

Deconstructing the NDC's Open Questionnaire: New Leader, Same Old Propaganda Approach

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When the new leadership, centered around successor Kim Jong Eun, emerged in the wake of NDC Chairman Kim Jong Il's death, many experts in South Korea predicted that North Korea would initially prioritize "continuity and stability" rather than pursue change. Thus, the "Great Leader" dictatorship system is expected to continue as-is, with the stability and entrenchment of the new leadership taking top priority. Thus far North Korea's actions have not diverged significantly from these predictions. The 9-point "Open Questionnaire" issued on Feb. 2nd by North Korea's National Defense Commission again clarified this obsolete propagandistic argument through its continuous emphasis on the North's "rejection of change." This position by the new leadership is disappointing to the South Korean government as it endeavors to find a new approach to improving inter-Korean relations via a more "flexible policy" following the appointment of Ryu Woo Ik as Minister of Unification.

Stale Arguments Repeated in the Open Questionnaire

The first question North Korea asked in this Open Questionnaire was, "Is the south Korean group ready to deeply repent of its heinous crimes concerning the great

loss to the Korean nation and apologize for them?”¹⁾ This was intended as a critique of the South Korean government’s heightened vigilance after Kim Jong Il’s death and its decision to limit condolence visits to the North. This is simply another demonstration of the North’s persistent strategy to promote Kim Jong Il as a leader of all people on both sides of the Korean peninsula and to foment internal disagreement over North Korea policy within South Korean society via the condolence issue. The South Korean government did not raise any of the various misdeeds attributed to the late Kim Jong Il, such as provocations against the South, acts of terrorism, and attempts to sow conflict within the South, and instead opted to take a broader view that favored stable management of the Korean Peninsula – expressing hope that North Korea would stabilize as quickly as possible, while expressing “sympathy to the people of North Korea” and refraining from lighting a Christmas tree at the South–North Korean border in order to avoid provoking the North. In this way South Korea’s behavior was consistent with international norms.

The second question asked, “Do the authorities have an intention to make public at home and abroad their willingness to implement the historic June 15 joint declaration and the October 4 declaration, its practical program?” This question appears to be more of a declaration intended for internal consumption. The South Korean government has already repeatedly expressed the position that it intends to observe all inter–Korean agreements and is prepared to enter discussion on implementation of the June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration. In a speech at the opening of the National Assembly on July 11th, 2008, President Lee Myung Bak declared, “I am willing to engage in sincere dialog with the North on how best we can implement the July 4 joint declaration, the inter–Korea basic agreement, the joint declaration on denuclearization, the June 15 joint declaration, and the October 4 declaration.” If North Korea wants to implement the June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration, it has no reason to refuse South Korea’s calls to begin working–level discussions between authorities, and it should also have no problem observing other agreements, such as the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization which was signed by the two Koreas in 1992.

The third and fourth questions (“Can the Lee group promise the world it can no longer hurt the DPRK over ‘Cheonan’ warship case and Yonphyong Island shelling incident?” and “Can the south Korean authorities make a policy decision to stop

1) The English versions of these questions are quoted from the English–language KCNA report, “Open Questionnaire of the Policy Department of the National Defence Commission of the DPRK,” KCNA, February 2, 2012.

big joint military exercises targeted against the DPRK?") are no more than repetitions of propaganda slogans. The question about the Cheonan is a form of psychological warfare aimed at provoking friction within South Korean society, while the Yeonpyeong Island question conforms with the North's strategy for redefining the area around Northern Limit Line (NLL) as disputed waters. The whole world has already acknowledged the truth that the Cheonan sinking was a North Korean provocation. The South Korean government formed a joint investigatory team composed of 25 experts from 12 civilian agencies, 22 military experts, 3 representatives from the National Assembly, and 24 foreign experts representing the US, Australia, Great Britain, and Sweden, which commenced a two-month-long scientific investigation and ultimately concluded that the Cheonan warship was sunk by a torpedo fired from a North Korean midget submarine. North Korea justifies its shelling of Yeonpyeong as an "advance payment" against South Korean artillery exercises, but then as now the South Korean military has limited its exercises to the waters south of the NLL. North Korea's repeated attempts to shift the blame on these issues stem from its classic strategy to turn the West Sea into a disputed area.

