

How to Resolve the Problems in North-South Korean Relations?

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North-South Korean relations are worsening once again. The atmosphere of cooperation and reconciliation accomplished by the new government's sunshine policy is about to wane. The incident of West Sea battle between the two sides, the North's detention of South Korean tourist, Min Young-mi, and the breaking-up of North-South high level talks in Peking are rapidly cooling off the warm atmosphere of tension reduction and cooperation on the Korean peninsula.

The bigger problem is the suspicion on the possibility of the North's long-range missile test. Right after Kumchangri matter gets resolved, the North is now drawing the world's attention with this new problem of Daepodong missile. The U.S. government has made it clear that it will nullify the comprehensive dealing plan suggested by "Perry Report" if the missile is test-launched. The Japanese government has declared that it will abort all the assistance programs to the North, including the KEDO-related assistance of one billion dollars in case of a missile test. The South Korean government is also showing tougher responses, such as development of middle-range missiles (500km), massive purchase of "pop-eye" missiles for first attack.

All these recent developments are putting Kim Dae-jung government in a very difficult situation. How can we resolve this diffi-

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cult situation, then? Should we desert the sunshine policy, and search for a new policy alternative? We do not need to panic here. In the process of attempting new contacts and exchanges between the North and the South, which had maintained more than fifty years of hostility under the rigid Cold-War structure, some transitional confusion and instability are quite natural. It is like the pain of birth, and the pain of coming out of one's egg into a whole new world. We would commit a serious fallacy, if we mistake this transient confusion for a permanent one, and turn the inter-Korean relations back to the past form.

Reinterpretation of the Sunshine Policy

Since the incident at the West Sea, Kim Dae-jung administration's sunshine policy has become a target for harsh criticism from every spectrum. Rigorously speaking, however, it is the sunshine policy that provides us with a way out of the current situation. The sunshine policy aims to separate economic exchanges from military confrontation, and ultimately to build political and military confidence through expansion of economic exchanges and cooperation between the two sides. It must be emphasized here that this policy is not necessarily unilateral and concessive. Rather it is based on the principle of reciprocity, "punishing military arousing, while rewarding cooperation." Although the policy separates politics from economics, it applies the principle of reciprocity in each of the two sectors. In other words, the sunshine policy is reflecting the government's will to engage North Korea on the basis of strong national security.

Another aspect of the sunshine policy is that of international cooperation. In resolving North-South Korean problems, the policy is ready to actively utilize a tripartite cooperative system among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan. It is also willing to cultivate an atmosphere of peace on the Korean peninsula by activating a peace system guaranteed by the four neighboring major powers and

establishing a Northeast Asian multilateral security cooperation system, if necessary. Moreover, the policy's internationalism can be also found in its efforts to assist North Korea's gradual reform and opening by persuading World Bank, Asia Development Bank (ADB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and international private investors to invest in the North. The point to be emphasized here is that the South Korean government is ready not only to gladly accept the diplomatic recognition of North Korea by the U.S. and Japan, but also to activate an international economic assistance system, only if the North changes its attitude and pursues policies of cooperation and symbiosis.

Finally, the sunshine policy is based on the principle of domestic consensus building. Strictly speaking, the sunshine policy is a kind of diplomatic policy. Diplomatic policy cannot be pursued without consideration of national interest, and national interest can be defined only on the basis of national consensus. Therefore, Kim Dae-jung administration should depoliticize the sunshine policy by refraining from using it as a tool for political battle. The policy must be pursued with as wide domestic support as possible, and if possible, on the basis of national consensus.

The essence of the sunshine policy lies in expanding exchanges and cooperation with the North, inducing the North's gradual changes for reform and opening, and at the same time working for a de facto unification through various policy programs mentioned above. Then, how does this policy provide us with specific solutions for the stalemate in North-South Korean relations?

Easy Problems, First

The head of the Ministry of Unification, Yim Dong-won, once summarized the operating principle of the sunshine policy as "easy-first and difficult-later." It is the principle of resolving problems step-by-step, starting with the easiest ones. This principle seems more relevant at this time than ever before. Among various

current issues in North-South Korean relations, two relatively simple problems should be resolved as soon as possible. One is the issue of resuming Mt. Kumkang tour, and the other is that of linking fertilizer assistance to meeting of separated family members.

The detention of Min Young-mi raised the problem of guaranteeing the safety of Mt. Kumkang tourists. The point to be noted here is that given the nature of the North Korean system, there cannot be a perfect solution, no matter how strong and specific the contents of memorandum might be. As the number of tourists increases, the possibility for similar incidents cannot help getting greater. It is problematic, therefore, to abort Mt. Kumkang tour completely due to just one incident of that nature. More important than guarantees by official papers are the process of mutual learning and confidence built from the process. Rather than aborting the tour itself, we should utilize the incident as an opportunity to reexamine institutional problems and to improve them, if possible.

It must be noted that North Korea should learn some lessons from this incident. Regardless of Hyundai's efforts, the success of Mt. Kumkang tour will be largely determined by the market principle of supply and demand. As long as such conditions as insufficient facilities, anxiety from watching and detention, and other procedural inconveniences continue to exist, even Mt. Kumkang, one of the best tour resources in the country, may fail to attract South Korean tourists. Therefore, North Korea should learn the importance of market principle from the incident, and be more cooperative in resolving the problems that are plaguing Mt. Kumkang tourists.

