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# Policy Forum 05-40A: The South-South Conflict and Korean Residents in Japan



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## The South-South Conflict and Korean Residents in Japan

Lee Jong Won

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### I. Introduction

Lee Jong Won, Professor at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, writes: "The most significant cause of continued confrontation surrounding policy toward North Korea is the DPRK's use of the nuclear card as a survival strategy and the tension Pyongyang still creates, thus, resolving these issues is of

first priority."

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## **II. Report by Lee Jong Won**

-The South-South Conflict and Korean Residents in Japan  
by Lee Jong Won

The newly-coined term "South-South conflict," along with policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) or North Korea, has risen as a political problem resulting in confrontation and disunity within South Korean society. The agitative and journalistic proliferation of the term South-South conflict has both slightly simplified and exaggerated the problem. The generalization of the term itself has fostered a dichotomy and hinders rational discussion concerning policy toward North Korea. Since the liberation of Korea to the present day the "Right-Left ideological divide" and "regionalism" have been a continuing problem in South Korean politics. But the contrariwise functions of the real origin of the term South-South conflict has also been glossed over and needs more attention. Such a conflict within South Korean society over policy toward North Korea is a reality that cannot be denied. The terminology itself gives birth to the South-South conflict phenomenon. This construction requires a method for both analysis and resolution, one that is also wary of the illusions that the terminology conjures up. With these considerations, this paper intends to investigate the problem of the South-South conflict phenomenon from the point of view of Japan and Korean residents in Japan.

## **The Political Structure of the South-South Conflict**

It is generally believed that the term "South-South conflict" entered as a part of the media's lexicon shortly after the June 2000 inter-Korean summit and gained widespread use after the controversial incident involving South Koreans who visited North Korea in 2001 for the "National Unification Festival" in Pyongyang. The conflict emerged more acutely after the inauguration of Roh Moo Hyun's participatory government. The contrasting views of such progressive groups as "March to Unification" and the conservative group "Anti-nuke, Anti-Kim Citizenship" (which became apparent with each group's presence in downtown Seoul on August 15th 2003) received widespread media coverage even in Japan. Such images have only contributed to the impression overseas of Korea being plagued by repeated disunity between conservative and progressive groups over policy approaches toward North Korea. This kind of disunity has also had a negative impact on the image of the Roh Moo Hyun government's level of stability and legitimacy.

Confrontation and division usually follow changes in policy approach. Moreover, in the case of Korea, for over a half a century the nation has gone from conservative regimes that professed anti-communism as the best national policy to an age of inter-Korean reconciliation. Therefore, it is only natural to expect opposition and disunity resulting from dramatic policy changes. Under such circumstances there is an obvious time lag between accepting the changes and the general public's understanding of those changes. It is therefore necessary to objectively analyze and understand the reasons for and the structures behind transition and significant change.

In order to understand the essence of the South-South conflict currently emerging in Korean society it will be helpful to analyze it from three different dimensions that are often used in explaining human political behavior: value, interest, and power. "Value" includes the notion of an ideology or a

system of thought and is an intangible factor whereas "interest" involves economic interests and is viewed from the perspective of material advantage. "Power" signifies authority and influence surrounded by contention and struggle. The South-South conflict can be viewed from these three dimensions of which power as the struggle for political authority is a salient characteristic.

On the surface, the South-South conflict can be seen as a continuing confrontation between the left and the right that emerged shortly after Korea's liberation in 1945, in other words a conflict involving ideology and value. There is still a generation in Korea who directly experienced the left-right confrontation and the Korean War. For this older generation of Koreans, North Korea has always been an object of opposition and "arguments of pro-communism," regardless of such notions' relevance to reality, they still have popular appeal. This is clearly shown by the fact that the main force behind the conservative groups and anti-North Korean gatherings are conservative Christian groups largely comprising refugees who fled from North Korea during the Korean War. The anti-communist value is the main factor behind such groups' mobilizing efforts.

However, within this confrontation of values there is an important change occurring. With the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and a narrowing of the gap of understanding between the two Koreas, the "anti-communist/pro-communist" debate is no longer sufficient to explain the heated discussions surrounding policy toward North Korea. Contrary to the understanding and assertions of conservative groups, the reconciliation and cooperation policy toward North Korea implemented since the Kim Dae Jung administration does not seek to support the North Korean system. Rather through coexistence and exchange the policy endeavors to promote a positive and peaceful foundation for unification by bringing about gradual change in the DPRK system and mitigating the differences that exist between the two Koreas. In other words the actual center of confrontation does not revolve around ideologies against or in favor of the North Korean system but rather involves debates over the best method for inducing desirable change of the DPRK's system. Despite the dissatisfaction and criticism of this policy approach by conservative groups in Korea, that a majority of the public voices its support for the basic ideas of reconciliation and cooperation toward North Korea illustrates this understanding. In addition, we can see a trend toward a gradual weakening and disappearance of the value-oriented confrontational aspect of the South-South conflict.

