Response to Han Sung-Joo’s essay, “The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide”

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Response to Han Sung-Joo's essay, "The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide":

Reconfiguration of the Ideological Divide in South Korea: An Update on the Post-Pyongyang Summit

By Mi-kyoung Kim

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I. Introduction

This response to Han Sung-Joo's essay, "The Shifting Korean Ideological Divide" (PFO #00-05G), was contributed by Mi-kyoung Kim, policy advisor to North Korean Aid Programs for World Vision Korea. Ms. Kim describes the internal ideological conflict that has arisen within the ROK as a result of the summit. While the ROK has provided the DPRK with economic and technical aid and has supported the DPRK's improvement of its international relations, the conservative right contends that this only provides the DPRK with the capability to later destroy the ROK. The DPRK has picked up this conflict and attempted to exploit it. She argues that this will prove counter-productive and the DPRK should realize that diverse opinions are part of a more pluralistic political system. Kim also argues that the ROK should be stronger than the DPRK when it attempts to intervene in its domestic affairs. Her views are personal and do not represent the opinion of World Vision Korea.

II. Essay by Mi-kyoung Kim

"Reconfiguration of the Ideological Divide in South Korea: An Update on the Post-Pyongyang Summit"

Professor Han Sung-Joo's essay on the ideological confrontation in the South Korean politics was so crisp that going over it was a pleasure. His longitudinal overview on the shifting pendulum between the left and the right effectively shows how the two camps diagonally differ in interpreting a bench mark historical event such as the Korean War and the role of the US in contemporary Korean politics. Professor Han wraps up his remarks by predicting that the current fervor over Pyongyang and the anti-US sentiments in the South will subside soon, and an emerging agenda for Seoul and Washington will arise to ride the quick rapids of changing politics hand-in-hand. His defense for "the cooler heads" in the concluding remarks seems to imply his tilt towards the moderate right in this divide.

I would like to update Professor Han's essay with more on the ideological contention since the Pyongyang summit in June. Under the banner of "engagement policy" with the operational logistics of "flexible reciprocity," the Kim Dae Jung government has been assisting the North in many ways. The amount of economic aid and the scope of assistance given to the North has been unprecedented in South Korean politics. The Seoul government has provided $2.3 billion of economic aid to the North for the last five years (1995-1999). It also has permitted private groups to provide $65 million of assistance during the same period. More than $3 million of the government funding was allocated to the domestic NGOs as a part of its DPRK aid in 1999. The delivery of assistance is made in various forms such as fertilizers, medical supplies and technical know-how to Pyongyang directly or through commercial firms as well as humanitarian NGOs. In addition to these, Seoul has been pleading with various international funding agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF to provide loans to the North so that Pyongyang can start rebuilding its crumbling social infrastructure.

Seoul has been an ardent advocate of Pyongyang's improvement of its international relations. One of Seoul's agendas has been motivating the North to put an end to its decades long self-imposed isolation. The South Korean government had been actively lobbying for Pyongyang's admission to the influential regional security body, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and it succeeded. Seoul has been welcoming the North to renew diplomatic relations with Australia and the Philippines. Italy has opened official ties with Pyongyang this year, the first G8 member nation to do so. Influential western bloc countries such as the US, Japan and New Zealand are tapping into the possibility of

establishing diplomatic ties with the socialist country as well.

The conservative right, on the other hand, has been criticizing the Kim Dae Jung government's policy to "embrace" the North on the following two grounds. First, there is more than enough poverty and social ills in South Korea, and assisting the vulnerable in the South should be the government's policy priority. In other words, the South Korean government's provision of economic assistance to the North is the outcome of the government's misplaced policy priorities. Second, Seoul's "sunshine policy" will not dissuade Pyongyang from its ambition to achieve reunification by means of communist revolution. In other words, our assistance to the North will not change their worldviews. It will instead serve as the resources needed to demolish the capitalist South.

The June summit talks seemed to grant an irreversible victory to the left. Kim Dae Jung, accompanied by the 150- member delegation, flew directly into Pyongyang, and harvested larger bundles of crops than originally projected. The two top leaders signed a joint declaration on June 15, and that was the greatest history-making event since the division in 1945. The "sunshine policy" did the magic in silencing the voices of the "Red Scare," and the conservative right seemed to be losing in the game.

However, the ideological confrontation has gained velocity as Pyongyang unexpectedly invites itself to be a major player. Upon the opposition leader's criticism of the incumbent government's North Korean policy, Pyongyang's official news media (Korean Central News Agency) launched a vehement verbal attack against the opposition leader, Lee Hoe Chang, calling him "the traitor to the whole Korean race" and an "anti-unification scoundrel." Pyongyang also has been intensifying its attacks against a leading conservative daily, The Chosun Ilbo. The paper has declared its own war against the North, refusing to be "tamed" by them. To make things worse, Pyongyang has dropped the president of the Chosun Ilbo from a list of invitees for a visit by 50 South Korean newspaper company representatives to the country. Faced with these unexpected turns and twists, the right in the South has started to voice strong disapproval of Pyongyang's intervention into domestic politics and the Seoul leadership's lukewarm attitudes towards it. One of the conservative lawmakers accused the top leadership of having become "pro-North," sparking heated exchanges between the right and the left. The ideological divide in the South has been transformed into a contention between the pro- and the anti-North camps as a consequence. It seems like Pyongyang has become the center of gravity by successfully drawing the sharp distinction between who is and who is not on their side. The honeymoon between Seoul and Pyongyang does seem to add a strange spiral to the equation in the ideological divide.

The Kim Dae Jung government is now left with serious weighing to do. It should learn to walk the fine line between being friendly with Pyongyang and at the same time being stern with Pyongyang's unleashed intervention into the South's domestic affairs. Given the fact that North Korean policy is just one policy area out of the total government blueprint, cooperation and collaboration with the opposition party is crucial for the government to succeed. Furthermore, Pyongyang should be more attentive to the fact that South Korea is not as totalitarian as they are, and that diverse and often even cacophonous voices do exist in the South. Their usual tactics in squelching opinions of disagreement does not work over the border. Learning such a lesson may be an important beginning for Pyongyang to nurture a more fruitful partnership with its long lost but newly found brethren in the South. That is, of course, only if they want to.

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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