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Lee Myung-bak's Memoir of Self-Justification



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The memoir of former President Lee Myung-bak is causing quite a stir. It is odd that he is rushing to publish the memoir as it has been less than two years since he left office in 2013. Lee explained the hurried publication of his memoir, which include sensitive diplomatic information, was motivated by hopes that it will be used as a frame of “reference in the decision-making process.” However, with the conservative government still in power and if the former president simply wished to share his experience in state affairs and give advice, there must be a variety of ways to do this. It is hardly convincing that the memoir was written simply to serve as a reference point for the current government, considering its political ramifications and the potential adverse effects it may have on ROK-China relations and inter-Korean relations.

The primary purpose behind Lee’s decision appears to be motivated by his intention to advise the incumbent Park Geun-hye administration amidst the ongoing discussions for an inter-Korean summit and defend his position on the North-South summit was indeed just. The memoir is filled with self-justifications that he proudly responded to break North Korea’s bad habits by not dwelling on the summit. He advises the Park administration to follow principle rather than clinging on to the notion of holding a summit. Besides the summit, Lee Myung-bak also makes indirect criticism toward the Park Geun-hye administration’s North Korea policy. He repeatedly stresses the proper policy toward the North is not to promote dialogue for the sake of dialogue and not to be led by the nose by North Korea whose strategy involves demand for compensation after provocation. Once again, he insinuates that his North Korea policy was right. This is also an indirect expression for the discomfort he felt toward the Park administration’s policies, ‘Trust-building Process on the Korean Peninsula’ and ‘Dresden Declaration’.

It is an unsightly scene to witness the conservative party that regained power -- between the incumbent president and her predecessor -- to quarrel over North Korea policy and inter-Korean summit but they are at liberty to dispute these issues. Even arguing that his North Korea policy was right and that inter-Korean relations was successful during his term is also his freedom. However, the unconvincing self-justification logic that he is insisting to the public, current administration, and President Park is a bit excessive. The normal political duty of a retired president should be to humbly wait and accept the historical evaluation. However, for someone who has left the presidential office less than two years ago, it only portrays his insecurity and impatience by arguing, “I did nothing wrong” as it only appears as his political justification.

Throughout its entire term, the Lee Myung-bak administration was not free from the judgment that his North Korea policy resulted in the collapse of North-South relations. By defining his two predecessor’s North Korea policy as “peojugi” (“over-giving”), he pledged to break the bad habits of North Korea and create new North-South relations. However, he did not succeed in changing the North nor change North Korea in the direction he hoped for. Rather, his 5-year term was consistently met with breakdown in North-South relations and elevated military tensions that resulted in security crises, such as the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong Island incidents. The Lee Myung-bak administration buried in its self-justification and principles, did not punish North Korea nor earn their concession, but rather suffered from North Korea’s provocations. This indeed was resolution only in rhetoric, and principle full of scars. What is important in evaluating

foreign diplomacy and North Korea policy is not words but achievements.

In the memoir, Lee boasts proudly of the fact that he rejected Pyongyang's unfairly demanded price for the inter-Korean summit. This, too is just based on his self-serving logic. First of all, rice and fertilizer that the North had demanded is more likely to be a necessary step to create the favorable condition in inter-Korean relations rather than a price for the summit. A summit is not something that can be created from thin air. Even the Kim Dae-jung administration pursued Mount Kumgang tourism and other exchange and cooperation projects and sustained humanitarian assistance to build mutual trust, which created the favorable condition for the summit. During the Roh Moo-hyun administration, the February 13 Agreement was signed that gave a positive sign to improve the nuclear issue through humanitarian assistance which provided continuation in inter-Korean relations and later paved the road toward a summit. Thus, a summit is possible as a result of continuation of North-South relations and mutual cooperation, and not possible through sudden efforts without improved relations and mutual trust. In other words, a summit should not be viewed as an entrance but as an exit of inter-Korean relations. For the summit to actually take place, both North and South must act to create a favorable environment for the summit. As the provision of favorable environment for the summit, Pyongyang asked for humanitarian assistance and the Lee administration in return asked for the return of POWs and abductees. This demonstrates President Lee was aware of the need to create conditions for the summit.

In particular, President Lee imprudently revealed the conversation during the South Korea–China summit in his memoir. It disclosed the fact that North Korea attempted to take advantage of China to actualize the inter-Korean summit. Regardless of this fact, unilaterally disclosing the information shared between leaders of two countries goes against the principle of diplomatic relations which should be based on mutual respect and trust. Who would want to trust and continue relationship with a country that discloses the content of conversations shared in confidence just a few years ago? This issue will definitely act as an obstacle in the South Korea–China relations not only in the near future but in the long term.

President Lee Myung-bak proudly vaunted that an inter-Korean summit did not take place. This should be a matter of remorse and not acclaim for causing deterioration in inter-Korean relations. Instead of boasting that he stood steadfast by his principles, he needs to humbly reflect on his rashness and stubbornness that resulted in failed management of North Korea and North–South relations with heightened tension on the Korean Peninsula, leaving a stain on history. Furthermore, the memoir of former President Lee is full of brashness rather than regret, making one to doubt the truthfulness and reliability of the memoir that supposedly captures the experience in state affairs during his presidency. The book may sell thanks to noise marketing, but it is doubtful to earn him respect as a former president.

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