

The True Intent behind the North Korean NDC's “Open Questionnaire” to the South

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In North Korea's recent expressions of its position toward inter-Korean relations, the National Defense Commission (NDC) appears frequently. Late last year, just after Kim Jong Il's funeral, North Korea made an official declaration via an “NDC Statement” (Dec. 30) criticizing the South Korean government's measure to limit condolence visits to the North and declaring they would “have no dealings ... forever” with the Lee Myung Bak government. Also, last spring in response to reports that some South Korean reserve units were using Kim Jong Il's photograph for target practice, North Korea issued a statement via an “NDC spokesman” (May 30) declaring it “would no longer engage with” the South Korean government. North Korea's revelation (May 9) that secret inter-Korean talks had been held that year in Beijing was also announced via an “NDC spokesman,” and a “representative of the NDC Policy Bureau” made additional revelations at a press conference (June 9).

Unlike the KWP's Unification Front Department, which sometimes mixes its criticism of the South with overtures for dialogue and cooperation in the name of organizations like the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the

Fatherland or the Asia–Pacific Peace Committee, the statements announced in the NDC’s name are characterized by strong, unrelenting rhetoric. As one of the organs tasked with advising the NDC on its projects, the NDC Policy Bureau is thought to act as the brain behind North Korea’s military security strategy. The NDC’s increased involvement in South Korea policy indicates the intent to manage the relationship on military and strategic terms, with less focus on material/practical aspects, and suggests that hardliners are taking the lead in ventures toward the South.

On February 2nd, North Korea released an “Open Questionnaire” in the name of the NDC Policy Bureau claiming that the Lee Myung Bak administration was “not qualified” to be a dialogue partner to the North. This was a “questionnaire” in name only considering its format and contents, and the North’s subsequent actions, it appears to be a unilateral declarative document with no real intent to ask questions. First, in terms of format, the fact that it was announced in the name of the NDC Policy Bureau is significant. As explained above, NDC statements directed at the South tend to be used for exclusively hard–line messages rather than calls for dialogue or negotiation. As to the contents, the questionnaire expressed nine points related to unification front propaganda, all unacceptable to the ROK government, such as demanding an apology for disallowing condolence visits, full implementation of the 6.15 Joint Declaration and the 10.4 Statement, no more discussion of the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents, cessation of ROK–US joint military exercises, and revocation of South Korea’s National Security Law. Declarations that had been made in the past at the level of the “Secretariat of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland” are now being promoted to the level of the NDC Policy Bureau, which hints at how important this issue has become to the North Korean authorities. With this “Open Questionnaire” announcement they have endeavored to promote their position. At the same time, the NDC Policy Bureau members were mobilized for a press conference (February 2), the Chosun Soren organization in Japan released a bulletin (February 4, *Chosun Shinbo*), and pro–North groups in the US (February 2, Korean American National Coordinating Council spokesman’s statement) were also mobilized to spread the message.

Already in May of last year North Korea had declared that it would “no longer engage with” the Lee Myung Bak government. The statement late last year added the word “forever.” It would be enough to simply cut off dealings with the South, but they have another reason for using this “open questionnaire” to explain all the reasons “why” they have cut off contact.

First, the North seeks to encourage fractures in South Korean society over our North Korea policy and to influence the next administration's policy in line with their wishes. By reconfirming their refusal to settle relations with the Lee Myung Bak government, they seek to drive a wedge between the South Korean government and public, as well as between the conservative and progressive factions in the South and between the ROK and US governments. At the same time the next administration is likely to emphasize that it is considering the nine questionnaire items put forth by the North to demonstrate that it is "qualified for dialogue" with the North when establishing their North Korea policy. The Lee Myung Bak government says that it has left open the door to dialogue and the window to opportunity, whilst pushing for an attitude shift from North Korea; in reaction, the North appears to have calculated that they can pass the ball once again into the South Korean court by responding with an offensive movement unacceptable to the South. It appears to be part of a propaganda war to once again shift responsibility for the failure of inter-Korean relations onto our side as the South Korean elections approach.

In its 2012 New Year's Joint Editorial, North Korea urged a "mass struggle" against "foreign collusion, antagonistic policies toward the North, and rehearsals for invasion of the North." Herein lies the key motivation for the North repeatedly insisting on its "reasons for not dealing with" the South Korean government. On the one hand this misreading of the "South Korean political situation," which forms the basis of North Korea's policy direction toward the South, is also stirring up agitation for an anti-South Korean struggle. For instance, regarding the condolences issue, this time the South Korean government made certain efforts to adjust its response, and thus the issue did not boil over as it had done in the past. But North Korea is exaggerating the situation, saying things like "The South Korean ruling forces have become the object of the people's stern trial" (January 1, New Year's Joint Declaration).

Second, North Korea's objective in expressing its position on inter-Korean relations via an "Open Questionnaire" to the South is to try to re-open dialogue with the US. More bluntly put, it is motivated by their need to acquire immediate food aid. On February 4th the *Chosun Shinbo* rather openly expressed this position in an article asserting that the US' decision to "take a step back in talks with the North and overturn the previous agreement on the food aid problem" was due to "American quibbling" that everything must pass through Seoul in order to get to Washington however, it is the NDC's position that the current South Korean government "is not qualified to participate in inter-Korean talks," and as North

Korea's Foreign Ministry made clear on January 14th, the US must demonstrate its "trust-building" intention by carrying through with its food aid promises.

Third, while inconclusive, there is some evidence to indicate that this Open Questionnaire may hint at an effort to consolidate "internal differences of opinion" within the North regarding its South Korea policy. The basis for this is, first of all, the *Chosun Shinbo's* February 4th report which assessed that "even if we meet with the South Korean government at this time, nothing beneficial to us would happen." This report had great repercussions within North Korea. From the *Chosun Shinbo's* reports we can deduce that for some time now there have been certain voices within the North Korea government arguing for the need to acquire material aid from South Korea. Conventionally in North Korea at the end of the year the various agencies establish their project objectives for the coming year, and it is possible that the Party Unification Front Department may have set benchmarks for the amount of material benefits to be gained from South Korean projects. The pro-dialogue offensive toward the South from the beginning of this year was the external expression of that.

As further evidence, the Open Questionnaire emphasized the need for "high-level DPRK-US military contacts," albeit as a means to pursue a peace regime, and the *Chosun Shinbo* further emphasized this point. This indicates that within North Korea the ideas of "using inter-Korean relations" and "focusing on US-DPRK relations" have both been bandied about, but the latter has emerged as the more realistic choice. As a result, unlike early last year (Jan. 5) when North Korea proposed official talks via a "Joint Declaration by the Government, Party and Organizations," this year it seems as if the NDC stepped forward with a more hard-line position.

On this basis, it appears that within North Korea at one time the KWP's Unification Front Department may have argued in favor of acquiring material benefits via some degree of increased contact with the South. The Unification Front Department is responsible for acquiring material benefits alongside fomenting agitation in the South. The NDC, on the other hand, puts repeated emphasis on the impossibility of "dealing with" the ROK government, citing the regime issue of condolences rather than material benefits, and seems to have decided to promote an attitude of "unending expectations toward the South" inside North Korea regarding economic aid, etc. What is clear is that from now on North Korea's various agencies in charge of South Korean contacts will have to follow the policy line set by the NDC Policy Bureau, disregarding the agencies in charge of dialogue

and operations, and will be focused on fomenting divisions within South Korean society and provoking “a shift in North Korea policy” in the South. It appears that the North Korean authorities still believe that our North Korea policy and public consciousness can be swayed by their one-sided propaganda war.