North Korea's condemnation of ROK-US joint military exercises is a perennial recurrence. These exercises are fundamentally defensive in nature, and South Korea always informs the North in advance of the planned exercise dates and invites them to observe. In consideration of the countless provocations committed by North Korea, such as the Korean War, the Panmunjom hatchet incident, the Rangoon terrorist bombing, and the KAL Flight 858 explosion, North Korea is in no position to criticize the ROK-US joint military exercises. If there had been no war or military provocations, the US military would not have entered Korean territory, and there would be no need for joint military exercises. North Korea's arguments fly in the face of historical fact, and its criticism of the joint military exercises is no more than a psychological tactic aimed at consolidating solidarity within the KPA and breeding conflict within South Korean society.

Fifth, the questionnaire asks, "Are they ready to drop wrong view on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and practically work for it?" To correctly interpret this question, we must understand that North Korea and the international community are talking about two different things when they refer to the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," which North Korea promotes as one of Kim Il Sung's "final injunctions." North Korea's concept of this phrase implies eliminating the entire nuclear defense capacity of the South, including the nuclear deterrent provided by the "invader" - that is, the US. To achieve this,

North Korea claims it must hold “nuclear arms reduction talks” with the US on equal terms as nuclear powers. By contrast, the international community understands “denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” to mean that North Korea must scrap its own nuclear weapons, since those are the only nuclear weapons left on the peninsula after the US’ strategic withdrawal of its nuclear weapons from the South in 1991.

North Korea’s argument is rooted in its desire for acknowledgement as a nuclear power and its policy of “approaching the US and shutting out South Korea.” Asking whether the South is “ready to … practically work for [denuclearization]” is North Korea’s way of inviting South Korea to essentially act as a bridesmaid at negotiations where North Korea and the US stand as equal nuclear powers. Ultimately this shows that North Korea is not sincere about its own denuclearization. South Korea has continuously abided by the terms of the 1992 Joint Declaration on Denuclearization signed by both Koreas and the Agreed Framework ratified by the US and North Korea in Geneva in 1994, while North Korea has cheated the international community by pushing ahead with its nuclear development programs and conducting nuclear tests in 2006 and 2009. North Korea has even engaged in arrogant nuclear diplomacy, secretly developing its uranium enrichment capability since the late 1990s and formally unveiling its uranium enrichment facility to the world in October 2010. That such a country could reproach South Korea with demands to “practically work for … denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” is patently ridiculous.

The sixth question the NDC asked of South Korea was “Are they going to keep vicious anti-DPRK smear psychological campaign?” This reflects North Korea’s discomfort with discussion in South Korean society about the possibility of a crisis in North Korea or unification by absorption; it is also the North’s way of demanding that the South Korean government put a stop to activities by civilian groups trying to inform North Koreans about the outside world, such as the effort by some groups to send packages via balloon to the North. The South Korean government has already clarified its position on this issue several times in the past: it hopes to see North Korea’s situation stabilize rather than devolve into a crisis, and it seeks unification by mutual agreement rather than by absorption. By the nature of liberal democracy, there are limits to the government’s ability to control activities by civilian groups. South Korea’s civilian groups cover a diverse ideological spectrum, and all of these groups enjoy freedom of action within the confines of the law.

Inherent in this demand is the North's inability to comprehend South Korea's liberal democratic system, but this problem would evaporate naturally if North Korea developed into a stable system through improved human rights and democratization adopted a policy of mutual prosperity rather than armed provocations. Any logical assessment would come to the same conclusion. Before criticizing the actions of South Korean civilian groups, they would do well to bear in mind that these civilian groups' activities have arisen in response to the reality the North's own inhumane system, their injudicious vilification of the South, and their attempts to incite social conflict within South Korea.

Seventh, the questionnaire asks, "Does the group have willingness to resume and keep going north-south cooperation and exchange in the direction of promoting nation's peace, prosperity and common interests?" The answer to this lies with North Korea itself. The pursuit of joint prosperity through exchanges and cooperation is an objective that has been promoted by successive South Korean governments up to the present day. If North Korea desires to give more than lip-service to the pursuit of true joint endeavors for mutual prosperity, then it should first reflect on the armed provocations that caused inter-Korean cooperation to halt in the first place.

South Korea has continuously expressed its willingness to pursue inter-Korean cooperation ever since the "Special Declaration on National Self-Esteem, Unification and Prosperity" of July 7th 1988, and it has taken steps to enliven and systematize inter-Korean exchanges of both materials and personnel. Furthermore, since the inter-Korean summit in 2000 South Korea has achieved great results in instituting and diversifying exchanges and cooperation in various economic, social, and cultural areas. North Korea, on the other hand, for all its talk of common gains and joint prosperity, has focused its actions on propping up its own system and threatening the South, not hesitating even to make military provocations since their nuclear threat prevents retaliation. Inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation were halted as a result of North Korea's attacks against the Cheonan warship and Yeonpyeong Island. If North Korea takes responsible steps to prevent a recurrence of such incidents, then of course exchanges and cooperation will recommence.

