The Impact of the US Attacks on North Korea

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By Brent Choi

I. Introduction

The following essay was contributed by Brent Choi, editor/research of the Joong-Ang Daily newspaper in Seoul. Choi examines the possible repercussions of the recent terrorist attacks on the US on the rapprochement process on the Korean Peninsula. He argues that given the likelihood of a more hard-line US policy resulting from the attacks, the DPRK will need to act quickly to make conciliatory gestures toward the ROK and the US to put the sunshine policy back on track.

II. Essay by Brent Choi

The Impact of the US Attacks on North Korea by Brent Choi, editor/researcher of the Joong-ang Daily, Seoul

The latest terror committed in the U.S. and the issue of North Korea has little connections in itself but not completely off the track. North Korea used to be one of the training grounds for Arab terrorists and is still listed as one of the terror-supporting nations by the United States. And besides, in this entangled world we now live in, almost everything is connected to each other one way or the other. Now with both of the U.S.'s landmark twin World Trade Center buildings smashed down to pieces, President George W. Bush is most likely to practice an even sterner foreign policy in the future and one of the nations that would particularly beat the burden will be Korean Peninsula.

The Korean Peninsula will feel the aftermath of calamity in New York soon enough--its all written all over in the TV. There's the former Foreign Minister of Israel insisting on a thorough investigation of the 'Rogue Nations' in his interview with the BBC, directly finger-pointing at a series of countries, including the North. U.S. troops stationed in the Korean Peninsula tightened their guard and President Bush's expected visit to Seoul around late October for a summit meeting has now turned blurry.

Perhaps the biggest lesson we could gain from the ultimate fiasco in the respect of National Defense is the ineffectiveness of Missile Defense Plan long pursued by the U.S. administration. Even if the U.S. succeeds in installing a Missile Defense System that would cost the nation about US$10 billion as insisted on by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, it would still be helpless against the latest terror conducted through the hijacking of civilian airplanes.

However this is just a cool analysis. In fact, it is more likely for the U.S. to choose a more "heated" alternative. Secretary Rumsfeld will see a boost in his hard-line policy in order to prepare for "a whole new threat." President Bush himself pledged that he'd "hunt down and punish those responsible for these cowardly acts," leaving slim chance for reconciliation and cooperation with its foreign policy.

This is the time for both Seoul and Pyongyang to act fast before the aftereffect of the New York havoc catches on in the Korean Peninsula and ruins all the past efforts to better relations with Washington. If the U.S. sets its mind to focus its future foreign policy on pressuring the rogue nations to identify the responsible nation, we could kiss the Sunshine Policy goodbye. Worse yet, Pyongyang may find itself forced to suspend a series of its own foreign policies involving South Korea and the U.S. and return back to the drawing board.

Seoul's concern is well displayed in the emergency National Security Council meeting held Wednesday morning just after the nightmarish incident both in New York and Washington. The Government through the emergency meeting confirmed its opposition toward terrorism and decided to call for full cooperation of neighboring countries, including the U.S., Japan, China and Russia, for maintenance of peace on the Korean Peninsula. The maintenance of peace in Korean Peninsula at this point indirectly argues that inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation policy must continue despite the tragedy across the continent.

Back in August 1998 when a bomb exploded in the U.S. Embassy based in Kenya, the North officially expressed regret toward the lost lives and vowed to stay strictly away from all terror acts themselves. It was wise to restate those words. This is because the North is in a handicapped situation already listed in the U.S. terror list.

Second, extending a reconciliatory gesture could be another idea. If Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun happens to step up and express deep condolences to the U.S. over the loss of a great many lives and assets, it may actually do some good to future North-U.S. relations. As the Korean saying goes, "A good speech is powerful enough to resolve heavy debts."

And third, from now on the North could really try to be a good boy and become more active in its engagement with the outside world, notably South Korea. Setting up an exact timetable for North Korea Chairman Kim Jong-il's return visit for one, could do wonders to lessen the U.S. suspicion toward the North.

Pyongyang froze inter-Korean dialogue for the past six months. If Chairman Kim still means to keep his word on his return visit to Seoul, he has three months left. If he lets the precious months go to waste, once again the glimmer of hope toward the North will be replaced by sense of betrayal, resignation and hatred.

"To launch a big and bold decision with speed"--that's one of the common political slogans in the North. That's good because they better hurry.

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