
Understanding North Korea's Political Situation and the Sunshine Policy

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Introduction

The recent submarine incident has caused a heated debate among specialists over the new government's sunshine policy. As a result of this controversy, the government has decided not to use the term, "sunshine." This decision was made to correct the widespread misunderstanding that the sunshine policy was about "unilaterally giving something to North Korea." By clarifying such terminological confusion and reconfirming the government's determination for national security, the decision should placate those who had voiced serious concern over the government's North Korea policy.

I am more than glad that the government has finally recognized problems of the sunshine policy and decided not to use the term any longer. It would be also instructive at this time to review some fundamental problems that the government's North Korea policy has revealed.

Reasons for the Controversy over the Sunshine Policy

The new government's sunshine policy, although it was never explicitly defined, can be interpreted in general as "an engagement

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policy that is based on the principle of separation of politics from the economy and is best suited for inducing North Korea's voluntary opening." Not many people would quarrel with the basic position of the sunshine policy that "understanding" and "embrace-ment" would be more effective than "pressuring" and "confrontation" in inducing North Korea's reform and opening, and securing reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas.

Then why has the policy stirred up such a controversy? The first reason can be found in the lack of a clear definition of the sunshine policy. Those officials responsible for North Korea policy have only attempted to defend the policy's logic without ever giving us an explicit definition of the term.

In his inauguration speech of February 1998, President Kim Dae-jung announced three principles of the North-South Korean relations: not allowing military moves by North Korea, not wanting a reunification by absorption, and promoting reconciliation and cooperation between the North and the South. It seems quite natural, therefore, that the new government's sunshine policy be based on or at least be compatible with these three principles.

If this is the case, any military action by North Korea must be swiftly punished according to the principle of not allowing military moves by North Korea. However, the government's response to the submarine incident in July 1998 was not so assuring to many people. For this reason, people began to have some doubts and concerns about the new government's North Korea policy.

From the initial stage of the incident, the government was not decisive, as it could not tell whether the nature of the incident was an infiltration or a drift. Even after it was confirmed to be a clear act of infiltration, the government was not so much concerned with sending a clear signal for punishment as it was worried about the possibility that the North-South Korean relations may get worsened and the new sunshine policy damaged. When North Korean agents infiltrated again around 20 days later, the government convened a National Security Conference, and announced a more resolute response, asking the North to admit and apologize for violating the armistice treaty, to punish the concerned North Korean officials, and to promise to prevent such incidents from recurring. Yet

the government made it clear that it would continue to maintain the sunshine policy, arguing that the infiltration was a set-up by North Korea's hard-liners who had been threatened by the sunshine policy and thus wanted to turn the inter-Korean relations back to confrontation.

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Our North Korea policy is, in a word, an effort to overcome the division of the nation. While accepting the reality of the two divided nations, we should strive first for a peaceful co-existence and co-prosperity, and ultimately for a national reunification.

For our North Korea policy to be effective, it is essential that we obtain North Korea's favorable responses. Then, the gist of the North Korea policy should be how to obtain the North's favorable responses. How can we obtain the North's favorable responses and changes? Can we induce their voluntary changes? Or would it be more effective to force their changes? This choice on "voluntary" or "forced" changes predetermines the basic direction of our North Korea policy.

Understanding North Korea's Political Situation

In planning the direction of our North Korea policy, it is important that we have an objective understanding of the political situation in North Korea and its implications for our national security. No matter how important the goals of inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation, and of peaceful reunification are, we cannot risk our people's lives and our liberal democratic system.

North Korea is still adhering to its own socialist system and the strategy of promoting a revolution in the South, while committing

military aggressions from time to time. Faced with this situation, why should we unilaterally pursue a soft, conciliatory policy with ourselves unarmed? Some analysts supporting the sunshine policy seem to point out that we should consistently pursue the policy in order to break the tacit alliance between the hard-line, Cold-war minded political forces of the North and the South. According to this view, these two political forces have formed a symbiotic relationship based on hostility, in which they strengthen each other's political position by engaging themselves in mutual confrontation. It is also argued that the recent submarine incidents have put the sunshine policy under attack from both the North's and the South's hard-liners.

