



38 NORTH

Informed analysis of events in and around the DPRK.

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The Future of North-South Relations: Short Term Perspectives

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38 North is a web-based initiative that harnesses the experience of long-time observers of North Korea and others who have dealt directly with Pyongyang in producing high quality analysis of events north of the 38th parallel.

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THE FUTURE OF NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS: SHORT TERM PERSPECTIVES

On July 15, 2010, *38 North* held a workshop in Seoul, sponsored by the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University, which gathered together experts from the U.S., South Korea, Europe, China and Japan, to discuss the latest developments regarding North Korea, both internal and external, with the goal of identifying future research priorities.

38 North is pleased to provide excerpts of this dialogue to our readers. This is the last of three installments on external developments involving North Korea.

You can find the first half of this discussion, which focused on internal developments, at www.38north.org.

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U.S. EXPERT: I'd like to raise the question of whether North Korea has learned anything in the 16 or so years that it's been dealing with the United States about Americans and their foreign policy making

process? Because several people have said that North Korea would like a peace treaty with the United States, and I think that at some level, that's probably true. At the same time, they must realize by now that the problem with signing treaties with the United States is that they have to be ratified by a two-thirds majority of the Senate and that's never going to happen. So I really wonder if now they might not prefer less formal agreements with the United States—things that can be implemented with less congressional interference. Or have they not really learned anything and still don't understand American policy making?

EUROPEAN EXPERT: You mentioned 16 years—that's really important because 16 years ago, the situation in North Korea certainly was very different than it is today. We had a China that was far from being the big international player it is today. South Korea was also very different. And I wonder how the world will look for North Korea 16 years from now. Obviously, we have some dynamics in world politics, and especially in East Asia,

that will force other countries to react. I don't know how important a peace treaty with the United States really is for North Korea. I think it has been important because without U.S. consent, not necessarily active support but silent agreement, it cannot develop its international economic relations. It must have at least a neutral relationship with the United States, not the United States as an enemy.

What I find interesting, and I wonder whether you agree or not, is that with the growing power of China, especially in the region but also beyond, the goodwill of the Americans becomes less crucial. At some point, the North Koreans might find themselves in a situation where it is enough to have China's support—a situation where they gain access to financial networks, international trade, and technology exchange without the goodwill of the United States and only by the goodwill of the Chinese, who will make the necessary phone calls, write the necessary letters of recommendation, and open the necessary doors. That would certainly have an impact on U.S.-North Korea policy. We might even end up with a more peaceful North Korea because they won't need to push the Americans if they can have the same stuff from the Chinese at a much lower price. I'm just speculating, but certainly we should not take the international situation as a static thing. Obviously there's a time lag for these countries to essentially react, and North Korea's the same. But I think as a dictatorship, they are actually capable of reacting very quickly to change.

MODERATOR: I think the lesson the North Koreans have learned in the past 16 years is a terrifically negative and sad one, which is, you cannot rely on the goodwill of the United States. It doesn't matter what you negotiate with any single American administration, because it can all disappear the day after the presidential elections. The only thing they can rely on is their own strength.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: Long live realism.

MODERATOR: This is why this nuclear issue is so critical [as a floor]. Before people in the foreign ministry went so far and exposed their careers and the safety of their standing to negotiate with the United States. But that was completely destroyed. And that's the legacy we have to live with today. Whether the successor will take those lessons to heart or say, "I can do it better," we don't know. We have to hope that he's willing to try again because if this is a permanent lesson, then we have a really, really tough road ahead of us in dealing with the North Koreans.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: If you want to support reform, you must support reformers. And if you don't do that, you kill those people.

MODERATOR: I would like to return to the question raised at the beginning of the conversation about the future of North-South relations over the next few years. I'm interested to hear what you think about this.

U.S. EXPERT: I suppose I would fall back on history. And it has been a long time. It's been a fundamental North Korean belief that no matter how a South Korean administration comes into office, eventually they're willing to deal. And it doesn't teach the North Koreans the wrong lesson. It teaches them that in fact, they don't have to worry about the first three years of a South Korean administration. They can wait it out and then get down to business. This has been the case since 1972. Every single South Korean administration

has eventually lined up to deal with North Korea.

I don't think that's a bad thing. It would be better if the South Korean administrations came in and were prepared to deal earlier rather than later. So I'm not worried about the North Koreans learning the wrong thing from a switch. It seems to me that they're always prepared to deal with South Korea. Each side seems to want to be dealing from the position of strength—that'll continue forever. But the fact is we need there to be an element of stability on the peninsula, all of us, not just the Koreans. China doesn't want tension. Japan doesn't want tension. So in the larger scheme, it's better rather than worse for the two Koreas to be engaged in some sort of dialogue that provides a sense of stability, however thin, to prevent situations where, for example, if you've got a loudspeaker, we're going to shoot at it. That's a terrible place for us to be in terms of the Korean peninsula. We've had how many years of relative peace? I don't care about the sea incident. It is important, but the issue is, what posture do you think North Korea is going to take towards South Korea over the next three years?

