



IFES Issues and Analysis - NO.60 [2017-10] May. 26, 2017

Moon Jae-in Government and Normalization of Inter-Korean Relations: Subjective Will and Objective Reality



Keun-Sik KIM
Professor, Kyungnam University
kimosung@kyungnam.ac.kr

The Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University has commissioned a series of four special issues of *Issues and Analysis* to discuss the situation that the new administration of Moon Jae-in faces. This issue dealt with restoration and normalization of North-South Korean relations. The next three issues will discuss THAAD and Sino-US/Sino-ROK relations, the rapidly developing North Korean missile and nuclear programs, with the final issue considering the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

The Moon Jae-in government is launched. Even without taking the initial honeymoon phase into consideration, the fresh start with new structural change in Cheongwadae highlighted by a leadership emphasizing communication is raising the expectations of the people. Among the new tasks to be tackled by the Moon government, normalization of inter-Korean relations?which has been at its worst for quite some time now?can no longer be delayed. Inter-Korean relations broke down completely after the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations, and the heightened tension and crisis on the Korean peninsula has become a common sight. It is needless to mention how abnormal the present situation in the Korean peninsula and inter-Korean relations are.

During his entire campaign period, President Moon Jae-in criticized the former government's security policy as "fake security." He criticized that while the word "security" was used, the Korean peninsula has suffered the worst security crisis, and the inter-Korean relations reached its worst stage with the last remaining links lost?inter-Korean talks stopped, the Kaesong Industrial Complex closed, inter-Korean economic cooperation disappeared, and nongovernmental exchanges were cut off. Regardless of Moon's platform, it is undebatable that normalizing inter-Korean relations and restoring dialogue is an urgent task to achieve peace and stability of the Korean peninsula and to "remove the old evils" from society.

Normalization of inter-Korean relations is only possible when the will of the government and objective conditions are combined in a virtuous cycle. First of all, from the standpoint of the Moon Jae-in government's will, the president's will to normalize inter-Korean relations seems solid. Already in his platform, he proposed a new economic map of the Korean Peninsula and proposed a long-term vision of the economic community and market integration of the two Koreas. He also declared reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mt. Kumgang tourism and accentuated that he will visit Pyongyang if deemed necessary. The willingness to restore the inter-Korean relations from hostility and confrontation to reconciliation and cooperation is consistent between the president and the policy advisory group. However, even if there is a will, if the objective condition is not satisfied, the power to drive will be lost. In other words, it is difficult to normalize inter-Korean relations only with the will of the Moon government under the current conditions of the North Korean nuclear reality and US-DPRK conflict.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's position is also an important factor in determining the future of normalizing inter-Korean relations. For the time being, Kim Jong Un is likely to take a wait-and-see attitude and approach the inter-Korean relations in conjunction with developments in US-DPRK relations. North Korea's foreign ministry director general for U.S. affairs, Choe Son Hui, said, "if certain conditions are met," North Korea would agree to meet with President Donald Trump while they "will observe the situation" to resume talks with Seoul. The DPRK embassy in China made a demand in principle to the new Moon administration to implement the inter-Korean agreements.

In regards to inter-Korean dialogue, the Kim Jong Un regime has changed its previous stance of "active necessity" to "passive principles". Based on its "two Koreas" strategy that support the principle of "separation and coexistence", the inter-Korean dialogue will not be rejected; but Pyongyang will not deem dialogue and exchange as absolutely necessary like in the past. It is highly likely that North Korea will actively engage in inter-Korean dialogue only after the US-DPRK negotiation is restarted, as relations with the United States is of primary concern to the Kim regime.

In the end, in order for the active will of the Moon government to actually lead to the normalization of inter-Korean relations, one must understand that it is inevitably related to the North Korean nuclear issue and the US-DPRK relations. In order for the independent will to bear fruit, there must be objective conditions to support it.

However, the objective conditions at the moment are not that great. The North Korean nuclear crisis is at its worst, and the sanctions placed on North Korea are a difficult situation to solve. The power struggle between the Trump administration and the Kim Jong Un regime is still ongoing, where Trump continues to place highest pressure on Pyongyang while North Korea is responding with maximum nuclear pressure. The US-China conflict, including the THAAD deployment issue, is another objective structure that is making normalization of inter-Korean relations difficult.

