

## Consideration of the Establishment of a New Government Policy toward North Korea

**Cho Han-Bum**

Senior Research Fellow, KINU Center for Unification Policy Studies

Online Series CO 13-03

The new South Korean administration, which will be inaugurated in February 2013, will face many challenges in implementing its policies toward North Korea. While it must resolve the long-term impasse in inter-Korean relations, South Korea must also respond to the deteriorating situation, such as the North's successful launch of Unha-3 and its threats of a third nuclear test. From an international political perspective, South Korea must be prepared for the repercussions that follow the escalating power struggle between the United States and China. Furthermore, in consideration of the fact that the next five years will be the most important in the path toward unification, there needs to be substantial preparations. The new South Korean administration's policy on North Korea must take into consideration the aforementioned structural circumstances and lessons from the preceding administrations in order to focus on exploring more efficient alternatives.

### 1. Maintaining “Sustainable” and “Consistent” Policies toward North Korea

Despite the various controversies, the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations' engagement policy were reasonable decisions that reflected the era of change with the collapse of the Socialist Bloc and the end to the systematic competition between South and North Korea. However, the engagement policy produced side effects with the remarkable growth of inter-Korean relations, which became the subject of constant argument throughout the two respective administrations. In other words, the appearance of flawed practices, “the unilateral

relationship in which North Korea is at the top” and “compensations for North Korea’s bad behavior,” became a source of public exhaustion on North Korean issues.

The Lee Myung-bak administration’s “principled policy toward North Korea” attempted to rectify such practices. Since inter-Korean relations unilaterally led by North Korea were not a reciprocal negotiation and cannot be sustainable, it needed revisions in order to maintain the formation of normal inter-Korean relations. Due to the impasse in inter-Korean relations and the North Korean military provocations, it would be wrong to deny the Lee Myung-bak administration’s attempts.

North Korea’s negotiation strategies toward South Korea, which are based on “a combination of provocations and dialogue,” are the underlying cause of the public’s distrust, and this has become a burden to the South’s progressive and conservative administrations in establishing policies toward North Korea. Despite the public disenchantment from the prolonged impasse in inter-Korean relations, the public reelected a conservative government, which can be interpreted as a greater public demand for “the establishment of a normal inter-Korean relationship” over “producing results from inter-Korean relations.” The amendment for the policy toward North Korea, which has not changed its attitude despite the nuclear issues and the *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island incidents, signifies the lost opportunity to rectify the North’s bad behavior and the establishment of a high-cost structure for inter-Korean negotiations. There must be awareness that changes in North Korea is a precondition to “confidence-building” between the North and South.

A painful lesson from the Lee Myung-bak administration did not derive from the inadequate progress of inter-Korean relations, but rather from its attempt to abruptly separate its policies toward North Korea from those of the preceding administrations. The Lee government’s sudden policy change, which lacked the scrutiny and introspection of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations’ legacy, created rigidity in over policies toward North Korea and was a factor in weakening its bargaining power toward the North. The new South Korean administration should carefully examine the benefits and drawbacks to the Lee Myung-bak administration’s policies toward the North as well as focus on exploring alternatives policies. There is a need to explore creative alternatives policies on North Korea that are based on consistency and continuity. There should be a focus on “establishing sustainable inter-Korean relations” on a mid to long-term level rather than hastening the improvement of relations that still remain underdeveloped.

## 2. Establishing a National Consensus on Policies toward North Korea: Seeking an Agreement on the “National Unification Treaty”

While North Korea propelled a unilateral policy to carry out their interests, South Korean society built a high-cost structure amid its self-consuming South-South conflicts and political strife on policies toward North Korea. The South-South conflicts are detrimental due to their excessive social costs and potential to spread overall social conflicts. In order to promote a successful policy toward North Korea, the South-South conflicts must be resolved and a national consensus must be established. Considering that

the new government is focused on “National Integration,” there must be efforts to embody this ideal. Following this point, the “National Unification Treaty” can be a means of establishing a national consensus on policies toward North Korea.

The National Unification Treaty encompasses the characteristics of a social agreement that prevents political strife on unification issues and establishes a productive policy cooperation structure. The treaty establishes a basic code of conduct on ethnic issues through minimal agreements that acknowledge differing interests and perspectives on the opposing parties as well as the conservative and progressive parties. The most important aspects of the National Unification Treaty include a “national consensus on unification,” “promotion of policies based on consensus” and “prevention of political strife on unification issues,” while also embodying them as a social convention. The follow-up action should be to permanently establish a substantial bipartisan cooperative system in regard to ethnic issues as a means to alleviate the burden of policies toward North Korea. The National Unification Treaty will make possible the resolution of political strife on policies toward North Korea and the establishment of a national consensus.