In many cases there is also a great deal of conflict over policy related to the economic or material interests with respect to North Korea. In accordance with changes in North Korea policy, conflict has resulted with respect to groups who have gained profits and other levels of society that feel their vested interests have been infringed upon. In the case of the South-South conflict, profit and loss with regard to economic interests is not a simple matter. By interpreting vested rights and interests in a wide sense the backlash from military authorities is one aspect of this infringement on interests. However, with the growth of large and small businesses and in accordance with developments in inter-Korean relations there is an expectation for significant economic profits, which rather than being a factor of conflict, are actually seen as a factor in promoting inter-Korean relations. Above all, this is evidence that business circles and enterprises in Korea are actually helping to guide the process of improving inter-Korean relations.

The most salient aspect of the South-South conflict is the clash surrounding the distribution of power or the struggle for political power. The term "South-South conflict" is a social phenomenon that gained increasing momentum through the dramatic victory of President Roh Moo Hyun, which only served to prove its connection to political power struggles. After suffering defeat twice in the presidential election there was criticism from conservative groups of the appeasement policy toward North Korea, which was seen as a form of political attack on the victorious progressive administrations. Similarities can be seen in the McCarthyism of the early 1950's in the United States

and criticisms by the Congress and the conservative press of the Bill Clinton administration's appeasement policy toward China in the 1990s. During times of intense domestic political power struggle, foreign policy can easily become a pawn for either side to sacrifice. The problem then becomes how this kind of conflict can be resolved within the framework of rational dialogue and discussion.

It would be useful here to compare the situation on the Korean peninsula with the situations in other countries that have experienced division such as Germany and China/Taiwan. In the case of West Germany the *ostpolitik* pursued after the 1960s toward communist East Germany and other communist regimes unfolded without resulting in any significant internal conflict within Germany. In 1966, a formation of a grand coalition of Germany's Christian Democratic Union and Social Democratic Party was sought to pursue a nonpartisan *ostpolitik* under West Germany's position of overall power without conflict among German citizens over policy approaches toward communist regimes. This can be explained through the economic advantages that West Germany gained in its approaches toward the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe which resulted in a common understanding and acceptance of the policy among the general public. In contrast, the case of Taiwan and its relationship with the mainland reveals a level of internal conflict exceeding that of Korea. In the case of Taiwan, although there is the benefit of improved relations with China through economic exchange, the conflict is amplified by the root of the problem between those born on mainland China and those born on the island of Taiwan and their difficulty in reaching a compromise, as well as the severity of the confrontation of values and domestic political power struggles. With respect to Korea's structural conditions the Korean case seems closest to the German case. However it shares more similarities with Taiwan with respect to the experience of war, a deep-rooted cold war and anti-communist mentality along with the simultaneous pursuit by progressive governments of policy changes toward North Korea and overall social reform accompanied by signs of political backlash from other sectors of society with vested interests. As with West Germany, it is now the task of South Korea to seek ways to mitigate domestic political power struggles in order to promote an end to the cold war structure on the Korean peninsula through public consensus.

## **Koreans in Japan and the South-South Conflict**

The South-South conflict does not receive a great deal of attention from the average community of Korean residents living in Japan. The main reason being that the average Korean resident in Japan does not experience a sense of real cold war confrontation in daily life. Of course there is some regular influence of a polarization from the confrontation structure resulting from the cold war-oriented organizations of the Mindan or pro-Seoul Korean Residents Union in Japan and Chongryun or pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. However, most Korean residents in Japan welcome the trend toward inter-Korean engagement and coexistence and the increasing internationalization of the Korean peninsula. The Korean residents in Japan--being the same ethnic group as Koreans on the peninsula--also experienced the cold war history of division of the Korean peninsula and war. Such experiences have negatively influenced their identity and social standing as well as their sense of self-respect. Therefore they reacted to the June 2000 inter-Korean summit and the resulting drop in tensions between the two Koreas by transcending political positions and generation gaps to show their wide support. There is a perspective that seeks to explain the South-South conflict phenomenon as a sign of instability of the Roh Moo Hyun government and this is influenced by the tendency of the Japanese press which worries about the national and international changes of South Korea which are often regarded as radical. However, this is not to be connected to criticism of the policy of inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation. In examining the last three years of the Mindan's newspaper there were not any regular reports or articles about the South-South conflict, suggesting that it is not a significant issue with Korean

residents in Japan.

