

Opening path to unification

We have to ... create a proactive cycle between South Korea, North Korea and the United States
Sept 24,2015

On September 15, I attended the third Korea-U.S. Dialogue in Washington, D.C. cohosted by the East Asia Foundation and Woodrow Wilson Center. American attendees showed interest in President Park Geun-hye's U.S. visit scheduled for October 16. While they were generally positive about the current state of the Korea-US alliance, they expressed concerns over a few issues.

The biggest concern was North Korea's future course. The possibility of a fourth nuclear experiment and rocket launch around the anniversary of the founding of the Workers' Party on October 10 is growing.

The statement of Uriminjokkiri, a propaganda organ of the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea, clearly shows North Korea's position. "Peaceful space exploitation is a legitimate right as a sovereign state, and no one can oppose North Korea's legitimate self-defensive measure of reinforcing nuclear deterrence against America's oppression of Korea." The American specialists were worried that Pyongyang's provocation may seriously undermine the outcomes of President Park's U.S. visit.

Lately, the possibility of North Korea's collapse and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula were also noteworthy topics during the conference. The views on President Park's "unification jackpot" or "preparation for reunification" were divided. North Korean experts in America see little possibility of North Korea's system collapsing and reunification by absorption. But foreign policy generalists consider President Park's unification policy as reunification by absorption.

In a recent article, University of Denver's Dean of School of International Affairs Christopher Hill, a former ambassador to Korea, wrote that South Korea needed to accept the North and should make plans in advance, presuming a fall was eminent. China expert Orville Schell prescribed that a secret plan should be prepared among Korea, China and the United States. The theory for North Korea's collapse, which had spread widely in the United States at the time of Kim Il Sung's death and power

transition to Kim Jong-il in 1994, seemed to have returned. Also, President Park's recent mention of "reunification as a fundamental solution to North Korean nuclear tension and human rights issue" also played a role.

President Park's attendance in China's Victory Day celebrations was also discussed, but since it was arranged through advance consultation with the United States, it didn't become an issue. Washington experts know that making an issue out of it could hurt the Korean sentiment and backfire on the United States.

In the end, the biggest obstacle is the catastrophic development of Pyongyang conducting rocket launch or underground nuclear test before Park's U.S. visit. Additional resolutions by the UN Security Council and a "secondary boycott" cannot be ruled out. Then, not just the U.S.-North Korea relations and inter-Korea relations but also the six-party talks would be negatively affected, leading to the worst possible scenario.

In order to prevent catastrophe, some argued that the Korean government needs to pursue more aggressive preventative diplomacy with North Korea before the U.S. visit. Through the high-level channels opened after the August 25 agreement, Seoul should display proactive responses to North Korea's claims to "peaceful exploitation of space," "easing concerns about security threat" and "improved U.S.-North Korea relations" to persuade Pyongyang. At the same time, they didn't forget to advise that it is necessary to recommend President Obama engages in talks with North Korea similar to talks with Iran.

They also emphasized that Park needs to state the position clearly to minimize confusion. While pursuing gradual reunification, Seoul can consider other options if sudden changes hit North Korea. But it does not help the Korean president giving an impression of promoting reunification by absorption, which North Korea passionately opposes, during her U.S. visit. It could blur Washington's focus on North Korea and make Washington reiterate principles.

It is undeniable the thoughts of these North Korea experts in Washington are based on excessive expectations of improved inter-Korean relations. Moreover, they don't appear to represent mainstream America.

Nevertheless, their view is worth taking into account as we cannot expect a breakthrough with "sanctions and pressure." We have to make the most of the Aug. 25

agreement and use President Park's U.S. visit as an opportunity to create a proactive cycle between South Korea, North Korea and the United States. If you change your position a bit, many paths will open up.

Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

JoongAng Ilbo, Sept. 21, Page 35

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