Evaluating Sunshine Policy at a Point of South-North Summit Meeting: Considering the Conflict Structure of Domestic Politics

Young-jae Jin*

The Rationale

Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il meet on June 13, 2000. It is the first summit meeting between South and North Korea since 1948. The summit meeting can play a role as the highest institution of policy making in the process of Korean unification. DJ doctrine described as Sunshine Policy[1] might be successful to some degree in a sense that North Korea will be more cooperative to South Korea after realizing the summit meeting.

However, what is the ultimate aim of the sunshine policy? It is simply not the realization of the South-North summit meeting, but the unification of Korean peninsula in the future. It is somewhat dangerous at the very point of achieving the summit meeting to regard the sunshine policy as total success. Although the nature of the sunshine policy itself racks up the summit meeting and it is an idealist gamble with a pragmatic touch of reality, many scholars simultaneously acknowledge that a rocky road lies ahead as far as our ultimate aim is unification of Korean peninsula.

Although the sunshine policy might be effective in realizing the summit meeting, it will not be so effective in domestic gover-

---

* Department of Political Science, Yonsei University

[1] Some researchers indicated that the terminology of sunshine policy is not appropriate, because sunshine fails to comprehensively reflect Kim Dae-jung's North Korean policy. Moon(1999) and Kwak(1998) use the term DJ doctrine. Tai-hwan Kwak, "Lets Turn the Sunshine Policy into the DJ Doctrine," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, August 17. 1998; Chung-in Moon, "Understanding the DJ Doctrine: The Sunshine Policy and the Korean Peninsula," In *Kim Dae-jung Government and Sunshine Policy: Promises and Chanllenges*, Chung-in Moon, David I. Steinberg (eds.), (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1999) pp. 35-56.

nance after it. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the sunshine policy at the point of the summit meeting from the standpoint of domestic conflict structure after the summit meeting.

The Patterns of Domestic Conflict Structures

The sunshine policy would be good in the very phase of realizing the summit meeting. The very nature of sunshine policy itself resulted in the attainment of the summit meeting, because it is dedicated to the pursuit of engagement through exchanges and cooperation despite North Korea's initial negative responses. Generally, the summit meeting can take place and continue in a situation of which both sides acknowledging and trusting each other is accomplished. There are two political systems, South and North Korea, playing a game, sometimes cooperative, but mainly noncooperative. When conflicts arise between the many diverse groups of one system and when conflicts are formed in each of their internal system led by a leader, then the game will be formed in which they will not be able to provide clear and effective solutions. In other words, the possibilities for the stable game taking place are lowered when complex conflicts exist within the system. When a system acknowledges the legitimacy of its head-of-state and when talks between the two sides are centered around its leader, the chances for a successful summit meeting taking place are bettered.

This is all related to how the leaders of South and North Korea take care of internal conflicts and how they respond to the summit meeting. So in order to talk about the chances of the successful summit meeting, first we need to study the types of conflicts within a political system and how they can be taken care of within the system.

The boundaries that have existed ever since the separation of the two Koreas in 1945 have formed unique conflicts inside the two systems. Studying the diverse conflicts systematically and understanding them provide the keys toward solving the fifty-year-long standoff between the two sides and help us to hold the successful summit meeting and prepare for the post-unification era. The possibility of peaceful unification would be even more realized when we know the types of conflicts embedded in the South Korea and when we manage them effectively. Even in North Korea, which has

an inflexible political system, conflicts hampering social unity exist, and this acts as a burden for the North in their efforts. Finding out the types of 'conflicts' in South and North Korea more specifically is practical for future policies. This paper will focus on those of South Korea.

A 'conflict' is defined as "a social phenomenon, taking place when two or more parties try to achieve contrary goals." [2] When we think of a conflict as a progress rather than a final product, we know it goes through the steps of formation, maturation, decline, and conclusion. But the flow of time does not always accompany the process of 'decline.' Disaster could arise if there is no chance whatsoever of a conflict declining in the maturation process, so if we do not take care of the conflicts in the unification process, it would act as a detriment to the successful summit meeting. Moreover, even after unification is complete, the aftereffects and cost of unification could deepen.

The division of the two Koreas due to domestic and foreign reasons has created political conflicts between the two sides and has become more serious as time has passed. These conflicts are currently the biggest block towards the unification of the two Koreas and the successful summit meeting. If a solution cannot be found for these conflicts, the chances for the summit conference look bleak. Let us typify the political conflicts within the South Korean society.

