



As a follow-up to President Moon Jae-in's 'Berlin Declaration', a North-South military summit has been proposed by the Ministry of National Defense, and South Korea's Red Cross has proposed a Red Cross Summit. The latter was proposed in order to agree on a meeting of separated families (and visits to ancestral graves) that President Moon called for in his declaration. Considering the advanced age of members of separated families, the situation is indeed urgent. And given the tenor of military tensions on the Korean peninsula, talks are very much needed at the earliest opportunity. However, the North Koreans have yet to react in any official capacity. The only response has been from Rodong Sinmun (North Korea's main newspaper), which has run editorials that have seemed to, in a roundabout way, reject the proposals.

The South Korean government has suggested 'all hostile actions on the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) which worsen military tensions' as the agenda for a military summit. 'Hostile actions' are 'not defined, and will be considered in light of the North Korean response', but there is good reason to believe that it includes the cessation of psychological warfare operations waged by the two sides, and leaflet drops. North Korea has demanded the cessation of mutual slander along the MDL, hence they do not have grounds to reject the military summit proposal. However, what might have been had the South proposed a more far-reaching agenda like 'necessary measures to alleviate military tensions on the Korean peninsula, and promote peace and stability'?

Since South Korea's new administration has come into office, the North Korean government has continuously emphasized the need to prioritize the resolution of political and military issues. A representative example of this is what Chang Ung, North Korean IOC committee member, said about plans to improve inter-Korean relations beginning with sports: "if I am kind, it sounds naive, if I am not, it sounds like hopeless." Chosun Sinbo, which represents the official view of the North Korean government, said that it will judge the will to improve relations by actions not words, indirectly pressuring the South to cancel the joint US-ROK Ulchi-Freedom Guardian military exercises planned for late August. The so-called 'fundamental problems' emphasized by the Kim Jong-un government include not only psychological warfare operations, but also includes conflicts of interest with related states, as in the case of military exercises.

The fact that Kim Jong-un's government has made political and military concerns its priority in North-South relations is not unrelated to the reactionary turn in North Korea's South Korea-related strategy. At the Seventh Party Congress in May 2016, Kim Jong-un's government asserted that there was no difference between their policies on unification and South Korea from those of the 1980s and 1990s. It is difficult to find a legacy from progress made in inter-Korean relations in the 2000s. At the same time, North Korea also declared that the 'dual development [Byungjin] of economic construction and nuclear weapons construction [sic]' was the state's strategic line for a new era, and had put in place a variety of measures to realize it. They are focused on the development of nuclear weapons and missiles to realize the latter goal, whilst seeking popular approval by improving living standards through markets and other means.

From the perspective of the regime, risking the very survival of the state in order to pursue the development of nuclear weapons and missiles, it is absolutely essential that the programs succeed. North Korea does not appear likely to give up on nuclear weapons in the face of continued, indeed strengthening sanctions and pressure from the international community. Rather, the state emphasizes the overriding priority of self-strengthening, and utilizes the sanctions regime as a useful means through which to further strengthen social cohesion. Thus, hardline policies targeting the North arguably may have actually strengthened North Korea under Kim Jong-un.

When seen from such a vantage point, normalization of inter-Korean relations does not necessarily appear to be an urgent issue for Kim Jong-un's North Korea. According to data released by the Bank of Korea on July 21, 2017, in spite of the freeze in North-South relations and the intensifying international sanctions regime, in 2016 North Korea's economy grew the fastest in 17 years, registering a growth rate of 3.9%. This is believed to be a consequence of improving economic conditions that resulted from growing domestic consumption in the last few years. At the same time, Kim's North Korea has made attaining actual nuclear status its overriding priority of the state, and is prepared to endure significant burden and hardships to achieve this goal. In order to restore and normalize relations between the two Koreas, therefore, a positive response from North Korea is necessary; but for North Korea what it deems to be a desired level of nuclear and missile development must likely be achieved in order for serious improvement in North-South and US-North relations to occur.

As President Moon has indicated following the G20 Summit, South Korea is very much lacking in the capacity necessary to resolve the problems affecting the Korean peninsula as a whole. Yet, that does not mean one must fall into pessimism or excess concern. This is because, as President Moon emphasized in his Berlin declaration, peace on the peninsula is both protected and made, and results depend greatly on what we do. North Korea has indicated—as it always does—a great deal of suspicion regarding the North Korea policies of the Moon administration—still in its early days. They appear to be 'vetting' the South Korean government, and observing circumstances. The North was also highly critical and cautious of the Kim Dae-jung government's North Korea policy, a government that helped change the direction of North-South relations through the first, historic North-South summit.

We must consider how we are to resolve the issue of inter-Korean relations in the face of the threat posed by North Korea's rapid development of nuclear and missile technology, creating both a broad strategy and a roadmap with specifics. At the same time, we must engage in discussion and cooperate closely not only with North Korea, but neighbouring states like the United States and China in order to create peace on the Korean peninsula. Given that North Korea is no longer accepting of most aid offers and believes that it has changed of its own accord, it is unlikely to be responsive to approaches based on prior methods. Discourse based on current issues alone will be of limited utility, and fundamental problems must be addressed to restore and normalize inter-Korean relations. This is the reason why the North-South situation is both urgent and in need of a new, detailed paradigm.

Such a paradigm should, as President Moon's Berlin Declaration emphasized, prioritize peace. We must construct a virtuous circle premised upon discussion with North Korea and neighbouring states, discussion that will restore and normalize inter-Korean relations, peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, and create a peace system on the Korean peninsula. It is the active engagement in resolving political and military issues especially, largely not dealt with at the inter-Korean level up to now, that must be done by us in order to foster fundamental change to the order on the Korean peninsula and end the vicious circle.

[MORE ARTICLES](#)

- To join our mailing list for *Issues & Analysis*, please email us with your name, email address, and affiliation to [ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr](mailto:ifes@kyungnam.ac.kr)

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

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



경남대학교 극동문제연구소  
The Institute for Far Eastern Studies

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