

Policy Forum 08-083: Moral Realism Boomerang: Eight Months into the Lee Administration's North Korean Policy

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By Bo-hyuk Suh

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I. Introduction

Bo-hyuk Suh, Research Fellow at the Korea National Strategy Institute in Seoul, writes, "it is time inter-Korean relations should change, which would begin by respecting the agreement reached at the South-North summit meeting... The South Korean government should offer North Korea an unconditional dialogue to discuss inter-Korean cooperation, including the implementation of the October 4 Declaration."

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II. Article by Bo-hyuk Suh

- "Moral Realism Boomerang: Eight Months into the Lee Administration's North Korean Policy"
By Bo-hyuk Suh

Ever since the Lee Myung-bak administration took over the helm of affairs, tensions between North and South Korea detect no sign of ceasing. In the midst of all the complications the United States and North Korea managed to agree to resume disabling North Korea's main nuclear weapon complex and along with such efforts ameliorate relations between the two countries. Indeed, this is a contrasting phenomenon between the two countries.

A Break in North-South Korean Talks and Differences in Perspective

According to the report submitted by the Korean Ministry of Unification to the National Assembly last September, the miscommunication between the two Koreas sprang from North Korea's misinterpretation of the South Korean government's acts of courtesy. "With the formation of the new government at the end of February 2008, those in charge of state affairs agreed to develop relations with the North in a more concrete and substantial way as to further enhance mutual prosperity between the two countries. [Despite such efforts] North Korea has reproached the South incessantly for no reason and refused to hold talks or collaborate." To make things worse, a South Korean tourist to Mt. Geumgang was shot on July 11th this year. The South Korean government commented that the situation between the two countries were just 'conciliatory transcendental periods' which new governments suffer in the earlier stages of transition. At the same time, the government emphasized that the president has proposed several times an open dialogue with the North and that it is trying in all different ways to resume talks between the two divided countries.

On the other hand, North Korea continuously slandered the South Korean government in over eight days out of ten since President Lee Myung-bak's induction into office. Since Lee's inauguration on February 25 through August 24, the number of libelous statements directed toward the government and Lee amounted to 78 cases. North Korea's behavior can be mainly highlighted as reproaching South Korea's emphasis on the alliance with the United States. The newspaper of North Korea's Workers' Party, *The Rodong Sinmun*, citing President Lee's speech on the March 1 Movement anniversary that "nationalism can not be a solution to the problems between North and South Korea" criticized that President Lee "cooperates with the United States to break off North-South Korean relations and crush their countrymen." Moreover, North Korea has been mostly discontented towards South Korea's North Korean policy, termed the Denuclearization and Open 3000 Plan, which the North declaimed as an "absurd precondition to the betterment of North and South Korean relations in exchange for our total

nuclear disarmament and opening up of the facilities." The North also added that such statements "boost competition and war and lead North and South Korean relations into an end." The North Korean government asserted that the Lee administration should respect and carry out the June 15 and December 4 Joint Declaration. North Korea added that "the June 15 and December 4 Joint Declaration gives answers to all the possible problems from how both Koreas can come together to achieve unification and the line of issues that may arise along the way."

"We have never disregarded or denied the June 15 Joint Declaration or the October 4 Declaration," the Lee administration responded. However, it maintains that "we need to rearrange priorities and schedules because implementing the terms of agreement in the October 4 Declaration requires enormous funding" and "it is unreasonable for Pyongyang to refuse dialogue yet demand unconditional implementation for us." To this, North Korea retorts that unless the South Korean government gives up its hard-line approach, "North-South relations will never recover from present catastrophic crisis, and it would be difficult to guarantee stable peace in the Korean Peninsula," and insists that the October 4 Declaration be implemented.

This shows that the suspension of South-North dialogue began with the shift in South Korea's North Korea policy after the Lee Myung-bak administration came into power. During the presidential campaign period late last year, authorities in Pyongyang were very interested in candidate Lee. For about a month after his election, they maintained a wait-and-see attitude and explored the possibility of dialogue with the new administration. It was through the April 1 issue of *The Rodong Sinmun* that North Korea officially denounced the Lee administration's general approach towards North Korea, naming the South Korean president explicitly. The newspaper warned that "if the new government continues to trample on North-South declarations and agreements, fawn upon foreign powers and escalate confrontation, we have no choice but to respond differently." While it refuses to talk to Seoul, Pyongyang has taken measures to phase in denuclearization by closing down and disabling nuclear facilities in Yongbyon, and is pursuing active dialogue with Washington in and out of the six-party talks.

Caught in a Double Dilemma

The Lee Myung-bak administration's North Korea policy - termed the Denuclearization and Open 3000 Plan, or more recently the Policy of Mutual Benefits and Common Prosperity - aims to turn North Korea into a normal state and build an economic community in the Korean Peninsula. The underlying assumptions here are that North Korea is the object of salvation and enlightenment rather than the partner on the road toward coexistence and prosperity, and that inter-Korean relations are contingent on the process of resolving the nuclear problem. In other words, the current policy towards North Korea is based on the moral realist idea that South Korea would transform the communist country using its superior national strength as leverage. However, this line of policy leaves the Lee administration caught in a double dilemma.

The first is the linkage dilemma. There are two prerequisites for the effective implementation of a linkage strategy. First, each party has to have an agenda in which it has a large stake, and the stakes have to be symmetric. Second, the level of mutual trust has to be high enough for each party to feel confident that it would not be betrayed by the other party. Without these conditions, the strategy would face resistance from the other party or criticism from within, reducing its impact or even causing it to backfire. In this case, the Lee Myung-bak administration links the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue with economic assistance and cooperation (running contrary to the strategy of simultaneous development of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the improvement of inter-Korean relations, which formed the foundation of the October 4 Declaration). It is doubtful that South and North Korea hold symmetric interests, since the latter's priority lies in procuring national security through the United States. Also, the two Koreas have run

out of mutual trust as of October 2008. As Seoul continues with its linkage strategy, it has come to face the consequences of the linkage dilemma, such as strained inter-Korean relations and its reduced role in the resolution process of the North Korean nuclear issue.

The other problem is the break-off dilemma, or the problem of high opportunity cost incurred as the current government fixates on distancing itself from as far away as possible from the North Korean policy line of the former administration. Since his presidential campaign period, Lee Myung-bak has attacked the 'Reconciliation and Cooperation' and 'Peace and Prosperity' policies of his predecessors. Rigid ideological stance and the obsessive effort to differentiate itself from the Roh Moo-hyun administration have led the incumbent administration to abandon the goals previous administrations have pursued: trust-building through reconciliation and cooperation, creation of a virtuous cycle of peace and economic development, and simultaneous resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem and improvement of inter-Korean relations. The result, as we all see, is the suspension of South-North dialogue. Pending issues between South and North Korea, such as economic cooperation, family reunion, military trust-building, have all come to deadlocks. The prospect of the institutionalization of inter-Korean relations and the establishment of a peace system has become bleak.

To induce North Korea to dispose of its nuclear weapons program, the United States partially terminated sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act and took Pyongyang off the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism as well. These measures will lead to the improvement of North Korea-U.S. relations. Now it is time inter-Korean relations should change, which would begin by respecting the agreement reached at the South-North summit meeting. The South Korean government should shift its policy towards North Korea so that denuclearization would lead to the stabilization of the peace system in the Korean Peninsula and North Korea-U.S. relations would develop in step with the progress of South Korea-North Korea relations. The South Korean government should offer North Korea an unconditional dialogue to discuss inter-Korean cooperation, including the implementation of the October 4 Declaration.

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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