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SOUTH KOREA'S POLICY MAKING PROCESS ON NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR ISSUE: A Random Note

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Introduction

The Kim Young Sam government was inaugurated with mixed blessing in February last year. The Kim government was the first civilian

government freely elected after thirty-year authoritarian rule and seemed to be prepared to launch a rather progressive policies in every sector of domestic politics, economy, social and even inter- Korean relations. Such ambitious attempt was possible thanks to the public trust and expectation over the civilian regime led by the former opposition leader who has devoted his life in fighting against authoritarianism. But on the other hand the Kim government should face a new challenge when North Korea's nuclear problem began to draw a serious attention from the international society.

Around the time of the Kim's inauguration the IAEA regarding North Korea's nuclear development program found significant discrepancies between Pyongyang's initial report to the IAEA in May 1992 and findings after six-round inspections. Increasing suspicion over the North's intention drove the Board of Governors' decision to ask special inspection over the North's two undeclared sites in Yongbyon.

President Kim's new staff working on foreign affairs, security and inter-Korean affairs were all former college professors who had no previous experience in public service. Among the so-called "Gang of Four" consisting of Deputy Prime Minister of Unification Han Wan-Sang, Foreign Minister Han Sung-Joo, President's Security Advisor Chung Chong-Wook, and the National Security Planning(Korean CIA)'s chief Kim Duk, the DPM Han varied in his career from the others. Dr. Han was all-time in the side of the oppressed and human rights activist expelled twice from the university campus. He promoted a progressive policy in the inter-Korean relations and in humanitarian reasons was very supportive in the President's decision to bring back Lee In-Mo, a North Korean journalist captured in the Korean War opposing to convert to the South. That issue was well over-due and has often ignited confrontation in previous North-South talks.

The Unification Minister Han became a easy target of the conservative camp when the North announced to pull out of the NPT just the following day Seoul officially decided to return Lee In-Mo to the North. It was Dr. Han's misfortune to drive himself to the setting where he would be inevitably in a defensive position in planning and undertaking unification policy with progressive tone.

To four former professors with no experience of public service North Korea's nuclear problem appeared as a serious challenge and frustration. Nuclear issue was a very new issue to South Korean government and no official debate was allowed since former president Park Chung Hee's attempt to develop nuclear weapons indigenously in late 1970s. And no expertise was accumulated in the government on how to deal with the nuclear problem and no enough understanding was shared about the implications of nuclear

weapons in the Peninsula. Under the nuclear umbrella of the United States South Korea had neither leverage nor voice on the issue for the last thirty years. Such lack of understanding and limited room of leverage made new Kim Young Sam government get frustrated and show fluctuation in its dealing with nuclear problem from the beginning.

Considering the position taken by each of the Gang of Four on security issues, the Unification Minister Han is the most progressive, Foreign Minister Han is probably the next, and Dr. Chung at the Blue House and Dr. Kim of the NSP are representing the conservative voice. The NSP chief Kim was not affiliated with the conservative camp when he was professor, but as chief of the intelligence agency he should no choice but to represent his institution, the champion of the conservative. Dr. Chung could enjoy his power supported by the Chief Secretary to the President Park Kwan Yong, but became quite often blamed by his colleagues on his indecisiveness and lack of capacity in coordination. Following development of the nuclear issue and South Korean government's policy decisions regarding the problem were made by this group of gentlemen until the Unification Minister Han stepped down December 1993 replaced by a conservative educator Lee Yung Duk.

First Stage: Frustration of the Progressive

Nuclear problem was from the beginning the international issue which the United States paid serious attention to every step of its development. And in some sense North Korea's claim to discuss the issue only with the U.S. was not unwarranted. Due to the U.S. concern over the issue the Foreign Minister Han became in charge of monitoring the development of debate in between Washington and Pyongyang, and between the IAEA and North Korea.

The first stage regarding nuclear debate was until the North and South Koreas agreed to discuss about the exchange of special envoy in preparation of the inter-Korean summit meeting in June 22, 1993. To the proposal of the North on special envoy the Kim administration expressed initial reluctance after assuming that the North sought to nullify the previous mechanism of the inter-Korean dialogue under the framework of the Basic Agreement which was put into effective February 1992. But just after Security Advisor Chung's trip to Washington the Kim government suddenly changed its position to accept the North's proposal.

