

Benefits of Mount Kumgang tour

Now is the time for the Park administration to abandon its obsession of a 'victory through principle'.

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Despite a tiny glimpse of hope for a breakthrough, the vice-ministerial talks between the two Koreas in Kaesong on Dec. 11 ended without any progress. As a result, the frozen relations between the two Koreas won't thaw for some time. Taking into account the Korea-U.S. joint military drills, scheduled to begin next month, and the April general election campaigns, it won't be easy for both Seoul and Pyongyang to have talks with some room to maneuver.

The talks broke because the two Koreas failed to agree on the agendas for their meeting. The South demanded a fundamental resolution on the separated family issue, establishment of three channels for environment, people's livelihood and culture, creation of a global ecological park inside the Demilitarized Zone and Kaesong Industrial Complex's customs, communication and transit issues be discussed on the agenda. The North demanded that resumption of the Mount Kumgang tour be discussed as the top priority. The talks, therefore, broke down as the two sides failed to reach an agreement on what they will discuss.

In a discussion session at the Kwanhun Club on Dec. 17, Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo said it was inappropriate for Seoul to trade the separated family issue with the Mount Kumgang tour. The Park Geun-hye administration believes it had won a victory by keeping its principle when the North threatened to shut down Kaesong Industrial Complex in 2013. It also believes that the Aug. 25 agreement was reached in line with that principle. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the administration will think about choosing another direction.

A more flexible attitude in negotiations, however, should be available under a larger goal of a "peaceful, prosperous and happy Korean Peninsula," because a principle in negotiation with the North is a means to achieve this particular goal. All negotiations are give-and-take. Insisting on a position or mechanical reciprocity of equivalence, immediacy and comparability will never get anywhere.

For example, the Aug. 25 agreement produced an outcome because Seoul accepted it without Pyongyang's straightforward apology. That was not an outcome of principle, but an outcome of flexibility.

The South is demanding the North an investigation of the death at the Mount Kumgang resort, a promise that no similar incident will ever happen, a system to guarantee personal safety of tourists and the exclusive business right to resume the Mount Kumgang tour. The North expressed its intention to accept the South's demands several times during the Lee Myung-bak administration. The North said its late leader Kim Jong-il had promised to do so when he was alive, and it will follow through with the promises.

In other words, the South could have accepted the North's demand for resuming the tour and held follow-up talks to resolve the preconditions and restart the tour program. It was not impossible. If the North failed to cooperate during the follow-up talks, the South could have ended it with a fair justification.

If we carefully review the situation, the South Korean government is reluctant to resume the tour project not because of the procedural issue but because of the concern that the bulk cash provided to the North for the tour could be diverted to finance nuclear weapons and missile development.

But there is a way around this problem. The two Koreas can negotiate a measure to guarantee that the cash from the tour project won't be used to develop nuclear arms and missiles. If Seoul shows a strong political will, the United Nations Security Council and Washington won't oppose the decision.

Furthermore, resumption of the Mount Kumgang tour will help build trust between the two Koreas and it can also play a role as a catalyst for Seoul to lead an initiative to resolve the nuclear crisis. Moreover, the North is probably having a hard time accepting the double standard that the South is okay with the Kaesong Industrial Complex, but not the Mount Kumgang tour.

Resuming the Mount Kumgang tour program is also beneficial to the South. It can be a stepping stone to find a fundamental resolution to the separated family issue. Furthermore, it will bring about positive effects to Park's initiatives of creating the three channels, building a peace park inside the DMZ and improving customs, communication and transportation at Kaesong Industrial Complex.

And the government must not forget that South Korean businessmen and residents of Goseong County, south Gyeongsang, are suffering from the suspension of the tour. According to the Inter-Korean Trade and Investment Conference, the seven-year suspension had incurred 821.3 billion won (\$702 million) of losses in investment, and 1.795 trillion won of losses in sales. In total, the 2.6163 trillion won of astronomical losses were created.

Hyundai Asan, the operator of the tour program, and its 49 affiliating companies are on the brink of bankruptcy and residents of Goseong are also suffering economic hardships. In order to ease their pain and achieve the goal of job creation and economic revitalization, the possibility of resuming Mount Kumgang tour must not be ignored any further.

Now is the time for the Park administration to abandon its obsession of a “victory through principle” and to implement a reasonable, pragmatic North Korea policy for the sake of the South Korean people. Resuming Mount Kumgang tour will definitely meet this goal and serve to improve inter-Korean relations and unification preparations. A bold and courageous decision of President Park is needed more desperately than ever.

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