The South-South conflict or South-North Korean confrontation among the Korean residents of Japan basically manifests itself at the organizational level through a confrontational structure. Conflict among the Mindan and Chongryun and the progressive force of the Hantongryun, which emerged out of the Mindan, are directly connected to and echo the South-South conflict and inter-Korean confrontation. Since opposition exists among these organizations there is also a direct influence on the South-South conflict. However, since basically the conflict among these organizations is localized to the organizations themselves, there is little if any connection to the majority of Korean residents in Japan.

The conflict between the Mindan and the Chongryun essentially reflects the confrontation between the two Koreas. We can see that the general phenomenon of the conflict structure of the periphery is more fixed than that of the center in the relationship between Korea and Korean residents in Japan. Despite significant change on the Korean peninsula, with no change in such organizations on the periphery there is a continuing tendency toward conservatism rather than progressivism. Rather than having an independent basis, both the Mindan and the Chongryun have relied on the cold-war strategies of the South Korean government and as a result inter-Korean reconciliation has weakened their foundations. Naturally these groups cannot help but take a step forward toward inter-Korean reconciliation and the post-cold war trend recently emerging on the peninsula. For example, in April of 1991 in Chiba, Japan a convention was held for the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF). With the need to form a joint cheering squad for the event the Mindan and Chongryun worked together. As a result that same year in October both groups helped to form a Council for the Promotion of Exchange among Korean Residents in Japan where several friendship and cultural promotion activities were held in local areas under the auspices of local chapters. However, most of the local chapter activities soon ceased and with the emergence of the DPRK nuclear issue the central council was no longer able to carry out joint activities.

With the June 2000 inter-Korean summit, expectations for inter-Korean exchanges were high among the Korean residents in Japan. There was one round of meetings of high-ranking officials representing the Mindan and Chongryun, yet so far no official exchanges have taken place. On the other hand during the year 2000 up to 209 cases of exchanges took place at various local levels; however the contacts took the form of Japanese or third parties hosting events with active joint participation from Korean residents in Japan rather than official joint hosting by the two Korean organizations themselves.

As one can see still there are obstacles blocking exchanges between these two organizations. The main reason for this can be found in the fact that the Mindan and Chongryun are losing their influence on the Korean residents of Japan because of increased inter-Korean reconciliation which is weakening these organizations and raising a sense of crisis. Because of this sense of crisis the tendency toward putting up organizational defense mechanisms has been strongest with Chongryun which has suffered the most.

In the narrow sense of the word, the South-South conflict for Korean residents in Japan is the conflict between Mindan and other groups excluding Chongryun, which has pursued democratization and unification. The representative example of this activist group is the Hanmintong, which was formed after the 1973 kidnapping incident of Kim Dae Jung. In 1989, Hanmintong changed its name to Hantongryun after cutting off its official relationship with Kim Dae Jung and changing its direction from a democratization movement to a unification movement. Hantongryun also has a youth organization as a subgroup. Although this activist group sometimes hosts conferences related to the South-South conflict in Korea it is difficult to say that it has had any influence on the general population of Koreans living in Japan. Although it is at ends with Mindan, it

is rare that Hantongryun is in direct conflict with Mindan because of the former's weak capacity for public mobilization.

The real South-South conflict among Korean residents in Japan is between the Mindan and the Korean government. The Korean government is leaning toward reform and progressivism, and the Mindan, with which the past conservative thinking and cold war mentality still remains. And despite the natural generational shift taking place within the Mindan--the third generation beginning to take the lead--the group still holds to conservative political tendencies. This inclination can be explained by several factors.