This line of argument is based on the assumption that North Korea's armed infiltrations have been planned and committed by a group of hard-liners in the North with the intention of strengthening the political position of the South's hard-line conservative political forces. Therefore, it is being further argued that we should continue to pursue the sunshine policy regardless of what the North does to us.

I have some doubts on whether there exists two different political forces (soft-line and hard-line) within North Korea that compete with each other for the goal of strengthening their own political positions. Moreover, there is no way I can confirm the accusation that the South's conservative forces are indeed in a symbiotic relationship with the North's hard-liners.

If we observe the political situation in North Korea today with an empirical mind, it seems that the country is in dire need of opening and reform in order to overcome the daily-worsening economic difficulties. Despite the necessity, however, the political elite are refusing to accept opening and reform, declaring in public that "the capitalist-style opening and reform are intended to destroy our own socialist system." This reveals that the North Korean regime's capability for opening and reform is inherently limited, regardless of how much we try to induce opening and reform with the sunshine policy.

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Then, how is the North Korean system overcoming the current crisis? What maintains North Korean residents' lives and the survival of the system are the three religious beliefs that the people have concerning "the nation's sun, Kim Il-sung," "the great leader, Kim Jong-il," and "national reunification through a revolution in the South." Then what maintains and strengthens these three blind beliefs? It is "tension," and its most effective form is the tension in the North-South Korean relations. In other words, the North Korean regime is making military moves from time to time with dual purposes. One is to control its residents by creating tension, and the other is to tap the possibility of a revolution in the South.

It is right for us to take strong and necessary measures in response to North Korea's military moves that are intended for the system maintenance and a possible revolution in the South. Punishing the North's military moves is not only an essential measure for our national security, but also a necessary ingredient of our North Korea policy in that only strong responses could alter the North's current policy. If we insist only on an engagement policy and tolerate the North's military moves, the North will never change its South Korea policy and be content to maintain tension with frequent military moves while patiently waiting for a time when the situation turns around in their favor.

It is difficult for me to accept the view that North Korea's military moves against the South are being committed by a faction of hard-liners within the North. The military moves are intended not for the strengthening of the hard-liners' political position, but for the survival of the entire system. Even in liberal democratic countries, military acts are tightly controlled by the supreme military head. Then how could some hard-line military members dare to commit military aggressions against the will of the supreme leader, Kim Jong-il? It is difficult to understand.

The Direction of Our North Korea Policy: Dual Strategy

Regardless of whether North Korea's military moves are being committed under the approval of the supreme leader, or by a faction of some hard-liners, we should take strong measures against

such aggressions so that the North would realize the simple fact that it cannot survive very long by maintaining the existing system. Only then, our engagement policy or sunshine policy could have some real effects.

In dealings with North Korea, it would be wise to bear in mind Mao's "dual strategy" of responding to the enemy's attack with counter-attack while preparing for future talks, and of engaging in talks with the enemy while preparing for future fights. In the same vein, it is instructive to note that the United States never lost its advantage in terms of power even while it was in the process of pursuing a detente with the Soviet Union in the seventies.

The Cold War characterized by relentless competition between East and West is now over. Yet the Korean peninsula remains the only region where the division and the Cold War are still alive. It is true that there have been many ups and downs in the North-South Korean relations. In the midst of fierce competition and confrontation, there were some periods of dialogue and cooperation. Nevertheless, we cannot be certain of our future as we are still faced with the dual situation of "the reality of confrontation" and "the desirability of dialogue and cooperation."

Fortunately, we can clearly recognize a trend even in the midst of such uncertainty of the future. That is the fact that we are nearing the time when North Korea will have to choose between the maintenance of the existing strategy and the acceptance of opening and reform. Thus it is important that we prepare in advance our realistic responses to either of the North's choices. More specifically, we should reassert the importance of national security in preparation for the North's choice of the current revolutionary strategy and use of its last resort (military attack), and at the same time make plans for assisting the North in case it chooses opening and reform. ■■■

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