

---

## Engagement Policy Laying Foundation for New North-South Korean Relations

Hak-soon Paik\*

Recently, the publisher of a major newspaper clarified his position on the new government's engagement policy by saying, "We do not know if Kim Dae-jung government has any policy alternative other than that of inducing North Korea to open up the system voluntarily while maintaining good relations with the North." I must agree with this position completely. We have already tried the policy of pressuring the North and even that of pressuring it to collapse. Such hard-line policies, however, were proven to be of little utility. Of course, the new government's North Korea policy has not been without defects and mistakes. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the new engagement policy will lay foundations for a new era of North-South Korean relations based on the principle of peaceful co-existence.

### **Main Features of the New Government's North Korea Policy**

First, the most urgent objective of the new government's North Korea policy is not "a Korean reunification," but "an improvement in North-South Korean relations through peace, reconciliation, and cooperation." The new government recognizes that the most urgent need at this stage is the realization of peaceful co-existence

---

\* Dr. Paik Hak-soon is a Research Fellow at the Sejong Institute.

between the North and the South, while realizing the goal of reunification may take a long while. It is for this reason that the government uses the term, "North Korea policy" instead of "reunification policy."

Second, the new policy is basically an engagement policy designed to induce North Korea's gradual changes. Abandoning the Kim Young-sam government's policy of pressuring the North to collapse, the new government attempts to engage North Korea into international society, thereby inducing gradual changes in the system.

Third, the new government is adopting the principle of separating politics from the economy. According to the principle, North-South Korean economic exchange and cooperation will not be linked to political situations, and greater autonomy will be given to private firms involved in business. Regardless of progress in political matters such as North-South dialogue, economic exchange and cooperation for mutual benefits will be continuously pursued in the private sector by the logic of a market economy.

Fourth, the new government is attempting to achieve reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea while firmly maintaining our national security and peaceful management of division. The government is making it clear that the first priority of its North Korea policy should be on deterring any form of military attacks by the North. With a firm security posture, the new government will respond to any military moves by the North with resolute and appropriate military measures, thus creating ultimately an atmosphere in which a military move is impossible to make. In addition, the government is not pursuing any immediate changes in the current system of the armistice treaty. Instead, it is attempting to build a system of peaceful co-existence based on reconciliation and cooperation while maintaining a peaceful management of the current division.

Fifth, the new government's position on international cooperation is that while both the South and the North must take the initiatives in solving the Korean problem and thus determining Korean

*Second, the new policy is basically an engagement policy designed to induce North Korea's gradual changes. Abandoning the Kim Young-sam government's policy of pressuring the North to collapse, the new government attempts to engage North Korea into international society, thereby inducing gradual changes in the system.*

people's future, international society's involvement and cooperation are also essential to the securing of peace and stability on the peninsula. Such a dual-track policy could overcome the helpless situation under the Kim Young-sam government, in which we had to totally depend upon a multilateral bargaining scheme such as the four-party talks in determining our nation's future, not being able to secure any channels for direct North-South dialogue.

*Sixth, the new government is applying the principle of reciprocity to official-level exchanges between the North and the South. Exchanges and transactions at the private level will be left to the private sector without governmental intervention, but when it comes to official-level transactions and cooperation utilizing government budget, the government will make sure that we get what we deserve to get while giving what we should give.*

Sixth, the new government is applying the principle of reciprocity to official-level exchanges between the North and the South. Exchanges and transactions at the private level will be left to the private sector without governmental intervention, but when it comes to official-level transactions and cooperation utilizing government budget, the government will make sure that we get what we deserve to get while giving what we should give. This is quite an improvement over the Kim Young-sam government's ambiguous position, which resulted in supplying the North with 150 thousand tons of rice while getting nothing in return. What the government got as a result of the aid was the worsening of North-South Korean relations and the highly critical public opinion on the policy.

### **The Background and Rationale for the New North Korea Policy**

As is seen above, the new government's North Korea policy is quite different from that of the Kim Young-sam government. What is the background behind the emergence of this new policy, and its rationale? First of all, the new North Korea policy was made possible because the new leader, Kim Dae-jung, was able to have a "policy window," that is, an opportunity to carry through the policy alternatives in which he had believed. It is not only natural, but also legitimate for the newly elected leader to implement new reform policies with his power and authority delegated by the people.

Second, the continuing sharp confrontation on the Korean

peninsula, which is in dire contrast to the collapse of the Cold-war system at the world system level, forced our nation to waste enormous energy and resources. It is only natural that many people now think that we should stop such a waste of our time and energy. It is in this context that the new government was able to declare in public that the goal of removing the threat of war and maintaining prosperity on the peninsula can be achieved not through military buildups and confrontation, but through the two parties' reconciliation and cooperation on the basis of peaceful co-existence.

Lastly, the South, hit by the IMF economic crisis in November 1997, can no longer afford to waste resources on the North-South confrontation. Economic recovery has become the supreme national goal, and there are no economic resources that can be used for the confrontation. For this economic reason alone, the new government cannot follow the old North Korea policy.

In sum, the new North Korea policy is not only a timely and appropriate policy that responds to the needs of the time, but also a future-oriented policy that can lay the foundations for new North-South Korean relations.

## Conclusion

While the new government has made some mistakes in handling several accidents that occurred in our relations with the North, it should be emphasized that those mistakes are largely the result of technical or communication problems. They do not necessarily mean that the new North Korea policy's objectives, principles, and directions are wrong. Even the public's criticism on the new policy was due not so much to the government's wrongdoings as to the North's hostile response to the new policy. In any event, it is hoped that the government's engagement policy can succeed in greatly improving the North-South Korean relations. More specifically, we are painting a bright future in which official North-South dialogue resumes, a summit meeting is held for the first time, and the problem of separated family members gets resolved. ■■■