

Policy Forum 09-001: The Lee Myung-bak Government's Policy Toward the DPRK after Barack Obama's Inauguration

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The Lee Myung-bak Government's Policy Toward the DPRK after Barack Obama's Inauguration

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By Kim Yeoncheol
Translated into English by Nan Zaijun.

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I. Introduction

Kim Yeoncheol, Director of the Hankyoreh Peace Institute (http://koreahana.net/sub05_01_1.htm), writes, "If the government misses the time to engage the North, it will only be more time consuming and expensive to compensate later... The government should think about its long term future... The tension in the inter-Korean relationship is becoming more intense. If we don't act now there will be only more regret for the wasted time and lost opportunities in the future."

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II. Article by Kim Yeoncheol

- "The Lee Myung-bak Government's Policy Toward the DPRK after Barack Obama's Inauguration"
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Endless waiting, this is how we can describe the Lee Myung-bak government's DPRK policy. The government will support the North but only if the nuclear issue is resolved. Likewise, humanitarian aid is possible, but the DPRK must request it. The South Korean government will not support the North aimlessly and inter-Korean dialogue will only continue if the DPRK is willing to participate in these discussions. South Korea is still waiting and North Korea is indifferent. It is unclear what will happen next.

Barack Obama's Inauguration and the Korean Peninsula

With Barack Obama's inauguration South Korea's DPRK policy will face a turning point. One result of the American election will be the end of new conservatism in South Korea. Moral diplomacy and unilateral attention will now start to gradually fade away. What is the future of the Korean peninsula? The DPRK will anticipate a new start to relations with the United States given that Barack Obama has pledged to interact with North Korea positively and is willing to meet bilaterally with the DPRK to resolve the nuclear issue. This election has thus given the DPRK an opportunity to improve political relations with its historical nemesis.

The interaction between the U.S. and DPRK under Barack Obama will be different from that over the last sixteen years. The Clinton Administration began a process of mutual understanding and trust building with the DPRK but, while the two countries overcame many challenges, the administration left office before this process could be completed. In 2000, despite Special Envoy Cho Myong-nok's U.S. visit and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's trip to Pyongyang, progress in the relationship between the two countries could not be maintained due to the political transition in the United States. The Bush Administration has experienced some of the worst relations between the two nations. However, by the time the Bush Administration began to generate realistic DPRK policy options, its tenure was almost over. The Obama Administration's diplomatic team will be different from that of George W. Bush. It will choose pragmatic rather than moral diplomacy. Under Barack Obama the top priority of the United States' DPRK policy will be to resolve the nuclear issue rather than force regime change. With the Democratic Party also in control of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate we can also anticipate that the President will be able to cooperate with Congress on this issue. There is no need to waste time in building consensus between American

political parties which is a key difference from previous political transitions.

Of course the results of U.S.-North Korean interactions have not always been positive. There are many problems that need to be resolved. In the past the U.S. has been enthusiastic to negotiate with the North but was hesitant to communicate with its allies, except to share the cost of the resulting agreements. Under the Agreed Framework the expense of constructing the Light Water Reactors was shared by South Korea and Japan. Similarly in the joint-declaration on September 19th, 2005 it was decided that all the parties in the Six Party Talks would split the financial obligations of the agreement. Even though the relationship between the U.S. and DPRK has improved, the cost-sharing arrangements between the other nations will not change dramatically. It is important to note that the U.S. needs contributions from both the ROK and Japan. The problem is that South Korea and Japan's foreign policy toward the DPRK is largely ideological and oriented toward domestic politics rather than international realities. Japan still has not resolved the abductee issue and South Korea's DPRK policy is focused more on domestic politics than diplomatic concerns. The disconnect between U.S. policy goals and those of its allies has the potential to duplicate the negative cycle of inter-Korean and U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral relations seen during the Kim Young Sam government. Unless South Korea adjusts its strategy to compliment U.S. policy toward the DPRK, inter-Korean relations will deteriorate further.

A Question for the Media: What is the Government Doing?