The conflict structure within South Korea is objectively different from that of North Korea. First, South Korea as a liberal society has a much more complex internal conflict structure than North Korea, a dictatorship state. Diverse social groups exist within it and conflicts between them can influence inter-Korean policies. More importantly, conflicts between the government and non-governmental organizations exist. On the other hand, North Korea ultimately is a dictatorship system and has relatively a simple conflict structure. In North Korea, there is no such thing as a group in conflict with the government.

Secondly, while South Korea is a capitalistic society, North Korea is a socialist society. This difference in economic systems

[2] Edward Azar, *Protected Social Conflict* (College Park. MD: CIDCM. University of Maryland, 1988) chapter 1.

makes it harder to analyze and predict the South Korean conflict structure. Under the capitalistic market economy, the flow of capital over national boundaries are controlled not only by the government but also by other countries and international economic organizations, which makes it all the more difficult to predict the future. Namely, simultaneous analysis of international relations is needed for accurate predictions. From November 1997 onwards, South Korea has been under the influence of the International Monetary Fund and thus it has shown that the measure the Korean government can take on the capital market has its limitations.[3]

Not including the conflicts arising from the arguments on unification, the political conflicts inside South Korea since the division on the Korean peninsula are: (1) ideological conflicts, connected to conservative-reformative conflicts, (2) regional conflicts, the most influential one in the political process of Korea, (3) government-people conflicts, arising from bureaucracy and a remnant of the rigid military culture, (4) conflicts between the rich and the poor, due to inequal distribution of wealth during rapid economic growth, and (5) conflicts between the older generation who have experienced the Korean War and the younger generation who have not, on the issue of unification. The purpose of this paper is to find out specifically how these conflicts really exist in the Korean society and how they can be thought of in regards to inter-Korean negotiations.

Ideological Conflicts

From the establishment of the Rhee Syngman government in 1948 to the early 1980s, the basic ideology of the government was anti-Communism. Especially after the Korean War, the South Korean government has been completely blocking the expansion of discussions on leftist ideas or leftist-rightist conflicts in the society overall. But after the procedural democracy in the late 1980s was established in its own way and after the South Korean system start-

---

[3] Some studies indicate that the social corruption in the process of rapid economic development is the most basic reason for IMF governance. Refer to Chung-In Moon and Jongryn Mo, *Corruption in South Korea: Its Costs and Countermeasures* (Seoul: Oreum Publishing House, 1999). For a general theory, Susan Rose-Ackerman, *Corruption and Government: Causes, Consequences, and Reform* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

ed gathering diverse views in the society, ideological conflicts became apparent in the society. For example, student movements started dispatching students to the North. But they did not necessarily create negative views on unification in South Korea. They merely took part in creating an atmosphere in which students and citizens could be included in the unification policies. Communism and socialism, which were kept at a distance due to its connection with North Korea, made people perceive the value of equality as they were linked to the idea of a welfare state, exposed as Korea was being industrialized. Moreover, as teachers who had usually taught rightist ideologies now formed labor unions, they became opposed to the government, and as time passes, this situation is likely to get complicated between rightest and leftist ideology. The fact that teachers are the ones concerned with the conflicts allow for their being most important means in strengthening as well as sustaining the basis of education, for which they were responsible. This suggests that ideological conflicts which are to be formed within South Korea will not necessarily be rightist-inclined.

Regional Conflicts

If asked to point out one conflict pattern in the current political process of South Korea, most would point out regional conflicts. Regional conflicts which are divided into two forms are well-immanent in our society. The first one is regional conflict seen in the electoral arena.[4] This is generally most prominent in the areas between Youngnam(or Kyungsang) and Honam(or Cholla) of late 1960s and hereafter. That competing political leaders are from these two areas has a lot to do with functional relations and the trouble has particularly deepened because Youngnam has always been on the winning side. Since Chungchung authority was especially formed in the local elections of 1995,[5] progressing after the late 1980s, regional conflict has been added on by another aspect and has assumed more complicated aspects. The second one is regional conflict from the social arena. According to the public

[4] Kap-Yun Lee, *Korean Election and Regionalism* (Seoul: Oreum Publishing House, 1998).

