

How to Untangle Inter-Korean Relations

Inter-Korean relations have been on hold since July 2004. Last year, the South Korean government's refusal to allow a delegation to attend ceremonies marking the anniversary of the death of Kim Il Sung and the South's acceptance of a large number of North Korean defectors led to the North's cancellation of the 15th round of ministerial talks. Despite this freeze on official interaction, non-governmental exchanges have continued. The Kaesong Industrial Complex project, railway links and station renovations, and the Mount Kumgang Tourist Resort are three major economic cooperative projects that are still progressing. In addition, as Ryongchon reconstruction aid, socio-cultural exchanges, humanitarian assistance, and private-sector interchanges continue, the inter-Korean relationship looks to be taking on a two-tier structure. In light of ongoing disaster relief projects, forest fire-fighting coordination, and the return to South Korea of fishermen who went North, in spite of the official standoff, the overall inter-Korean relationship seems to be maintained.

■ Why are Relations Stalled?

A combination of events in the latter half of 2004 led to the North's refusal to join talks. South Korea took measures to block ROK citizens from paying condolences at a memorial service marking the 10th anniversary of the death of Kim Il Sung, an ROK naval ship attacked a DPRK warship that crossed the Northern Limit Line, and in a mass defection, 468 North Koreans were brought to Seoul via a third country. In the U.S., the North Korean Human Rights Bill was passed, and Ulchi-Focus Lens, the world's largest computerized joint forces command and control training exercise, took place in South Korea. Domestically, South Korean experiments with uranium came to light. Particularly, the refusal to acknowledge Kim Il Sung, the acceptance of defectors, and other measures directly related to the North Korean system are taken very sensitively in Pyongyang.

Of course, the reason for the stalled relations is not just the accumulation of these events. Mistrust and insecurity has been mounting since the current administration took office. A government-ordered investigation into funds sent to North Korea was said to damage the spirit of the 6.15 Joint Declaration. May 2003, at the U.S.-ROK summit, an agreement to 'investigate additional measures as the situation worsens' and consultations on linking inter-Korean economic cooperation with the North Korean nuclear issue led Pyongyang to be distrustful of Seoul. As the development of the inter-Korean relationship would be difficult without a resolution to the nuclear issue, support for the Kaesong Industrial Complex lull in 2004, leading to considerable North Korean apprehension over the lack of South Korean desire to pursue North Korean projects.

As the standoff continues between North and South Korea, mutual mistrust and disappointment have led to a more weakened relationship. South Korean disappointment arose from the North Korean declaration on February 10 of possession of a nuclear deterrent and an indefinite boycott from talks despite the ROK government's speech in Los Angeles in November 2004 calling for a need to understand the North's point of view. North Korea was hoping for a change in the direction on relations along with President Roh's second Berlin visit, but was disappointed instead by Roh's speech saying there are times when Seoul needs to get "red in the face" with anger in its relationship with the DPRK. "In the intra-Korean relationship as well, we must express criticism and get red in the face when it's time to get red in the face."

The reality is that, in light of the unresolved nuclear issues and the weakened relations, it is difficult for South Korea to adopt a positive, proactive North Korean policy. From the Northern perspective, while shoring up its nuclear program and faced with its current confrontation with Washington, it is impossible to avoid damaging inter-Korean relations when it is seeking to blackmail U.S. concessions by creating a crisis on the peninsula. Currently, with tensions raised between the U.S. and North Korea, there is a good possibility for stretching out the nuclear crisis, and as a result, the neglected inter-Korean relationship.

Even as the potential created at the June 15, 2000 inter-Korean normalization talks is being reduced to ashes, the inter-Korean relations based on the three main economic cooperative projects continues despite the lack of new ministerial talks, and from the North Korean perspective, there is no demand for further talks. It appears that there is no domestic support for continuing talks on inter-Korean relations when without talks the three major projects are solid and progressing on their own. Without South Korea offering some considerable incentives for North Korean cooperation, there is no motivation in Pyongyang to return to the table.

■ Mutual Mistrust

Ever since the Roh Moo Hyun administration took power, the North has lacked faith in South Korea. Some serious effort is needed to firmly root trust into the turbid inter-Korean relationship. Firstly, the Roh administration's North Korean policy needs to pick up where the 'Sunshine policy' left off, and continuing with the message of the June 15 2000 Joint Declaration, consistently support mutual reconciliation. It is important to maintain consistency to avoid sending mixed signals to the North. With President Roh's varied speeches and criticisms of North Korea, there is more than a little confusion over the intentions of his North Korea policies.