The eighth question asks, "Can the present south Korean authorities meet our principled demand for replacing the present armistice system by a peace-keeping mechanism?" while the ninth demands, "Can the south Korean authorities make a decision to abolish at once the 'Security Law' and other evil laws against the nation and reunification?" In short, this is an antiquated propaganda attack

beyond compare. Shifting from an armistice system to a peace system is something that everyone wants, but it is not something that can be achieved overnight – it requires trust-building and peaceful stabilization. The National Security Law is a similar issue. All countries have laws for restricting anti-state groups that threaten their system's existence and security. Articles 84–85 of Germany's Criminal Law, Article 246 of Austria's Criminal Law, and Articles 9 and 42 of Japan's Anti-Subversive Activities Act are just a few examples. The US also upholds Article 2385 of the Criminal Code and Article 843 of the Communist Control Act, which stipulate punishment for anyone who forms, joins or cooperates with any group that supports, incites, or instigates acts aimed at subverting or overthrowing the US government. North Korea's regime preservation laws are far more draconian than any of these, and it metes out harsh punishment even against those who simply leave the country in search of food.

The South Korean government and people share a firm desire for peace and wish to live in a world where the National Security Law is no longer necessary. However, for North Korea to make such a demand while it engages in repeated provocations (protected from retaliation by the nuclear threat), launches vulgar verbal attacks, and attempts to stir up conflict within South Korean society, it must have a confused sense of sequence. In the present circumstances, demanding the repeal of the National Security Law and agreement on a peace regime is like asking us to relinquish the mechanisms that protect our liberal democratic system, and this is no different than arguing that the process should begin with the disbanding of the ROK-US alliance and the removal of the US military from the South. The Charter of the (North) Korean Workers' Party specifies the objective to "implement the task of democratic revolution and liberation on a nation-wide scale." The KWP Charter, the "Three Principles of National Unification," and other North Korean policy documents are filled with phrases such as "institutionalizing Juche ideology throughout the entire society," which implies that South Korea must be remade into a society that reveres the Great Leader, "renouncing external forces," which implies removing the US military from the South and ending the ROK-US military alliance, and "establishing an independent national government and liberating the people," which is aimed at inciting revolution in the South.

In short, the contents of the Open Questionnaire from the NDC are nothing more than propaganda statements directed at South Korea, the US, and the domestic audience for the sake of justifying the North's rejection of change. For the South Korean government there is no reason to fly into a rage over these statements, which have been repeatedly emphasized by the North for decades, nor is there any

need for a point-by-point response to each of the questions. It is simply disappointing from the position of the South Korean government, which had been hoping that the emergence of the new leadership around Kim Jong Eun might lead to a change in North Korea's stance and provide an opportunity to improve inter-Korean relations.

Continuous Efforts are Needed to Improve Inter-Korean Relations and Induce Change in the North

Since Ryu Woo Ik was appointed minister of unification, the South Korean government has been striving to show more flexibility in order to improve inter-Korean relations. Considering this, the obsolete attitudes displayed by the Kim Jong Eun regime are more than a little disappointing. South Korea has shown sincerity through various projects at the Kaesong Industrial Complex such as construction of a hospital and fire-fighting facility and expansion of roadways, while also allowing repeated civilian visits to the North such as visits by religious leaders and the South Korean maestro Chung Myung Hoon. The South has sent hepatitis vaccines and tuberculosis medication via UNICEF while increasing humanitarian aid and proposing more reunions for separated families. Even in regard to re-opening tourism at Mt. Kumgang, the South has shown flexibility, stating that extracting a guarantee from the North Korean authorities of the physical safety of South Korean tourists is the core issue and suggesting that all other conditions are of lesser importance. That Kim Jong Eun has responded to such efforts with this stale and worn-out psychological attack is very disappointing.

Nevertheless South Korea must make continuous efforts to build a healthy inter-Korean relationship and encourage change in the North. North Korea already has a long history of refusing reform and opening and clinging to its personality cult for regime survival, and it is nothing new for it to adopt a strategy of pursuing nuclear talks with the US while refusing them with South Korea, or to try to stir up social conflict within South Korea in order to weaken its leverage against the North. Nor is it unusual to see North Korea trying to manipulate the generational gap in the South for its own purposes during a South Korean election. The NDC's Open Questionnaire indicates that at least in the short term North Korea will continue with its conventional approach. Nonetheless there is always the possibility of change. It is South Korea's fate to exercise patience and eventually win out in this battle against time.