It is difficult to expect normalization of inter-Korean relations in the near future unless the huge obstacle that is the North Korean nuclear issue is overcome. Even if the South Korean government's independent actions to improve inter-Korean relations had a positive effect on the Korean peninsula thus far, progress in inter-Korean relations could not be made under the deteriorating conditions of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Moreover, the present situation of the nuclear crisis continues with the clash between major powers. Thus under the current reality progress in inter-Korean relations is neither plausible nor desirable. In other words, even if the Moon Jae-in government's intention to improve inter-Korean relations is strong, it will be challenging to take the first step in front of the immediate obstacle, which is the nuclear issue.

The Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments both regarded the North Korean nuclear issue as a top priority, and as a result the inter-Korean relations suffered. The Lee Myung-bak administration's "Vision 3000: Denuclearization and Opening" and Park Geun-hye government's closure of the Kaesong Industrial Complex are prime examples that demonstrate that the nuclear issue was closely linked to inter-Korean relations. Since then, advancement in the nuclear issue has become a precondition for the improvement of inter-Korean relations. As the new Moon administration expressed disapproval of the previous Lee and Park governments' policy toward North Korea, the Moon government cannot attempt to improve inter-Korean relations with the nuclear issue as a premise; but at the same time, it will be difficult to pursue an independent inter-Korean relationship detached from the nuclear issue.

In the end, the Moon government should opt to find a desirable solution to improve inter-Korean relations and the North Korean nuclear issue by creating a virtuous cycle between the two, where advancement on the nuclear issue results in improvement in inter-Korean relations and vice versa. To do so, the Moon administration must recognize the fact that the North Korean nuclear issue is not a premise for the inter-Korean relations but at the same time it cannot be entirely separate. It is detrimental in all aspects to go all in on inter-Korean relations independently

disregarding the nuclear issue and the US-ROK cooperation, as it will not improve the situation with the nuclear issue, US-ROK relations, or domestic public opinion.

Rather than seek immediate progress in inter-Korean relations, it would be wiser for the Moon administration to prioritize achieving progress in the nuclear situation by actively promoting the ROK-US and ROK-China relations so that the North Korean nuclear issue can transition into a negotiation phase. At the present time, after placing “maximum pressure”™ on North Korea, President Trump may likely opt for a tactic of “maximum engagement”™. In other words, the possibility of negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington cannot be ruled out. Once the nuclear negotiations begin to advance between the US and North Korea, it is likely to open up the path to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, and at that moment the Moon government should fully embark on normalization of inter-Korean relations.

The Moon Jae-in administration should not make the normalization of inter-Korean relations a top priority right away. Instead, the first and foremost priority is to observe the objective reality in order to make progress in the nuclear issue. This means that it is more urgent for the new Moon administration to restore trust in the US-ROK alliance and ROK-China relations in order for South Korea, the United States, and China to make a breakthrough in the North Korean nuclear issue together. Of course, even before the issue advances, it is necessary to prime the inter-Korean relations by first resuming nongovernmental exchanges, contacts, and humanitarian assistance. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize improving relations with the US and China is also a top priority and dispel any concerns President Trump might have and improve strained ROK-China relations on account of THAAD. Triangular cooperation between South Korea, the United States and China could lead to a reopening of nuclear negotiations, and this in the end could be a shortcut to restore inter-Korean relations.

After taking office, the new Moon administration fortunately did not rush to appoint a special envoy to North Korea. It is also a prudent decision not to immediately emphasize the resumption of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and removal of the May 24 [sanctions] Measures which when he was serving in the opposition party Moon had insisted should be done. The reality of inter-Korean relations is not possible with subjective will alone. In order for the will to result in an actual outcome, we must fully consider the objective conditions that will enable it. It is time for the Moon Jae-in administration to strategically think about normalizing inter-Korean relations based on this reality. It is better to go in the right direction, no matter how slow you go.

[MORE ARTICLES](#)

- Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IFES).

- To join our mailing list for Issues & Analysis, please email us with your name, email address, and affiliation to ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr

You can remove your email address from our mailing list by clicking the link below

[\[No longer receive e-mail\]](#)



COPYRIGHT(C) 2010 IFES ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
2(Samcheong-dong) Bukchon-ro 15-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-230,
Republic of Korea
TEL. +82-2-3700-0739 FAX. +82-2-3700-0707
EMAIL. ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr