

## THE NORTH-SOUTH KOREAN TALKS: Where They Stand

by Sangyo Oh

### *The Current State*

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The food crisis and miseries of North Korea seem to be the central axis around which the Seoul-Pyongyang relationship is revolving. The four-party talks are being set aside for the time being. While the governmental level negotiations are stumbling over the participation of Pyongyang, the non-political talks between the 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. This agreement was made after rounds of disputes over the amount and method of delivery.

Does this agreement mean 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 revealed their temporary nature. An agreement between the negotiators of the South and North Korean Red Cross organizations might contribute to the easing of tensions on the Korean peninsula for a while, but there is no real indication that the two Koreas are approaching a lasting frame of peace and reconciliation.

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, the four-party talks have been set aside.

Second, both sides are viewing each other in terms of the political game, rather than acting in accordance with building a real base for peace on the Korean peninsula. Even the humanitarian consideration itself is a product of politics. Pyongyang was worried that knowledge that the 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 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 to Seoul and Washington, their calculation is that only force would ensure concessions from the enemy.

But other side of the story is that Pyongyang is worsening its reputation as a anachronistic

dictatorial regime. This has brought upon contempt for 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 N-S 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 judgement 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; and 3) the politics-first policy toward the famine is not good to 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 his 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.

In the South, the election factor works against more active pursuit of reconciliation. The presidential election is scheduled for December, and the outgoing government would not be 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. The ruling party has always benefited from taking a hardline posture against Pyongyang. In this respect, Seoul is not expected to orient itself to a softline attitude toward Pyongyang this year.

#### *Structure of the N-S 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 lead to an easy collapse of system in the Eastern bloc, Pyongyang opted for a hardline policy and refused to open the system. It repeated its old Cold-War strategy of

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confrontation. 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 the 1953 Armistice Agreement was practically nullified, and thereby urged US to establish a new peace system while excluding Seoul in the process. This "exclude-Seoul" policy in determining the future of Korean peninsula stirred up anger and caused a hardline policy on the part of Seoul.

Moreover, Seoul 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 coming into the port 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. By opting for the aggressive line, Pyongyang has lost the opportunity to take advantage of the supportive mood of the South.

Political strategic thinking is also dominant in the South. The four-party talks, proposed last year to discuss any problem related to the peace and future of Korean peninsula, actually had the character of counter balancing 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 the 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 establish channels with the U.S. and to relax 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's intentions. Seoul has come to relearn the lesson that only strong-handed measures would give any influence on the behavior of Pyongyang.

As long as the current leadership of Pyongyang views an improvement in bilateral relations with US 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 the tension on the Peninsula and bring about reconciliation with Pyongyang might not work. Maybe what is achievable is a short-term modus vivendi that Pyongyang desperately needs in order to earn time and energy to move forward as it sees fit.

### *The Future of the North-South Relationship*

**W**hat direction are the two Koreas moving toward? Four scenarios are conceivable  
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