Korean peninsula, actually had the character of counterbalancing the offensive moves of North Korea. It had the effect of setting new agenda between Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington, and as such, it was a successful move, because Pyongyang had to respond to a proposal in which the U.S. was the participant. North Korea has never been enthusiastic on the proposal for the four-party talks. It responded only because it could lead to another avenue to establishing channels with the U.S. and relaxing U.S. economic sanctions against itself. But the question of guaranteeing economic and food assistance before the actual launching of the four-party talks again created another breach between Seoul and Pyongyang. Pyongyang demanded a prior guarantee of food aid in return for participation in the talks. However, Seoul was not willing to give in, due to the deep distrust of Pyongyang' intentions. Seoul has come to relearn the lesson that only strong-handed measures would have any influence on the behaviour of Pyongyang.

As long as the current leadership of Pyongyang views an improvement in bilateral relations with the U.S. as the only effective way out of its current crisis, it will refuse a multilateral frame of discussion such as the four-party talks which would narrow its scope of action and strategic choices. Accordingly, any initiative by Seoul to ease tension on the Peninsula and bring about reconciliation with Pyongyang might not work. Maybe what is achievable is a short-term modus vivendi that

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Pyongyang desperately needs to earn time and energy to move forward as it sees fit. In this sense, the tentative agreement at the working level between Seoul, Pyongyang, and Washington announced in New York on June 18, which presumes the preparatory talks being held during August, seems to demonstrate the intensity of hardship and crisis on the part of Pyongyang.

The Future of the North-South Relationship

What direction are the two Koreas moving toward? Four scenarios are conceivable at this moment depending on the move of Pyongyang. The first is that Pyongyang keeps going on the same line without reform and takes advantage of its military capability to maintain its influence and voice. In this case, tension and conflict would recur in the North-South relations. But Pyongyang has to risk a gradual death of the system, because

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without reform and expanded opening of the system, the Pyongyang regime might not be able to perform the basic functions that a political entity should carry out. Signs of subversive moves and laxity on the part of security agents are already being spotted. Pyongyang would not be able to continue the current policy for a long time.

Second, Pyongyang might resort to war if it faces an impending threat of collapse from the inside. However, this is suicidal given the fact that Pyongyang would have to fight against the allied forces of the U.S. and Korea. Therefore, war is less likely to occur as a rational choice by the top leadership. But, if it ever does break out, it will be either triggered in the wake of internal disturbances in the process of collapse or provoked as a desperate move to do whatever as it faces doomsday.

Third, the North might opt for reform and open the country. This is unlikely at the moment given the current structure of domination—that is, totalitarian control of people, information, and idolization of Kim Jong-Il. This scenario will be possible only when the

Kim Jong-Il regime has been toppled down and a new political elite emerges willing to transform the failed system.

The final and most plausible scenario is that Pyongyang pursues a gradual reconciliation with Seoul, not able to dare provoking a war, nor open the system, nor stick to the existing line of policy in the face of the deepening crisis. This is an acceptable scenario to Seoul. Pyongyang will be able to ensure large-scale economic assistance in return for a guarantee of peace and coexistence in the form of a peace treaty. By keeping up with the changes in international society and the emerging global civilization, Pyongyang will be able to avoid catastrophic collapse and play some role in the process of reunification.

If the choice of Pyongyang depends on the prospect of survival and means to achieve it, the choice of Seoul is restricted by its obvious need to maintain peace and prosperity. It is simply imperative for Seoul to establish a peaceful relationship with Pyongyang. It is even more so if Seoul believes that the Pyongyang regime will last for a substantial period of time. Even when Seoul was pushing for the hardline policy to counter Pyongyang's provocative actions, it had to pursue reconciliation to reduce tension in the longer term. Pyongyang's frequent resorts to the threat of war prove that Pyongyang has been consciously taking advantage of Seoul's need for reconciliation. Of course, if the collapse of Pyongyang is impending, Seoul may not be that much interested in improving its relationship with Pyongyang. But even in that case, reconciliatory measures such as food assistance and economic cooperation are still needed to control the negative effects of collapse and to fortify the basis for eventual reunification.

Thus, the future of the Korean peninsula is more likely to be determined by Pyongyang than Seoul. This does not mean that Seoul is exempt from the responsibility of inducing Pyongyang to the road to peaceful coexistence. Seoul is in a position to affect the behaviour of Pyongyang by coordinating the

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international demand for peace, reform, and opening of the country. That effort has to be made through a step-by-step approach in a way that Seoul can control Pyongyang's behaviour with the right mixture of inducement and constraint depending on the Pyongyang's response.

It must be a difficult time for Pyongyang, not only because it is facing economic crisis and food shortages, but it also has to make a choice between reconciliation with Seoul and pushing for the ineffective existing "exclude-Seoul" policy as a matter of principle. The dual strategy of officially denying Seoul, while informally encouraging economic cooperation and assistance at the non-governmental level will not work any more. The fact that North Korea is currently participating in the preparatory talks between Seoul, Pyongyang, and Washington is clear evidence to that. Pyongyang has to realize that improving the relationship with the U.S. and Japan alone while excluding Seoul is not possible, nor will it provide Pyongyang with a successful exit from the crisis. Seoul is an essential part of the recipe for the survival of Pyongyang. The real chance for the reconciliation that allows the survival of Pyongyang comes only when Pyongyang formally gives up the idea of violent revolution and transforms its society into one where realism and pragmatism prevail. Only then Seoul will be able to launch massive economic support, thus providing Pyongyang with an opportunity to exploit this for survival and to claim some role in the process of reunification. ■EKR