[5] Myungsoon Shin, "Elections in Korean Politics." In Joon Kee Min et al., *Politics of Korea* (Seoul: Nanam Press, 1997), p. 149..

opinion poll, general citizens, not only Youngnam locals but also other locals, carry ill-feelings towards the Honam people. This has brought wide-spread biased views and discrimination upon the Honam people among all others and led to regional conflicts at the national level. Although the rest are not included in the rivalry consciousness between Youngnam and Honam region, they still hold ill-feelings toward Honam people, just as Youngnam people do. This is perhaps due to incorrect information brought upon them in the process of socialization and biased views of education. If regional conflict is prevalent in our society, when we are at the standpoint of aiming for unification, then the making of eastern Youngnam and western Honam division can function as a force in the unification policy. The discrepancy of Youngnam and Honam could be extended that of conservative(supported by Youngnam)-reformative(by Honam) conflict in the process of the summit meeting and Korean unification.

Bureaucracy and Government-People Conflicts

By interacting with Korea's authoritative political culture, bureaucracy of South Korea has brought about conflicts between the government and the people. In fact, bureaucracy does not just exist in the nation's bureaucratic institution, but it has existed in all sorts of organizations, including conglomerates and the military. It forms a structure around them and it has always existed in places where there was any mobility. Bureaucracy puts a priority on formality rather than on practicality, and on short-term achievement-based management style rather than on long-term discernment. It is a system in which individuals are sacrificed for groups. Bureaucracy has more or less shown some effectiveness in the society of rapid economic development, but it has also induced some serious government-people conflicts in the post-Industrialization society that puts emphasis on individual character. By strengthening of government authority, regulation of information and sovereign ideology, South Korea's bureaucratic society has always consolidated their own power. In fact, even after the democratic government came into being, bureaucrats had stayed in their places and exercised their power. This does not leave any expectations for

99

changes in the society because there will be remnants left from bureaucratic forms in society overall even after transformation of military government to a democratic one. Since government-people conflict in Korean society has been understood as a composition in which those who rule and those who are ruled, government-people conflict in South Korea can be expressed as a conflict between the elite and not-elite class stratification.

Stratification

South Korea's class stratification can be blamed on a national policy which was only focused on industrialization without alternative plans for welfare policies.[*] The issue here is that there is a relative deprivation arising from class stratification although all citizens may take advantage of benefits of the economic development. Since this kind of relative deprivation may not guarantee equality in competition process itself, which otherwise should be provided in a capitalistic society within their social justice, it could deepen and conflicts between classes could also be constructed. For example, small-medium sized enterprises feel relative deprivation from large enterprises enjoying privileges in managing economic activities. Salaried workers may feel relative deprivation from the so-called upstarts doing leasing business of land and buildings. One side effect of relative deprivation is that income differences between farmers and people in cities lead to farmers moving to cities. Labor management conflict, which forms one of Korea's biggest conflict structures, undoubtedly is rooted and understood in class stratification conflict structure between the possessor class and the labor class. It is difficult to say that what labor class is experiencing is an absolute poverty, but it ultimately comes down to 'poverty within wealth', originated from unequal distribution principle. Therefore, the reason why labor management negotiation is experiencing difficulties is not only about simple income negotiation, but it is because mistrust and hostility exist in deeply-rooted class conflict.

---

[*] Bok Song, *Conflict Structures of Korean Society* (Seoul: Kyungmoonsa. 1997). pp. 117-145.

Generation Conflict

As Ronald Inglehart pointed out, what is prominent in the post-Industrialization society is generation effect.[7] In post-Industrialization society, the younger generation show different tendencies from the older generation. In the case of South Korea, whether one has experienced the Korean War or not is the basis for how one views unification.[8] However, it is not just the view of unification that actualizes generation conflict. Generation conflict shows itself in various ways, so we cannot be optimistic that it will be solved easily. The older generation and the younger generation show great differences in ethical values. The older generation values 'groups,' 'stability,' and 'order' because they are much under the influence of the time they grew up in and the time they are in at the moment. On the contrary, the younger generation values 'individualism,' 'changes,' and 'individuality.' Perhaps this is not only a problem for the South. However, the basic difference in this inclination between the older generation who put priority on order and peace and the new generation who think that unification is the first on the list even in such chaotic situation decides on what are primary factors for views on unification. Since the older and the new generation's views on unification are originated in basic value system, perhaps they will never be in harmony and always stand parallel to each other. The government tries to expand discussions on unification to all the citizens and gather opinions from them and other social groups. But, as people's views differ in basic value systems, the government will only end up gathering views of the older generation since it cannot but adopt conservative policies compared to the opposition party. So, the activities of the new generation who are left out in the gathering of views on unification will be limited to non-systematic areas.

