

Policy Forum 00-06B: United Front Strategy against U.S. Troops

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United Front Strategy against U.S. Troops

By Nam Si-uk

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I. Introduction

This is the second essay examining the question of the DPRK's past behavior in the light of the recently completed ROK-DPRK summit. This essay was contributed by Nam Si-uk, professor at Korea University and former publisher of the Munhwa Ilbo in Seoul. Nam questions whether DPRK leader Kim Jong-il's grand strategy relative to reunification with the ROK still follows a "united front" policy of building alliances with sympathetic factions within the ROK. Nam argues that Kim Jong-il's attempts at intervention in ROK domestic politics, including the US military presence, gives one reason to be pessimistic about whether Kim Jong-il is sincere about reconciliation. This essay originally appeared in the Korea Times on July 31, as "Is United Front Strategy Still Unchanged?"

II. Essay by Nam Si-uk

"United Front Strategy against U.S. Troops "

A big question was raised in the wake of the historic Inter-Korean Summit on 13-15 June in Pyongyang: Is North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's united front strategy towards South Korea still valid? This question remains unanswered.

If his strategy is as it used to be, then the hope for peaceful coexistence and cooperation between the two Koreas, until the final unification, would be a mirage. Up to the present, however, both optimistic and pessimistic signs have appeared. The former includes the announcement of the holding of a separate annual meeting of the Pan-Korean Alliance for Reunification (BomMinRyon) in the South, North and abroad, on August 15 on the occasion of National Liberation Day, for the first time this year. The militant pro-North activists in South Korea intentionally defied Seoul's laws by participating in the annual rallies in Pyongyang for years.

However, there are many more pessimistic signs. The first is the strong protest of Kim Jong-il, who is concurrently Chairman of North's National Defense Commission, against President Kim Dae-jung, during the Pyongyang summit, for the reported move by South Korean prosecutors to arrest the students who had hoisted the North Korean flags on their campuses. Reports had it that Chairman Kim even demanded President Kim to return to Seoul the next day. It was Kim Jong-il that gestured to the student activists for their firm support in line with his united front strategy towards South Korea. Furthermore, his bold action to interfere in the South's internal affairs is contemptible.

Another pessimistic sign is North Korea's condemnation of some South Korean leaders who were critical of President Kim's North Korean policies and a conservative daily paper, which is keeping an editorial policy unfavorable towards Pyongyang regime. It is undoubtedly an interference in domestic affairs and a demonstration of the North's unchanged united front tactics.

Chairman Kim's strategy was described in detail in his article, "August 4 Laborious Work" in North Korea, dated August 4 1997, in which he ordered his party leadership to carry out the late president

Kim Il-sung's instructions on national unity by forming an "All-Nation United Front." The Front was aimed at stirring great national unity among the people of the North, South and abroad. All members of the Korean nation, especially those in South Korea, transcending in differences regarding thoughts, ideas, political views and religion, are urged to join the united front. Those listed are workers, farmers, intellectuals, youths and students, the urban petit bourgeois, national capitalists, politicians, businessmen, men of culture, religious men and soldiers - virtually every walk of life in South.

Then what, a great national unity? What for? Its goal is "the liberation of South Korea from the foreign domination," i.e. the withdrawal, or at least the change of status, of U.S. troops. A glimpse at Chairman Kim's article clearly reveals that all his reunification policies have focused on the pullout of U.S. forces. He wrote, "The question of the reunification of our country is a question of putting an end to the foreign domination and intervention in South Korea." This means that Kim Jong-il's policy of national unity is to be achieved by the time-honored united front strategy, with the purpose of achieving the ultimate goal of the withdrawal, or change of status, of U.S. troops in South Korea. In his strategy, the withdrawal of American forces and national reunification are in fact sides of the same coin.

In an article dated April 18, 1998, another major "laborious work," better known as "Five-Point Policy of Great National Unity statement," Kim Jong-il declared that he would carry out what he called "all-embracing magnanimous politics" for the purpose of uniting all Korean people on the road to reunification. By this broad-minded politics, he would embrace even people from the upper classes in power, figures from the governmental party and the opposition party, big capitalists, and generals in South Korea under the banner of great unity. One could equate Kim Jong-il's "magnanimous politics" as a new version of his united front strategy.

The article gives an answer to us about the condemnation of South Korean leaders and the newspaper: He said that in spite of his all-embracing politics, he would never tolerate those who do not follow his united front line. He made it clear, "Whoever is hostile to his fellow countrymen and pursue[s] the anti-North confrontation policy... will be cursed and condemned by the people and cannot escape from the trial of history." He added that those who he defined as anti-reunification forces and divisive elements should be fought by the force of national unity.

The June 15 inter-Korean joint statement earned Kim Jong-il a commitment by President Kim to work together for national reunification. They presented a general sketch for the reunification formula, even though it has yet to be shaped more concretely. As a result, the hope for reunification among the people and the pressures to withdraw the U.S. forces in South Korea, as well, have been heightened. Amidst heated and apparently premature debate, a noted progressive professor, at a panel for National Assemblymen, even claimed an ending of the alliance relationship with the U.S.

What seems interesting, with regard to the objectives of Chairman Kim's South Korea policies, is a challenging view of Mr. Han Ho-seok, a pro-Pyongyang theoretician of reunification problems and director of the Center for Korean Affairs based in New York. He argued in his article, written after the Pyongyang summit, that Kim Jong-il's united front strategy towards the South is developing in three directions.

The first, according to his view, is the united front strategy towards political entities in South Korea. He said that it is now being promoted through negotiations with the South Korean government. Mr. Han maintained that the Pyongyang summit is a highlight of the inter-Korean negotiations. Han's view contradicts the general beliefs in South Korea that the Pyongyang summit was the fruition of President Kim's vigorous Sunshine Policy. The second is what is called a "Pan-National United Front" strategy by national unity movements in the South, North and abroad. It has been promoted by the

BomMinRyon movements, which is now planning to stage a series of large-scale rallies, until August 15, urging implementation of the Pyongyang accord and for achieving national unity. The third is a united front strategy, which has been served by the Juche idea and oriented toward the National Democratic movements in South Korea. This form of the united front strategy is being carried out, not by North Korea, but by pro-Northern elements in the Southern side.

A united front with the South Korean government? What an insulting remark! Mr. Han's argument is different. As early as April, 1998, at a time when President Kim Dae-jung had just been sworn in some two months prior, Chairman Kim expressed in his above-mentioned article of 1998 a willingness for improved relations with the South Korean government as a method for achieving great national unity. Kim Jong-il stressed, "To replace distrust and confrontation between North and South with those of trust and reconciliation is a pressing requirement for national unity and national reunification." If this remark had not been mere rhetoric, the Chairman could have taken full advantage of President Kim's voluntary visit to Pyongyang.

The problem now, however, is not to judge which view is right or wrong, but how to properly assess the fact that the Pyongyang meeting materialized out of the contradictory motives and competing objectives of the two leaders: President Kim's "Sunshine Policy" aiming to peacefully open and change North Korea, and Chairman Kim's "Great National Unity Policy" aimed at realizing the pullout of U.S. forces. Then how have things turned out? Since the Pyongyang summit, which side has been changed and which has not? Any hasty conclusions may be a grave mistake, but one thing is clear: In the festive mood in South Korea, along with aggravated anti-Americanism, the justification for a continued presence of U.S. troops in a military alliance with South Korea appeared to be seriously challenged --a political situation on the Korean peninsula that the Pyongyang regime has long-awaited.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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