The issue of linking fertilizers to separated family members is not a difficult one to resolve. It can be resolved rather easily because the two sides are highly interested in resolving this matter quickly. The North needs to secure fertilizers by July or August, and the South also wants to realize meetings of separated family members as soon as possible. Given this match of mutual interests, this matter may be resolved without too much efforts.

South Korean citizens' sentiment toward North Korea is not very favorable at this time. Continuing tension and conflict with the North will only worsen the situation. Instead, we should try to find a breakthrough in North-South Korean relations by starting with easily resolvable problems.

Dual Strategy of Engagement and Check on the Missile Problem

Just like the nuclear issue, the issue regarding North Korea's attempt to test long-range missiles is a difficult one to resolve. If the North should test-launch its Daepodong missiles in August as suspected by the U.S., it will have grave negative effects on the sunshine policy as well as on the atmosphere of peace on the peninsula. The test is also likely to invalidate the comprehensive package deal suggested by the "Perry Report." It may generate the worst situation on the peninsula since the nuclear crisis in June, 1994.

This pessimistic view has some realistic grounds. The first is the U.S. response. North Korea's launching of long-range missiles will provide the Republican Party's presidential candidate with grounds for attack on Clinton's diplomatic policies. The U.S. Congress controlled by the Republican Party may obstruct implementation of the U.S. engagement policy toward North Korea, and put forward the policy of total missile defense system in Northeast Asia as an alternative. In this process, the comprehensive package deal will be lost, and North Korea-U.S. relations will be turned back to the state before June of 1994.

Secondly, if the missiles are tested, Japan is likely to abort all its economic assistance programs. With a rise of right wing hard-liners in the political circle, the necessity to rearm itself and build a missile defense system may be discussed. Finally, the North's missile test will make it difficult to maintain the sunshine policy on the basis of the tripartite cooperation among South Korea, the U.S. and Japan. In that case, Kim Dae-jung administration will find itself

trapped in a diplomatic dilemma.

As seen above, North Korea's test launching of long-range missiles would exert grave negative effects. Therefore, it must be stopped by employing every means available. What means can we consider, then? For step-by-step responses, we should first try a "carrot" tactics as suggested recently by American Diplomatic Association. In particular, we should make every effort at constructing KEDO light-water reactors. In addition, the U.S. economic sanctions on North Korea should be eased, as agreed by the Geneva Agreement. A carrot tactics can be justified on two grounds. One is that we should provide the North with what we promised. The other is that North Korea has not launched missiles yet. It would not be desirable to interpret a mere possibility as a reality and to impose unilateral sanctions and punishment.

Second, we should intensify international pressure upon North Korea. Besides the U.S. and Japan, China and Russia have already promised to exert diplomatic pressure to stop the North's missile test. In particular, it is encouraging that twenty two countries participating in Asia Regional Forum (ARF) have included the missile issue in the common agenda. Of course, diplomatic pressure through international cooperation is not binding, but it can work as an effective means to restrain the North's action.

Third, we should prepare military measures to deter North Korea's moves. In this context, efforts to build up our military deterrence capability by developing missiles with 500km range and increasing first-strike capability are desirable, belated as they may be. If we cannot participate in the total missile defense (TMD) system in the region, we should at least start discussing the possibility of building our own national missile defense (NMD) system. It is not that we should build such a system right now. The discussion itself could be an effective means of checking and deterring the North's missile threat.

In addition, it must be emphasized that North-South Korean relations are not a one-shot game, but an iterated game with vari-

ous possibilities. Therefore, in the worst case of North Korea's test-launching of long-range missiles, we do not necessarily have to think of it as an end of the game and to alter our engagement policy fundamentally. Nuclear weapons, missiles, and biochemical weapons, which are complexly intertwined with the survival of the North Korean regime, will be repeatedly raised as major issues in North-South Korean relations, as long as the regime maintains the policy of "strong and big nation." Therefore, it would be a policy of renunciation and defeatism if we stop our sincere efforts to resolve these problems, and make an abrupt change in the direction of our North Korea policy.

Need to Overcome Transitional Confusion

The current North-South Korean relations can be expressed as the state of transitional confusion. In transforming North Korea's structure of self-reliance and isolationism into that of reform and opening, some transitional contradictions and confusion are hardly surprising. North Korea's contradictions are to be manifested also as contradictions in North-South Korean relations. The contrast between the West Sea in a battle and the East Sea of peace and exchange, and the irony of thousands of North Korean residents dying of hunger while the regime attempts to test-launch missiles are two drastic pictures of the contradiction. These contradictions are nothing but reflections of the structural contradictions of the North Korean society.

Paradoxically, these contradictions have some positive meanings in that they reveal the possibility for change. Therefore, it would be premature to judge the sunshine policy as a failure on the basis of the contradictions and transitional confusion. It is time to resolve threads of contradictions and confusion with patience. To renounce our engagement policy at this time would be nothing but an impatient act of cutting the threads rather than resolving them one by one with wisdom and patience. ■

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