



PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN SOUTH KOREA AND INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS

Sangsoo Lee & Stina Bergman

The post-Kim Jong Il situation on the Korean Peninsula remains tense. This year will be a critical year for the peninsula. Will the new North Korean leadership be successfully stabilized or not? The upcoming presidential election in South Korea will have a great impact on the security situation on the peninsula. The next 12 months are likely to be a transition period opening up a new era of inter-Korean relations.

Since the sudden death of Kim Jong Il in December last year, no sign of political instability has been seen in North Korea. The power transition in Pyongyang seems to be going smoothly. In response to Kim's death, South Korea has abstained from putting pressure on the new leadership in the North. President Lee Myung-bak has said that there is "a window of opportunity" for improved inter-Korean relations. However, the anti-South rhetoric of the new Kim Jong Un regime in Pyongyang is harsher than heard before. The North Korean news agency KCNA recently said that "the Lee Myung-bak group can never be a dialogue partner of the DPRK as these traitors can no longer be entitled to live with them under the same sky." It also published an unusual "open questionnaire" to the South last week, insisting on preconditions for resuming the inter-Korean dialogue. These recent statements reflect that Pyongyang is dissatisfied with Lee's refusal to express official condolences to North Korea after Kim Jong Il's death and his tough stance towards the North. However, Pyongyang's intention seems to be to warn for the consequences of Lee's anti-North Korean policy in order to increase its political leverage over the two elections that will take place in 2012. It is likely that Pyongyang is not much interested in a "lame-duck" president, and is waiting to resume for talks until a new South Korean government has taken office in 2013.

Presidential Election in South Korea

2012 is a critical year for South Korea with the presidential election in December. Although economic and welfare issues will be key interests for voters, the issue of national security that will remain an ever-present factor in the next government's calculations. The North Korean issue cannot be ignored in the upcoming election campaign.

Park Geun-hye is a leader of the Grand National Party (GNP) and one of the leading contenders in the presidential election. According to an article by her recently published in Foreign Affairs, Park's approach for dealing with North Korea is an "alignment policy" that would entail assuming a flexible open policy to negotiations with the North. Meanwhile, Moon Jae-in, a former chief secretary to the late President Roh Moo-hyun, advocates a comprehensive approach to the North based on Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine policy. He argues that this is the only way to make peace on the Korean Peninsula. Another potential candidate is the independent Ahn Cheol-soo, who has recently grabbed national attention, though he has kept quiet on any presidential ambitions. Despite the lack of information about Ahn's view on the North, he seems to be interested in an engagement policy. According to media, he has twice met Kim Keun-sik, a well-known scholar and proponent of the Sunshine policy, for advice on the North Korean issue.

Although the approaches of the three potential presidential candidates differ in terms of degree of engagement with the North, their basic views regarding the North Korean issue cannot be seen to be that different because of their attempts to stand for a policy that differ from Lee Myung-bak's.

Need for a New Sunshine Policy

The change of party in government in many cases heralds fresh ideas and a discontinuation of old policies. Therefore, many people expected that the previous presidential election in 2007 would bring an end to the Sunshine policy. With Lee Myung-bak's victory, this proved to be the case. Now, five years later, the same question mark hangs over the next administration's policy. Recent opinion polls in South Korea reveal a change of political atmosphere towards the left. This implies that most voters favor a foreign policy



that seeks engagement and reconciliation with North Korea. Both popular discontent with the way that the ruling GNP has dealt with Pyongyang, as well as a generational shift in South Korea are crucial factors explaining this change of attitudes.

The question remains whether repeating the Sunshine policy can solve the current issues on the Korean Peninsula. In the past Sunshine policy era, historic inter-Korean summits took place in 2000 and 2007, and various economic, social and cultural exchanges were realized, despite the North Korean nuclear issue. Notwithstanding the improvement in relations it must be remembered that the Sunshine policy of the past was tarnished by the lack of conditionality in the dealings with North Korea, particularly in the provision of economic aid. Critics have accused the South Korean government of having directly shored up Kim Jong Il's regime and even gone as far as claiming that "unconditional aid to the North only resulted in the explosion of the North Korean atomic bomb." This has led many South Koreans to question the effectiveness of the next government's policy in bringing about change. Of course, there might be reasons for viewing the "Sunshine era" of South Korea's unconditional assistance with criticism, as it neither resulted in the expected North Korean domestic change nor deepened inter-Korean ties. Nevertheless, Lee Myung-bak's hard-line policy has obviously not convinced the Pyongyang either, but only generated a more inward-looking and hostile North.

Future Opportunities for Inter-Korean Cooperation

A lesson to be drawn from past inter-Korean cooperation, in particular during "the Sunshine era," is the need for the restructuring of the aid system for North Korea's economic development. Past inter-Korean cooperation was not directly related to North Korean development, but a financial aid to the regime. Future inter-Korean economic cooperation should focus more on infrastructure, such as roads, electricity and ports in order to make a foundation for economic growth. Aid should also

include long-term project supporting human development such as building schools and hospitals, transferring technologies in the fields of agriculture, energy, and medical sectors, as well as training and educating officials in North Korea, rather than cash and materials aid, which only helps the regime. In a long-term perspective, comprehensive aid could open up of the North Korean economy and society, and eventually result in a fundamental change in North Korea.

Economic cooperation must also include trust-building measures. To get out of the current stalemate of inter-Korean relations and establish mutual confidence the Yellow Sea is the focal point at present. The Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents in 2010 were signs of tense inter-Korean relations but also an indication of the unstable regional relations around the Yellow Sea; in particular, the sensitive issue of the disputed Northern Limit Line (NLL). There is an urgent need for reducing tension centering on the Yellow Sea. At the Second Inter-Korean Summit in 2007 agreement was reached to establish a "peace and economic cooperation zone" in the Yellow Sea. There is now an urgent need to implement this agreement, but it is a remote prospect under Lee Myung-bak's administration. The idea was to create a joint-fishing zone for fishermen from the North and the South as well as setting up a coastal industrial complex with South Korean business backing, encompassing the estuary of the Han River and North Korea's Haeju port. This can be a significant project for the next South Korean government. It would not only protect fishermen and prevent military conflict from re-occurring but to build confidence and trust.

Sangsoo Lee is a Research Fellow and Stina Bergman an Intern with the Institute for Security and Development Policy.

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