The UN Security Council's decision on May 11 to appeal to the member countries to keep dialogue with North Korea for resolving the nuclear problem by peaceful means and South Korea's acceptance of Pyongyang's proposal provided the U.S. with excuse to resume bilateral dialogue. This occasion reflects that the internal debate in the South Korean government on the inter-

Korean affairs was prevailed by the Washington's voice and difference of opinions among four key decision makers in Seoul was almost meaningless in deciding its own fate. In the final decision the Unification Minister Han and Foreign Minster Han were favorable of opening new channel of dialogue with the North while two others were rather reluctant. Security Advisor Chung had no choice but to follow the U.S. request on the issue when he met with many key officials in Washington, even though his mission was to persuade the U.S. counterpart to understand and support Seoul's assessment of Pyongyang's intention regarding the special envoy proposal.

Second Stage: Making Two Different Voices Relieved

The first and second round of the U.S.-DPRK talks in New York and Geneva respectively made South Korean government nervous because these high-level meetings were unprecedented except the January 1992 meeting in New York between Kim Yong Sun and Undersecretary Arnord Kanter on the eve of the North's signing the Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA. South Korea's Foreign Minister's role was to justify the significance of the U.S.-DPRK meetings in the course of resolving the nuclear problem and the DPM Han was supportive to the agreement, and Dr. Chung could not have reservation to that even though the conservative circle launched a campaign of criticism that South Korean government was dismissed in the game.

The conservatives in the South spoke up their voice when the North violated its commitment to accept to resume inspection talks with the IAEA and the inter-Korean dialogue before the third round talks between the U.S. and DPRK. As the IAEA Board of Governors' meeting and the UN Security Council were discussing the measures against the North, Pyongyang conveyed its message of so-called "package deal" to Mr. Ken Quinones accompanying the U.S. Congressman Gary Ackerman's trip to Pyongyang in October 1993. In a couple of weeks North Korean government officially proposed its position in November regarding the package deal by Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, a North Korean representative of the U.S.-DPRK high-level talks.

South Korean government showed strong reluctance of the North's package deal approach to the nuclear issue, but opinions were divided among four key members of decision making. Two Hans joined the side in interpreting the North's proposal as simply reflection of Pyongyang's defensive position because the North has very limited cards to play in dealing with the U.S.. But the other two had different views by reading the North's intention which is just playing for time without showing any good will to resolve the problem, and they opposed to accept the concept of package deal. However their complaint was a little bit pacified by the North's acceptance, to the U.S. Assistant Secretary

Gallucci's message to the North on September 20, 1993, of working level preparatory meeting for the exchange of special envoy between Seoul and Pyongyang, which was held three times in October.

The United States began seriously analyzing the North's intention and concluded in mid-November to try a comprehensive approach even tentatively in the course of resolving the nuclear problem. This was a very important shift of the U.S. position and unexpected step considering its status of the one and only superpower in the Post-Cold War era. But this was a serious beginning of the encounter between the North's package deal and the U.S. comprehensive approach.

Third Stage: U.S. Prevailing over S. Korea's Policy Debate

South Korea's concern over the U.S. big shift in its previous position ignited a serious debate and sense of urgency concerning the lost ground of its choice in the process of discussing the nuclear problem which threatens the security of the South. President Kim's unexpected, bold gesture in the summit meeting with President Clinton in Washington November 23, 1993 created a new concept, "thorough and broad approach" to the nuclear issue. The Kim administration made a jargon to demonstrate its own voice in the nuclear game and tried to show to the North the U.S.-South Korean cooperation. Since then the official position of the U.S. and South Korea was represented by this term. When we consider the differences remained in the U.S. interpretation and the South Korean one, the new words were made to the initiative or urge of some strong criticism in the Blue House on Foreign Minster Han's soft line leaning toward the U.S. decision.

A series of working level meetings between the U.S. and DPRK were held in New York and two parties reached an agreement on basic framework for continuing dialogue in between on the nuclear issue on December 29, 1993. And the inter-Korean dialogue resumed in March this year regarding the exchange of special envoy. But the problem came up concerning interpretation of the U.S.-DPRK agreement on so-called Four-Point measures to be simultaneously implemented including fixing the date of the third round high-level talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

The point of major conflict was the terms on special envoy. South Korea claimed that the actual exchange of special envoy should be a precondition to the resumption of the U.S.-DPRK third round talks, but the North argued that some basic agreement on the details of the issue was good enough to resume the talks with the U.S. Finally the U.S. supported the Seoul's position and the North representative's notorious warning of "Sea of Fire" at the working level meeting March 19 stalled the inter-Korean dialogue, which quickly raised tension in the Peninsula.

North Korea's blunt words ignited hot debate in South Korea and the hardliners took up their voice in the discussion and drew broad support from the conservative camp in the political circle and the media. Which drove the softliners, probably solely represented by the Foreign Minister Han Sung-Joo to keep silent. Minister Han was a lonely fighter in the government policy making circle since the former Unification Minister Han stepped down December last year.

