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Tourism at Mt. Kumgang: An Opportunity for Improving Inter-Korean Relations



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The tourism business at Mt. Kumgang has emerged as an issue with the potential to make or break the future of inter-Korean relations. In his recent on-site inspection of the Mt. Kumgang tourism site, Chairman Kim Jong Un ordered the removal of the facilities built by the South, and proposed a conference to exchange documents to facilitate this removal immediately. With both inter-Korean relations and US-DPRK relations at a standstill, it seems as though Chairman Kim's remarks are becoming a significantly challenging factor for the South. Firstly, the message that Chairman Kim sent through this on-site visit as he brought the Mt. Kumgang issue to the forefront was that he is attempting to change the muddled situation with South Korea and the US, and that this is a multipurpose card for pressuring the South and the US. At the current stage, it is critical to gain a precise understanding of North Korea's strategy and intentions. In order to do so, an urgent meeting must somehow be arranged with the North Korean authorities responsible to change or resolve the Mt. Kumgang tourism situation. In this way, an opportunity to normalize inter-Korean relations might also be created.

Since North Korea halted tourism to Mt. Kumgang in 2008, there have been ongoing attempts to resume the sightseeing tours. While this is partially owing to the fact that tourism on Mt. Kumgang was one of Chairman Kim Jong Il's dying instructions, the impact that it will have on North Korea's economic development strategy provides an even greater impetus. Despite the international sanctions against the North, Chairman Kim Jong Un is focused on tourism as a measure that could become a driving force behind the country's economic development. As a result, North Korea is actively developing its domestic tourism sector to both improve the standard of living of ordinary people and bring in foreign currency. This is also why Chairman Kim Jong Un stated in his 2019 New Year's Address that he would "unconditionally" revive tourism on Mt. Kumgang. From the regime's perspective, tourism on Mt. Kumgang is not a choice, but an essential mission.

In 2015, a representative from the Chosun Mt. Kumgang International Travel Agency went to China, where the company held a Mt. Kumgang Investment Promotion Conference. At the conference, the representative emphasized the absolute need to revive tourism on Mt. Kumgang, saying, "It took great courage for Marshal Kim Jong Il to yield the entire military region between the sharply divided North and South over to tourism. However, the tourism business at Mt. Kumgang, which has made a great contribution to national reconciliation, was destroyed, and the failure to revive it up to this day is entirely the product of the hostile policies of the anti-communist countries."

After tourism on Mt. Kumgang began to slump owing to the issues within inter-Korean relations, North Korea changed its focus to international cooperation in an attempt to maintain the business. Following the incident wherein Park Wang-ja was shot in July 2008, North Korea froze and seized South Korean assets in August 2011 and at the same time enacted the Mt. Kumgang Special Tourist Zone Act, which aimed at targeting foreigners, such as Chinese tourists, to come to Mt. Kumgang. In August 2011, an international tourism trial was conducted via the Man Gyong Bong 92 passenger ferry. On June 11, 2014, the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly officially announced the establishment of the "Wonsan-Mt. Kumgang

International Tourist Zone.” In 2012, North Korea created a plan to construct a large-scale “Tongcheon Special Economic, Trade, and Development District” that would connect the five major East Asian countries via land, sea, and air through Mt. Kumgang. Tongcheon, located in Kangwon Province, was chosen for its position as the center of the Wonsan-Mr. Kumgang zone. This was a measure reflecting the willingness of Chairman Kim Jong Un to revitalize tourism on Mt. Kumgang on an international scale. The measure aimed at building up the Mt. Kumgang region as a global tourist destination and an economic hub. However, it did not attract the amount of foreign capital that the regime desired, and only a small fraction of foreign tourists sought out Mt. Kumgang as a destination. This brought about the keen realization that the expansion of tourism to Mt. Kumgang will continue to struggle both economically and in practical terms without cooperation with the South. It is worth noting that even when Chairman Kim Jong Un visited Mt. Kumgang for the first time and ordered the removal of the facilities built by the South, he mentioned that if South Korean tourists would come they were welcome anytime.

The path that we must choose is clear. Tourism on Mt. Kumgang is not a simple, self-contained issue. It is closely tied to the development of inter-Korean relations and naturally to US-DPRK denuclearization negotiations as well. Because of this, we must turn the tide and take this opportunity now to engage in dialogue. If inter-Korean relations fail to normalize, North-South cooperative projects including Mt. Kumgang tourism will also fail to materialize. Nothing can get done when tensions increase and the relationship between the two Koreas is strained. We must wisely use the issue of Mt. Kumgang to make a breakthrough in denuclearization. Because North and South Korea agreed to form a special zone of peace and cooperation in the West Sea in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 19, 2018 it is desirable to base the solution to this problem on the spirit and content of this agreement. There is a need to propose a concrete plan for cooperation that can share the benefits of peaceful cooperation and the economic benefits linked to the development of Mt. Kumgang and Wonsan between the two Koreas. To resolve this problem, we must create a step-by-step progression scheme that does not violate the scope of the UN and US sanctions regime. Creating space within which inter-Korean relations can demonstrate independence while also cooperating with the US is another important task. This is not simply limited to tourism on Mt. Kumgang; it is the key to preventing the deterioration and promoting the advancement of normal relations between North and South Korea.

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