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Suggestions for the Moon Jae-in Government's North Korea Policy



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After the May 9 presidential election, the Moon Jae-in government was born. Since the president's seat was left vacant for a quite some time, a number of issues are awaiting to be resolved. In particular, the most urgent issue is dealing with the increased security threat from North Korea's nuclear and missile advancements and restoring the inter-Korean relations that were virtually cut off for nearly a decade. Given this, President Moon Jae-in reorganized Cheongwadae (the Blue House) and removed the post for senior presidential secretary for foreign affairs and security and instead the national security office chief will act as the control tower of the new government's unification, diplomacy and security policy. It is foreseeable to observe concrete actions to take place soon with a new North Korea policy in place to normalize inter-Korean relations.

Currently, the situation in the Korean peninsula has intensified more than ever due to North Korea's persistent nuclear and missile advancements and hegemonic conflict and competition between the US and China. The Kim Jong Un regime will not easily give up its nuclear and missile program, and there will be many difficulties expected in the near future in achieving peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, with looming US-China conflict likely to continue for a considerable period of time. There is not a single problem surrounding the Korean peninsula that can be easily solved, including the US-ROK THAAD deployment that is straining relations between South Korea and China, the issue of THAAD cost-sharing with the United States, and the 'comfort women' agreement with Japan.

In order for the Moon Jae-in government to restore inter-Korean relations in a meaningful way, it is crucial to establish a condition favorable to resolve North Korea's nuclear and missile advancement. As North Korea continues to push forward with nuclear and missile advances, the pressure of the international community on North Korea was further reinforced, and the inter-Korean relations remains strained from the nine years of hardline North Korea policy of the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations. In this process, the internationalization of the Korean peninsula issue has deepened, and a vicious cycle continues as South Korea, who is the main actor in the Korean peninsula, has lost its voice in this process. In particular, as shown in the summit between the US and China in April, the US and China are using the North Korean nuclear issue as a negotiating card for their own national interests. This reality once again confirms that South Korea's right to speak can only be attained through improvement of inter-Korean relations as the main stakeholder.

Therefore, for the fundamental resolution of issues surrounding the Korean peninsula, the Moon Jae-in administration is likely to pursue a North Korea policy with the aim of restoring and normalizing inter-Korean relations as a major state goal. The United States is trying to induce change in North Korea through sanctions and pressure while China is trying to solve the problem through dialogue and negotiation. It will take more time and effort to narrow the gap between the US and China. In this process, we need to actively engage and exert efforts to reflect our position and interests as the main actor of the Korean Peninsula in the United States' and China's policies toward the Korean peninsula. Through normalization of inter-Korean relations, we can fulfill our role as a main actor and cooperate with the neighboring countries including the US and China in

order to find a fundamental solution to problems that we face in the Korean peninsula. In this context, it is considered appropriate that, in his inaugural address and phone calls, President Moon Jae-in referred to holding summit meetings with major countries and dispatching special envoys to the US, China, Japan and Russia. Along with this, the new government will also need to actively review the option to dispatch a special envoy to North Korea.

Above all, we must seek ways to make a positive contribution to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue through advancing inter-Korean relations. In addition to imposing sanctions and pressure with the international community, South Korea should pursue a ‘two-track’ strategy to promote bilateral and multilateral dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang in order to alleviate tensions on the Korean peninsula. We were able to derive the September 19 Joint Statement—evaluated as an important roadmap for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue—and succeeded in persuading the US and North Korea through our efforts to mediate based on the solid US-ROK alliance and friendly relations with the North coupled with the help of China.

The Moon Jae-in administration should pay attention to the fundamental structural changes that are taking place in the international order, including Sino-US relations, when formulating its new North Korea and foreign policies. The interests of the great powers around the Korean peninsula are complicated, and the current situation is directly tied to our survival. The THAAD deployment issue is a persuasive representation of our current situation.

One fortunate aspect about the recent change is that unlike the past, Washington and Beijing are strengthening cooperation to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. Of course, the US and China have much more space to cooperate with each other than before, but above all, the priority of the North Korean nuclear issue has greatly increased in the United States. The level of North Korea’s nuclear development has reached a point where it can no longer be neglected, but in addition, the United States has no immediate need to consume a high level of energy to deal with urgent issues like the Middle East or Iran nuclear negotiations like in the past. This provides a great opportunity to deal with and concentrate on the North Korean nuclear issue. Given that the Korean Peninsula question cannot be resolved alone and it demands international cooperation, the new government is fortunate to witness such change in environment.

Another aspect is the need to actively communicate with the public. As President Moon Jae-in mentioned, it is desirable for the president to explain directly to the people and seek consensus on important issues. Only when the North Korea policy is established and promoted based on national consensus through the process of gathering public opinion can one then demonstrate power and trust to opponents. While a new policy toward North Korea is also needed, it is wise to find a more viable, feasible and improved solution by reflecting on the past North Korea policies of the previous governments.

In order to restore trust and improve relations between the two Koreas, the Moon Jae-in administration will have to work hard and carry out various policies, adjusting the speed and distinguish between urgent and mid-to-long-term goals. If one tries to do too much in too short a period of time, plans are likely to backfire. What is most essential at this time is to be patient, steadfast, and consistent.

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