### 3. Strengthening Policies on North Korean Citizens

North Korea experienced mass starvation during the mid-1990s, and the vulnerable social classes are still prone to starvation due to the ongoing food crisis. We have consistently observed significant problems in health and hygiene due to the collapse of the medical system. Human rights violations have exceeded dangerous levels. Such conditions signify that a major goal in the policies toward North Korea should relieve the people’s humanitarian crisis.

North Koreans are considered South Korean citizens under the constitution of the Republic of Korea; therefore, the South Korean government is not immune from the responsibilities of this human security crisis. A major problem in implementing the “principled policy toward North Korea” is that the policy basis does not distinguish between North Koreans and the North Korean regime. The process of abruptly reducing exchanges between the North and South has been reflected in the humanitarian aid, which has harmed the North Korean citizens. Sustainable humanitarian aid must be established as long as the North Korean crisis exists. While North Korea must also demonstrate an effort to comply with the international protocols on humanitarian aid such as securing transparency in distribution, the international community and South Korea must be more active in responding to the North Korean human rights issues as needed. Various alternatives, such as raising interest in North Korean human rights violations and the systematic collection of the relevant data, must be directly and indirectly reviewed.

The greatest lesson we can derive from the German reunification is East Germany’s strong confidence in West Germany. The continued exchange between the two Germanies along with West Germany’s varied efforts to alleviate the pain of East Germans established trust within East Germans, being the main force behind the unification at the crucial moment. This signifies that the North Korean people’s trust is the most crucial to Korean unification, and there must be various policy efforts to ensure this. In addition to continued humanitarian aid toward the North, there is a need to focus on developing a “customized policy

for North Korean people.”

#### 4. Changing the Awareness of the North Korean Nuclear Issues: Parallels between “Dismantlement” and “Securing Deterrence”

The successful launch of Unha-3 is a major turning point in the North Korean nuclear issues. The nuclear armament of North Korea must be prevented at any cost, and a situation in which it acquires the status of a nuclear state cannot be tolerated. If the North succeeds in gaining asymmetric power through nuclear armament, then South Korea will face severe limitations on the responsiveness of its national security.

South Korea has actively cooperated with the U.S.-led multilateral approach to the North Korean nuclear issues. However, the Six-Party Talks failed to produce any substantial results, while international sanctions failed to stop North Korea’s nuclear development program. In this process, North Korea has both domestically and internationally demonstrated progress in its nuclear program through its two nuclear experiments and five long-ranged missile launches. Such negotiation efforts confirmed that the dismantlement efforts alone are not sufficient enough to resolve the nuclear issues.

The successful launch of the Unha-3 exhibited the need for an ongoing effort to dismantle the North Korean nuclear program and a national security correspondence on the nuclear development in order to secure deterrence. Realistically, it is difficult to complete the process of dismantlement in a short period of time, and it is likely that the North may incessantly attempt to acquire nuclear capability, so South Korea needs to respond by concurrently securing a deterrent strategy. In addition to an independent procurement of intelligence assets that can be utilized to monitor the North’s nuclear capabilities, the procurement of a wide variety of security deterrents must be reviewed. Moreover, there must be active demands for the United States to be prepared, as the North Korean nuclear threats continue to gradually escalate the situation. The security situation in South Korea has fundamental limits in reacting to the asymmetric forces, so cooperation with the United States is crucial. In addition to the reinforcement of the ROK-U.S. mutual cooperation, it must be visually apparent that the United States must demonstrate reliable actions and secure South Korea’s deterrence abilities in dismantling the North Korean nuclear weapons.

#### 5. Preparing for Changes in the International Political Situation in Northeast Asia

As China rose to become a G2 country and strengthened its foreign policy and national security capabilities, the United States began to materialize the strategy to “pivot to Asia” as its basis through various channels, including military means. This projects an increased international political tension around the Korean peninsula in Northeast Asia. While South Korea has traditionally pursued foreign policy and security strategies based on the ROK-U.S. Alliance, the importance of the Alliance still persists. Meantime, its relationship with China, particularly centered on economic sectors, has developed so rapidly that the trade volume between South Korea and China has already surpassed that of South

Korea and the United States. Quantitatively, China is more important than the United States in economic terms. The current situation is very different from the past in that the United States holds priority in security while China now holds priority in economic terms.

A situation in which the United States and China maintain cooperative relations is the optimal international condition for unification on the Korean peninsula. However, it is necessary to scrutinize and prepare for the impact that the conflict between the United States and China has on South Korea, since the competition for hegemony between the two powers is likely to accelerate. The main objection of the diplomacy on unification is the establishment of a new bilateral relationship between South Korea and China, since support from China is crucial to the process of dismantling the North's nuclear weapons and unification. Under the circumstances in which conflicts between the United States and China are highly probable, creative approaches to advancing the strategic cooperative partnership with China must be manifested. To this end, various measures to develop high-level strategic dialogue between South Korea and China as well as revitalize public diplomacy with China must be sought. Establishing a new bilateral relationship between South Korea and China may become a major task to the "Balanced Diplomacy." ©

KINU 2013

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely that of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).