"Open to the U.S. and closed to the ROK" is a popular saying about inter-Korean relations. The traditional assessment of the DPRK's policy is that when it opens up to the U.S. it will shut down its connections with South Korea. "Open to the U.S. and closed to the ROK" however is not an accurate description because trilateral relations depend on the DPRK's attitude and posture. The trilateral relationship is based on interactions between all three countries which are influenced by historical experience. There has only been one time when the U.S. and DPRK relations were good while inter-Korean relations deteriorated. In the twenty years since the beginning of inter-Korean dialogue during the Roh Tai-woo presidency only the Kim Young-sam government has experienced the "Open to the U.S. and closed to the ROK" situation and that was due to international environmental factors that interfered with inter-Korean cooperation. In this sense the Lee Myung-bak government has achieved its goal of undoing the last decade of work. Inter-Korean relations today have reverted to the state they were in ten years ago and are likely to remain deadlocked for the foreseeable future.

If the government will not organize inter-Korean dialogue during its tenure in office, when does it think will be a good time? The government will have to shift its focus soon for several reasons. First the Lee Myung-bak government will come under increasing pressure from the media to change its policy. Although most government officials see the situation in ideological terms the public views them differently. Ideology does not feed the populace and, with the economy in decline, the citizens are unlikely to tolerate any instability in inter-Korean relations. While the ROK's mainstream media is conservative, they do not welcome uncertainty and crisis. Why did the Kim Young-sam administration send rice to the DPRK in 1995? Because the media's strong attitude toward the DPRK changed. Since the U.S. and DPRK had reached a consensus in Geneva and the DPRK had started to engage Japan, the South Korean public looked at the government and asked, "What are you guys doing?" This demonstrates the dual nature of the media. After removing the DPRK from the list of terror-sponsoring nations and the US election, the US and DPRK's relationship will be improving and the populace of South Korea will become frustrated with the government's incompetence.

Anticipating Contradictions in the DPRK Policy Between the U.S. and ROK

The US-ROK relationship is going to face problems. When the U.S. removed the DPRK from the terror-sponsoring nations, the Aso government in Japan said that they had been betrayed. They

complained that the U.S., their ally, only informed them of its decision just before the announcement, disregarding Japan's opinions of the abductee issue. Countries, including the U.S., tend to primarily pursue their own diplomatic interests. The U.S. values cooperation with its allies, but when their perspectives do not align with one another, the U.S. puts its own interests first. With the election of Barack Obama, the U.S. and ROK's DPRK Policy will definitely contradict one another. It is possible that the Obama administration will send a Special Envoy to the DPRK even before he takes office. This has happened before. On November 1999, during President Clinton's second term in office, Bill Richardson, a Representative from New Mexico, visited North Korea as a Special Envoy. At that time, the inter-Korean relationship was very negative because of the Kangnung Submarine accident. While the Kim Young-sam government was intentionally not-discussing the incident, Congressman Richardson ignored the ROK government's refusal to make the issue a topic in negotiations, proposed that the DPRK apologize for the incident, and then promoted the DPRK's participation in the four party talks. The DPRK acknowledged Richardson as an emissary and Kang Suk-Joo actively discussed US-North Korean relations with him.

From the Obama Administration's perspective, the DPRK nuclear talks are an indispensable issue as it is one of only a few diplomatic issues where the new administration can show its foreign policy acumen and deliver a successful result. The economic crisis in the US will not be resolved anytime soon. Moreover, it will be very hard for the US to attain immediate achievements in Afghanistan and Iran. Consequently, the DPRK nuclear issue is an indispensable issue for the Obama Administration to achieve a demonstrable short-term success.

However, one challenge for the development of the US-DPRK relationship is the costs involved in a nuclear bargain. The US has always been negative on consultation, but very positive on sharing expenses. Under the Clinton Administration such cost sharing was an issue because the Republican Party controlled Congress. In 1994, the discussion of sharing the costs of a light-water reactor stagnated because of the US's passivity toward the issue. Although there were disagreements between the US and ROK at that time the Kim Young-Sam government still shared 70% of the light-water reactor construction costs.

Of course, the Lee Myung Bak government could also catch the US's hind leg like the Kim Young-Sam government by negotiating how to share the economic burden. In 1996, just after the Kangnung submarine accident, the New York Times reported that the "Department of State's Staff thinks the most troublesome group on the Korean Peninsula is the South Korean Government". In response, the Chief Secretary to the President, Kim Guan-Gil asserted that the news was "a play on words by the US government" at a press conference. The US-ROK relationship was very bad at this time. Certainly, it was difficult for the ROK Government to make decisions without coordinating and consulting with the US. Today at least the US and ROK are designated as allies of one another. There have already been some Anti-US voices in the ultra-right but the operations of a nation cannot function as merely a competition between ideologies. Realistic policy options must be taken into account to govern the country and dealing with the economic crisis and promoting the free trade agreement requires cooperation between the US and ROK.