In November of 2004, President Roh spoke in Los Angeles, calling on America to understand North

Korea and to accommodate Pyongyang's requests. In April of this year, President Roh spoke in Berlin about his disappointment with Pyongyang's hard-line toward the U.S., and took a strong stance, criticizing North Korea for its one-sided demands. Around the same time, administration officials announced the delivery of fertilizer to North Korea was to be linked with the realization of official talks, indicating that requests for fertilizer would be refused. High-ranking Blue House officials expressed anger with representatives of civil organizations that provide fertilizer with no strings attached, and staff close to the President increasingly blamed North Korea for failures in the relationship, raising doubts that the current North Korea policy is logical rather than emotional. For inter-Korean relations to develop and for peninsular peace to be achieved, leaders must toughen their resolve, and if the situation is to change then consistency and patience are of the essence. Despite the current weak state of affairs, the South Korean government must portray to the North a belief in a policy of consistent engagement and cooperative reconciliation. President Roh has taken a passive stance, considering the need for and ability to pursue a special envoy or normalization talks to be low. Rather, a proactive look into the possibility of success or failure of North Korea has led to a growing mistrust between Seoul and Pyongyang. If Seoul were to take a positive role towards rebuilding the relationship, the chances are high that Pyongyang would respond this year. Within this year, with the 60th anniversary of the Party, the 10th anniversary of 'Military First Politics', and the 5th anniversary of the June 15 2000 Joint Declaration, there exists a need in Pyongyang to reach epochal results in inter-Korean relations.

■ North Korean Nuclear Issues

What is necessary is an inter-Korean relationship focused on resolving the nuclear issue, rather than one that is simply a result of the nuclear issue. South Korea must find the strength to guide North Korea through the resolution of complex nuclear issues, and this strength can be found in a rebuilt inter-Korean relationship. To this end, the South must break away from the current distaste and negative outlook regarding developing relations.

At the same time, North Korea is pursuing the development of crisis in order to gain concessions from the U.S. Normalization of relations on the Korean peninsula is necessary in order to act as a 'relief valve' for these crises. It is becoming increasingly more difficult from South Korea's perspective to be in the middle of the standoff between the U.S. and DPRK. Through restored trust between the leaders of the two Koreas, a positive, Korean solution is necessary. As a DPRK hard-line policy collides with the U.S. policy of neglect, the threat from a nuclear North Korea is growing. In light of this, among the actions possible by South Korea, one is to influence North Korea through revived relations.

As the tensions rise, South Korea really has only one of two choices. Either adopt the American approach to North Korea and actively pressure Pyongyang until coercing them into an acceptable solution, or actively pursue the strengthening of inter-Korean relations, and then by establishing trust,

guide the North to a resolution. There is no middle ground here; South Korea cannot straddle the fence. Currently, while opposing U.S. pressure on North Korea and at the same time criticizing Pyongyang, South Korea appears to oppose both countries. From this position, Seoul is unable to influence either Washington or Pyongyang. Seoul needs to look into sending an envoy to North Korea. Through an envoy, Seoul can express its position and push for a change in North Korea's stance.

If an envoy were to be sent, it must be sent in the name of 'revitalizing inter-Korean relations'. If tasked with the role of normalizing relations, or discussing solutions to the DPRK nuclear issues, it could inflame ROK domestic conflicts as well as unnecessarily spoil relations with the Americans. While officially limiting the role of the envoy to the restoration of inter-Korean relations, realistically, pressure to concede some issues regarding the nuclear issue and discussion on normalization of relations could be touched on. Special envoy Lim Dong Won's April 2002 trip to the North is a good precedent.

South Korea must seriously push for a resolution to the nuclear issues by opening up trustworthy channels of communication with the North. Through these channels, Seoul needs to convince Pyongyang that in order to restart the deadlocked negotiations, North Korea must return to the 4th round of 6-party talks as soon as possible. Without a restart of the 6-party talks, conditions on the peninsula will continue to worsen as U.S.-DPRK conflict worsens. The North needs to be given 'freeze for compensation' and 'dismantlement for normalization' options.

The South Korean government has little influence over the North Korean economy. Even slowing production of the Kaesong Industrial Complex or halting economic cooperative projects would have little impact. Especially Kaesong, where wages are minimal and South Korean small and mid-sized industries would bear the brunt of any restrictions.

■ How to Create Results

Now is the time for South Korea to recharge efforts to solve the deadlocked inter-Korean talks, and offer incentives for the North's return to negotiations. More than just supporting the current level of economic cooperation, South Korea must take a more proactive approach. This is not just an attempt to dress up the appearance of relations that are on hold due to the nuclear issues, but rather measures to pursue a process for peace on the peninsula in spite of the nuclear issues.

In an effort to improve relations, restart dialog and promote incentives, additional support of the North Korean economy, or new inter-Korean economic cooperative projects should be proposed. For example, inter-Korean cooperative farming, support for the energy sector, rebuilding of shipping

facilities at Nampo harbor, etc projects that can entice North Korea to restart dialog should be considered. This especially includes cooperative farming projects that can help to lessen the food shortage hardship faced by many North Koreans.

A new agenda for inter-Korean relations, and a new look for dialog should be developed, with both ministerial and prime ministerial talks set up. Ministerial talks focusing on the three major economic cooperative projects and inter-Korean exchanges, and high level talks pushing for a new level of trust and for taking the cooperation following the June 15 Joint Resolution to a new level, 'upgrading' relations, should be pushed. These talks could have the potential to expand into raising the level of socio-cultural interchange, and other environmental, energy, and agricultural cooperation, raising the bar for exchange, dialog, and security on the Korean peninsula. / Keun-Shik Kim (Assistant Professor, Kyungnam University)

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