Firstly, it should be pointed out that the Mindan is basically the product of the cold-war structure and its existence depended on the conservative regimes of the past. Since 1946, the Mindan has grown under the support and protection of conservative regimes as a counter organization to the leftist Federation of Korean Residents in Japan or Chongryun. Until the advent of the Kim Young Sam administration in the mid-1990s the Mindan was acting as a passport-issuing agency for Korean residents in Japan with a significant financial base. There was a great deal of funding from the Korean government provided to Mindan for the purpose of maintaining its activities. Out of the yearly budget of \$20 million (2003), the Korean Residents Abroad Foundation, the main organization supplying funds to Koreans living overseas, allotted \$7.5 million to support the activities of the Mindan which represents 40 percent of the total financial support provided for Koreans overseas, a clear indication of just how close the Korean government and the Mindan organization were. Under the Kim Dae Jung administration in 2002 criticism arose over the excessive support for Mindan which resulted in a gradual reduction of funding. Under the Roh Moo Hyun administration in 2004, to the shock of Mindan, its allotment in the budget was cut in half to \$3.5 million. Although Mindan enjoyed a close relationship with the conservative regimes of the past, changes toward more progressive Korean governments and in policy toward North Korea are now issues directly affecting the organization.

Secondly, with respect to the Mindan, inter-Korean hostility is not simply an ideological conflict but also a prolonged structure of confrontation with Chongryun at the organizational level. That is to say that despite the natural occurrence of a generational change both in the Mindan and Chongryun the closed mentality made it difficult for internal and policy change to take place. The reality is that with the election of leaders and internal dynamics of the organization there is a lack of democratic procedure making it impossible to have meaningful change. Another reason is that Mindan usually built networks with Japanese conservative forces in personal and political policy while taking on the role as a conservative Korean lobbying organization toward Japanese political parties such as the Jamindang. The hardline sentiment toward North Korea now widely prevalent in Japan has served to amplify the Mindan's dissatisfaction and criticism over the South Korean government's increasingly appeasement-oriented policy toward North Korea. It cannot be denied that the Japanese conservative forces' conception of North Korea and information exerts a significant influence on Mindan's conservative mentality. It would be no exaggeration to express this relationship as a kind of political alliance formed out of a common hostile feeling toward the reformatory attitude toward North Korea now apparent in South Korean politics.

## **Resolving the South-South Conflict and the Experience of Koreans Abroad**

As with any kind of policy approach, debate and discussion on North Korea policy needs to reflect a variety of different positions. Having unanimous agreement over policy is unnatural and also it is not desirable from the perspective of promoting realistic policy choices. The real problem now is that

the South-South conflict is becoming a serious point of dispute in real politics as well as a confrontation that is both highly emotional and uncompromising. It is not easy to imagine that an important policy issue such as inter-Korean relations would somehow escape the realm of real politics. However, having policy toward North Korea become a hostage to domestic political confrontation poses a grave danger to the Korean peninsula's future and the national interests of Korea. Based on the experiences and reality of Korean residents in Japan we will examine several points for resolving the South-South conflict.

First, it is important to seek ways to establish the institutionalization of a nonpartisan promotion of North Korea policy and nonpartisan climate for discussions. Fortunately, the last general election reflected an overall generational change in political authority which is laying the foundation for bring about just such a climate. On the common basis of the post-cold war/democratization generation's coming of age it is time to not only re- examine inter-Korean issues but also it is important to establish a non-partisan diplomatic framework.

Secondly, it is crucial to activate national discussion in order to grasp inter-Korean relations from the wider international political perspective. When we look at the radically changing international political situation surrounding the Korean peninsula we can easily recognize how destructive the exhaustive bipartisan South-South conflict is and its harmful side-effects. With the exception of Mindan and its defensive conservatism we cannot witness much of the South-South conflict phenomenon among the Korean residents in Japan. One reason is that Korean residents in Japan understand the Korean peninsular issues in the framework of relations with Japan and the attitude of Japan toward the Korean peninsula. For half a century Korean residents in Japan have experienced the exhaustive structure of South-North division. Through this experience, they have come to realize that their status in Japanese society will change with the political and economic potential that can result from peaceful coexistence and cooperation between the two Koreas.

Above all else substantial progress is urgently needed with respect to inter-Korean peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Although there were many changes resulting from the June 2000 inter-Korean summit there still has not been a framework in which one can actually feel a sense of reconciliation between the two Koreas. Here also we must factor in the nuclear issue and the need for North Korea's "strategic resolution." If there is a breakthrough in the nuclear issue and improved foreign relations (especially in relations with the United States and Japan), international competition surrounding the Korean peninsula will be in full force. In order to prepare for this the overall cooperative framework between South and North Korea rapidly needs institutionalization and this process itself will reveal the actual futility of the discourse over the South- South conflict. The most significant cause of continued confrontation surrounding policy toward North Korea is the DPRK's use of the nuclear card as a survival strategy and the tension Pyongyang still creates, thus, resolving these issues is of first priority.

### **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](mailto: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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