Let us look at the five conflict areas that we examined beforehand, then see what stage they are in at the moment, and which direction they should head for before entering a positive ending stage.

First, in the case of ideological conflicts, South Korea has had

101

---

[7] Ronald Inglehart, "The Silent Revolution in Europe: International Change in Post-Industrial Societies," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, pp. 991-1017.
[8] Bok Song, *Conflict Structures of Korean Society* (Seoul: Kyungmoonsa, 1997), p. 135.

them in labor management and reciprocal interaction. In the period right after the liberation, there were leftist-rightist conflicts; however, they were in the recess time in the middle of anti-Communism period. Now, the need for introducing the concept of a welfare state in the post-Industrialization society might be limited in their leftist logic, but it seems that it will gain its own influence in the Korean society. The founding of the left-wing Labor Party and other related small movements in the 1990's democratic period is one example. Needless to say, it is important to take in this kind of leftist logic in the system in order to end the ideological conflict affirmatively. This will help them function as cohesive acting units in the negotiation process of South-North unification.

Secondly, the present late 1990s is in a critical situation in the case of regional conflict. Since the current regional conflict is still in cleavage structure, which is the top priority in South Korea's political process, we can assume that regional conflict is in its mature stage. We could mention diminishing steps in that most of South Korea's leaders and citizens all discuss harmful effects of regional conflicts and possible solutions to them, but all of it may be superficial. As a matter of fact, there is a limit in approaching the overcoming of regionalism just by political means, and there is a need for another kind of approach because it is a political-cultural issue. The problem is if regional conflict takes hold of the kind of newly-appeared conservative-reformative dispute cleavage structure, it will be hard to settle regionalism and conservative-reformative disputes. That is to say, if a plan is formed in which Youngnam is conservative(Bo-soo), Honam is reformative(Hyuk-sin), or East is conservative and West is reformative, then this would mean that another kind of division (Bo-Hyuk Non-Jaeng) will be seen in South Korea, not unlike the division of South-North Korea.

Thirdly, it seems that the government-people conflict is in the declining stage. This means that the government officials are accepting the assertion that they are not the masters of the people. And since the electoral system in which people get involved in the voting process was started, the chances of government-people conflicts retrogressing in time or of other reasons have diminished. Therefore we can assume that government-people conflict is not so significant conflict pattern compared to others.

Fourthly, the generation conflict can be a long-lasting problem. That the 6 · 25 generation are now in their 60s at the least and the majority are not in their generation show that the generation without the experience of the war are acting as masters if unification-related generation conflicts are to be looked at by population studies. However, that those who had experienced the Korean War are still in leadership and that those leading elites in their 40s-50s who had not experienced the war want to keep stability and status quo might imply that generation conflict is not in any particular stage, but that it is something of a repeated process.

Conclusions and Speculations

The sunshine policy is successful in the sense that it built a cooperative situation between South and North, and eventually brought about South-North summit meeting. Nevertheless, it made a more complicated structure of domestic conflict as shown above. Since now, it is important to understand and manage domestic conflict structures. The regional discrepancy of Youngnam and Honam could be extended to that of conservative-reformative conflict in the process of the summit meeting. This means that South Korea loses national integration compared to North Korea. Diverse interest groups in South Korea recently show serious conflicts in the process of keeping their material niches, such as the conflict between the doctors and the pharmacists. South Korean government has a difficulty in managing it.

The South Korean government will have higher chances of national unity if it can manage conflict systems effectively and it will then be able to come to negotiations with the North. If these conflict patterns are not managed well in the social system, the negotiation channels will be multiplied and thus the chances of success will be diminished as much. South Korea's ideological conflict is being expanded into labor management complication, regional plan, and conservative-reformative conflict. In conclusion, the understanding and managing of various conflict structures formed in the Korean peninsula will be an important beginning for South and North Korea to maintain confident, cooperative relationships.■