

On Demands for Flexibility in the Lee Myung Bak Government's Policies

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Recently there has been vigorous debate over the Lee Myung Bak government's North Korea policy and demands for "flexibility." While some are calling for a return to the Sunshine Policy, others insist that we must put even more pressure on North Korea. Does our government's policy truly need to be more flexible? If so, what would such a "flexible" policy look like, and how might it be implemented? Serious reflection and policy re-orientation will be needed in order to create an effective policy with widespread popular support.

Achievements of Lee Myung Bak's North Korea Policy and Demands for 'Flexibility'

The Lee Myung Bak administration's North Korea policy achievements up to now include ① establishment of a "principled" inter-Korean relationship and ② a paradigm shift from "peaceful management of division" to "preparing for unification." The Lee Myung Bak administration has worked to shore up the shaky ROK-US alliance and terminate the misguided traditional practices of the inter-Korean relationship, while promoting a new vision for unification and expounding upon its value in order to transition from the former negative attitude toward unification, which framed it as something to fear and

avoid, to a more positive outlook.

Probably the biggest factor behind the increasing calls for flexibility in Lee Myung Bak's North Korea policy is the recent news of US-DPRK contacts. Since the start of the second North Korean nuclear crisis the US has refused bilateral talks with the North, sticking to its two key policy directives, namely the "China First Policy" which places primary responsibility on China to resolve the nuclear issue within a multilateral framework, and "Strategic Patience" which says that the US will not hold talks with North Korea until it makes visible efforts to disable its nuclear programs. However the US has recently been seeking dialogue with North Korea in order to manage the new "crisis on the peninsula" brought on by the series of North Korean military provocations and the disclosure of its uranium enrichment program. Meanwhile within South Korea there have also been voices calling for a softer policy line toward the North.

The criticism of Lee Myung Bak's policies on the grounds that they need greater "flexibility" is actually a distortion of the true intention behind the public's demands for "flexibility." When the South Korean people call for flexibility they do not mean to imply that our side bears responsibility for the current impasse in inter-Korean relations. According to a survey conducted by KINU in 2010 at the end of Lee Myung Bak's second year in office (just before the sinking of the Cheonan), with regards to the cause of the impasse in inter-Korean relations, 51.5% of respondents believed that "North Korea's mistakes have been greater" while only 4.2% felt that "South Korea's mistakes have been greater." The disparity would likely be even greater if the same question were asked after the Cheonan sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.

Looking back, ever since a North Korean delegation headed by Kim Ki Nam proposed an inter-Korean summit in the summer of 2009, each critical moment in inter-Korean contacts has been accompanied by another North Korean provocation. Ever since Kim Jong Il's health problems surfaced, the military hard-liners have pushed out the factions that favor dialogue with the South in an attempt to take charge of the situation. Early this year military hard-liners, disillusioned with the leadership's efforts to engage in dialogue with the South, sent NDC member Ri Son Kwon to the military working-level meeting, where he proceeded to break up the talks by calling the Cheonan sinking "an elaborate scheme." Later the North Korean military had some unofficial contacts with South Korea, but once again the South Korea specialists in the United Front Department were pushed aside in favor of leading military personnel such as General Pak Chol of the NDC; the North

condemned the South Korean military's targeted firing exercises as "a massive provocation" and the talks stalled. Ri Son Kwon and Pak Chol are known as subordinates of Kim Young Chol, the director-general of the Reconnaissance Bureau and a major promoter of the hard-line policy toward the South. In other words, if anyone deserves the blame for the current deadlock in inter-Korean relations, it is not the South Korean government but rather the hard-liners in the North Korean military.

Establishing Preconditions for "Flexibility"

After witnessing the Cheonan sinking and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, most South Koreans feel real concern about the heightened threat of war breaking out and hope for a reduction of tensions. According to a KBS opinion poll conducted in advance of this year's National Liberation Day (8.15) ceremony, 84.7% of citizens feel that the current security situation is unstable. Those calling for a "flexible North Korea strategy" base their argument on this public sense of unease.

However most South Koreans feel that even if "a flexible North Korea strategy" is able to breathe new life into inter-Korean dialogue, it is unlikely to create a dramatic breakthrough or open up new prospects for inter-Korean relations. The same KBS survey also showed that, in regards to a potential summit, a far greater percentage had negative expectations (63.7%) versus positive ones (36.3%). One noteworthy result of the survey was that a majority of citizens responded that they would support a principled policy toward the North rather than unconditional large-scale aid. Only 10.9% of respondents said that they would support unconditional food aid to North Korea, whereas 64.6% supported "aid with conditions" and 24.5% supported "unconditional termination" of aid. People who felt there must be no linkage between "the nuclear issue and inter-Korean economic cooperation" or between "the Cheonan incident and inter-Korean trade" amounted to just 36.9% and 26.4% respectively, and on the issue of Mt. Kumgang tourism only 27% felt that the tours should be continued unconditionally.

Overall the results of the KBS survey seem to reflect a public desire for flexibility in the government's policy only so far as it does not damage its fundamental principles. In that case, what can we do to show "flexibility" within the confines of our stated principles? First, it is better to focus on tension reduction via functionalist approaches and the resulting expanded scope of contacts, rather than hoping for radical changes and breakthroughs through singular events in inter-Korean relations. For instance, as we continue with ongoing activities such as visits and exchanges by NGOs, reunions of separated families, humanitarian aid, etc., we

should gauge North Korea's corresponding reaction and adjust the scope of contacts accordingly.

Second, in pursuing dialogue with the North we need to re-draw our battle lines and make sufficient preparations. Many complicating variables will pop up in the process of expanding exchanges and cooperation, and if there is dissonance between different government departments about the way to handle these issues it may give the North a pretext to act aggressively while also inviting criticism at home and abroad. To avoid this outcome we must establish clearly defined goals for inter-Korean dialogue and develop an appropriate strategy for achieving them. Also in the dialogue phase we must proceed in a well-coordinated order, maintaining a tight system of coordination between the control tower of North Korea policy and the various government agencies.

Third, we must maintain close coordination among South Korea, the US, and Japan in order to block North Korea's human manipulation tactics. Close agreement will be particularly crucial in addressing the scale and timing of food aid, inter-Korean dialogue and economic cooperation, and approaches to the nuclear issue.

Fourth, to prevent divisions from forming in domestic and international discourse, we need to promote a clear blueprint for South Korea-led unification. Over the last year or so, the lively debate about how to prepare for unification has contributed to inspiring a vision for unification and a consciousness of its value. On the other hand, the more concrete visualization of unification has led to heightened domestic concerns about unification costs, and has had the unwanted side effect of prompting some in neighboring countries to act more directly to preserve the status quo on the peninsula. Despite the ROK government's repeated clarifications, some factions continue to express concern that our policy of preparation for unification is aimed at fomenting a sudden crisis or collapse in North Korea. Such confusion and misinterpretation of our North Korea policy is partly due to the lack of a clear blueprint for unification. By building national consensus and international support for our vision of South Korea-led unification, we can promote a more stable North Korea policy.

Finally, we must build consensus on the idea that our North Korea policy must not be judged simply by the quantity of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation, but rather by substantive changes in the state of inter-Korean relations. Without this consensus, we will continue to be tempted to neglect a "principled" North Korea policy in favor of impatient policies chasing after immediately gratifying short-term progress on secondary issues.