There is a Turning Point for the ROK's DPRK Policy

The ROK's regret over the end of inter-Korean dialogue is going to become more serious. At the same time, the Lee Myung Bak Administration's pragmatic DPRK policy will not be changed easily. The ROK's policy, which is dominated by the new right faction, is similar to the Neo-Con movement in the early days of Bush Administration, but even more serious.

To begin with, there are no political figures in South Korea that can restrain the Neo-Cons. The most serious problem that ROK politics is facing now is the absence of an organized opposition. French

politics have the tradition of Gaullism. In the US President Lincoln represented the Republican Party but not the Democratic one. In South Korea, through the process of colonization, war and cold war, the ultra-right have pushed out any opposition. In the early days of the Bush administration, when the Neo-Cons advocated a moral-based foreign policy approach toward the DPRK, Colin Powell, then Secretary of State, was able to restrain this behavior. In addition, without Powell's positive activity, the opening of the Six Party Talks on August 1st, 2003 would not have been possible. When the Iraq War was confirmed as a failure, the traditional conservatives including Francis Fukuyama condemned the rash idealism of the Neo-Con movement. In 2006, after the Republican Party was defeated in mid-term elections, the Neo-Cons began to gradually disappear from the historical stage. The Bush Administration's direct discussion with the DPRK started at the same time. However, in South Korean politics, there are no realist diplomatic strategists like Henry Kissinger, or an experience-oriented realist like Colin Powell.

The weakness of the ROK's Bureaucracy is another problem. Diplomatic bureaucrats play important roles in parliamentary government systems, including Japan. In the United States, despite having a Neo-Con dominated White House, the US Department of the State didn't abandon its role. When Condoleezza Rice became the Secretary of State and Christopher Hill became Assistant Secretary State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs and delegate to the Six-Party Talks, the Department of the State began to take back the leadership of the negotiating process. What about the ROK? Why there are so many "empty-headed" civil servants in South Korea? Maybe it is because at the beginning of the new government, there was no process to hold anyone accountable for their actions. Political revenge against the professional civil servants became a serious problem.

Policy is not just a rule, it is also how officials act. No matter how excellent the system is it will be difficult to make efficient use of it if officials distort the policy. The Lee Myung Bak Government's "diplomatic security" policy was seriously flawed, but in many ways has not actually started since the Neo-Cons in South Korea have not had a chance to act yet. At this point South Korean politics will see more activities based on ideology and faith. The roles of people who think there is no need for a Ministry of Unification, that it is fine to ignore Inter-Korean dialogue, and want to promote regime transmission in DPRK have only just begun.

Although the new right says that it is fine not to promote inter-Korean dialogue, the reality is different. How do you deal with separated family members? The government should take into account the feelings of elderly, separated families and set up family meeting places, like those established at Mt. Kumgang last July. An even more important issue is economic corporation. There needs to be a strategy to support the ROK's small and medium enterprises. Because of the failure to expand the dormitories at the Kaesong Industrial Complex it has become very hard to employ DPRK workers. The government should listen to the small and medium enterprises' depressing voices and finish construction of the facilities. It is difficult to understand how a government who promised to rejuvenate the economy can then proceed to ignore the problems of these small and medium enterprises.

The economy is becoming worse. With the global economy so unstable what will we do if there is a military conflict between the two Koreas? Since the Park Chung-hee regime there has been no government that denied the necessity of managing inter-Korean relations. If the government does nothing, it will be difficult to even maintain the tenuous, current situation. How long should the government wait? If the government misses the time to engage the North, it will only be more time consuming and expensive to compensate later. When considering the inter-Korean relationship, the government should not just consider the DPRK, but also pay attention to the ROK-US and ROK-China relationships as well as South Korea's relationship with Russia and Japan. The government should think about its long term future. There were some opinions about normalizing inter-Korean

relationship before the US election, but that opportunity was missed. The tension in the inter-Korean relationship is becoming more intense. If we don't act now there will be only more regret for the wasted time and lost opportunities in the future.

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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