Fourth Stage: Hardliners Speak up Again

In the midst the Kim administration kept tough position against the North, the Blue House staff took the lead in most decisions in foreign and inter-Korean affairs. They were active in mobilizing the international support to drive the situation to the sanctions against the North.

North Korea responded very firmly by announcing on May 13 the replacement of the 5MW reactor core which heightened the international concern over the North's nuclear development program. And the debate on sanctions by the international community led by the U.S. at the UN Security Council was activated and South Korean government as a party directly concerned had no choice but joining the U.S. move. And South Korea even should take an active role in mobilizing the neighboring countries's support from Beijing and Moscow.

It is an irony that Foreign Minister Han, softliner should take such an awkward role to ask China's participation to the sanctions against the North following the request of the hardiners in the government policy making circle.

International move toward sanctions continued and intensified until the former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's visit to Pyongyang and meeting with Kim Il Sung in mid June this year. South Korean government did not give significant meaning to Carter's visit and even expressed caution in the sense that his trip might mislead the North Korean leadership and provide Kim Il Sung a wrong message of appeasement at a very critical moment on the eve of sanctions.

However, the Clinton administration had many reasons to take advantage of his trip. The U.S. could find out the passage of the resolution at the UN Security Council to go against the North seemed impossible considering China's reluctance and Russia's ambivalence. And President Clinton tried to find an excuse to shift the move of sanctions to the phase of dialogue. Especially many experts warned the limit of effectiveness of sanctions against the North and unpredictable military reaction from Pyongyang. That is why President Clinton even intentionally exaggerated Carter's visit and his accomplishment. South Korea

became once again positioned in a complicated situation, but had only to share the U.S. interpretation by quickly accepting President Kim Il Sung's proposal of the inter-Korean summit. President Kim Young Sam's quick acceptance of the summit meeting proposal amazed his staff but the decision seemed to reflect President Kim's sentiment of worrying that Seoul might be dismissed in the nuclear game played mainly by Washington and Pyongyang.

In this fourth stage, what should not be ignored in the Kim administration's policy making mechanism is the outstanding role of new Deputy Prime Minister of Unification, Lee Hong-Koo. He was former unification minister and established scholar --- who is among the Gang of Four the only high ranking official with previous experience in public service and with good sense of politics. The Unification Minister Lee could quickly take control of making major policies as head of the coordinating body of unification and security policies, and he enjoyed full mandate of the President. Minister Lee was senior professor of Foreign Minister Han and Security Advisor Chung, and contributed to easing policy confrontations between different voices from the Foreign Ministry and the Blue House.

Fifth Stage: Softliners Gaining Power, but Wait

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter provided new momentum for Presidents Clinton and Kim Young Sam to shift their months-long sustained policies to rather conciliatory ones and the U.S. and South Korea could begin preparing for the third round Geneva talks and the historical inter-Korean summit respectively. This climate of dialogue may continue under North Korea's new leader Kim Jong Il even after Great Leader's sudden death on July 8.

The Unification Minister Lee's role is preeminent as he successfully drew an agreement last month in preparatory meeting for the summit with the North's counterpart Kim Yong Sun, and is really in charge of coordinating policies toward the North based on full support of the President. Security Advisor Chung has recently played a key role in preparing for the summit and Foreign Minister is closely monitoring the upcoming U.S.-DPRK talks in Geneva. The NSP Chief Dr. Kim was in awkward position under the criticism by the Korean National Assembly when the NSP exposed its limit in gathering intelligence regarding Kim Il Sung's death.

How the role play is to be readjusted in the immediate future of the Kim Young Sam government will be decided in the course of the U.S.-DPRK negotiations on nuclear issue and affected by the new North Korean regime's attitude on the nuclear problem. Considering President Kim Young Sam is quite sensitive to the public sentiment and the domestic media's coverage of current

affairs, we cannot underestimate the influence of the Korean mass media over South Korea's policy making process.

In a nutshell, South Korea's policy making process has been derailed time to time for the last 18 months when struggling with North Korea's nuclear issue, and this fluctuation of policies reflects without sufficient filtering lively or democratic policy debate among the Gang of Four who has rather broad spectrum of views. But under the Korean presidential system, President's style and personality dominate the mind and behavior of his cabinet ministers and the Blue House staffs regardless of their own philosophy and ideas.

President Kim Young Sam may finally find a balanced character, the Unification Minister Lee, a good coordinator of different voices in the policy making circle and an effective buffer against the public criticism from the conservative political camp and the media.

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