KOREAN EXPERT: I want to make a comment on inter-Korean relations. Already, the North Koreans have announced officially that they will not have a dialogue with the Lee Myung Bak government. But I think they will change their minds once the situation has calmed. Also, they are expecting the South Korean government to ask for dialogue. They are expecting it, but they have to believe the South Korean government is changing its hard line. Then they would come to a dialogue with South Korea.

JAPANESE EXPERT: The North Korean position seems to be a strategy of “wait and see.” Many people forget the significance of this. However, North Korea has changed their policy towards Lee Myung Bak and it has been quite a tremendous change because they proposed a summit meeting with South Korea. This is the first time since Chun Doo Hwan in the mid-1980s. All South Korean presidents have had summit meetings to talk to North Korea, but last year North Korea asked Lee Myung Bak to have a summit meeting and he did not accept the preconditions. From Pyongyang's perspective, this was very negative. So now if Lee Myung Bak asks to have a summit meeting, Kim Jong Il may accept. I don't know when a meeting will come up, but I think Lee Myung Bak should think about his legacy especially regarding unification issues.

Pyongyang is very worried about the South Korean military. At the end of last year, the Lee Myung Bak government started making new contingency plans for the Korean peninsula—not war plans, but emergency plans. On January 13, the *Mungha Ilbo* published a report that was clearly leaked by the Lee Myung Bak government, which stated they were making such plans. From Pyongyang's view, this was a very provocative action or preparation for a kind of preemptive attack on the North. So on January 15, the NDC issued a statement of warning. After such a serious warning from Pyongyang, South Korea replied saying that if North Korea attacked, then they would launch an attack. I think Pyongyang took this quite seriously. I think they were thinking there was some possibility that Lee Myung Bak would conduct a preemptive attack. So, I think Pyongyang wanted to send a wake-up call to South Korea. Pyongyang has some capabilities to retaliate, so I think an attack seems plausible. It might make sense to North Korea.

U.S. EXPERT: Well, not to disagree with that, but I want to throw in alternative possibilities. Let's look at

the historical parallels between then and now. In 1987 when the North initiated some violent acts, South Korea was moving towards democracy which was undermining North Korea's ability to use the student movement. South Korea was getting ready to hold the Olympics, a big coming-out party on the world stage to show off its economic and democratic development. So North Korea wanted to make its own statement by blowing up the plane and telling the world, "We're still here." I think if you look at what's going on now, you've got Lee Myung Bak, who's been running around the world pushing South Korea's new global status as an emerging power and hosting the G-20 Summit. Seoul is also hosting the 2012 nuclear summit. And Lee is saying Korea is the "first country to recover from the economic crisis" and basically walking around like he owns the place. North Korea is saying: We are still here, and you still have to deal with us. I don't think that these are necessarily mutually exclusive, but I do think that may be a major part. With all the successes South Korea has been having and its increasing profile on the world stage, I think North Korea wanted to make people pay attention to them and remember that they are also here and have a voice.

KOREAN EXPERT: After the DPRK bombing in 1983, the South Korea government proposed a dialogue and North Korea accepted, even though they never admitted to the bombing. So I think it's time for the South Korean government, if they are ready, to propose a dialogue to maintain peace and stability and to reduce tension. Then North Korea might come, even though they may not accept the blame for the sinking of the *Cheonan*. Another thing is that the South Korean president has named Yim Tae Hee as a chief secretary. He was the man who negotiated with the North Korean counterpart in Singapore. So I think it's a signal for the North Korean government. I think Yim Tae Hee still thinks it's possible to reduce tension.

MODERATOR: One thing to consider in worrying about the *Cheonan* is that it might have been the first sign of policy direction under the new NDC. It would have been O Kuk Ryol, who just took control over the reconnaissance bureau. It's not that they decided on their own, that's not the point. Kim Jong Il was probably angry at what happened with the West Sea incident that took place in the fall and said to somebody, "I want this fixed." So this new group of people had the funds and the approval to plan something rather aggressive, which is exactly what they did. Completely unusual and different from anything they had done before, and it worked.

KOREAN EXPERT: I think what's important now is to prevent North-South relations from getting worse. The Minister of National Defense declared on May 24 that the United States and South Korea will have joint military exercises in the West Sea. I think we can't really avoid having these exercises, But we have to make them less threatening to North Korea and China—especially China, which thinks the exercises are really dangerous to their security.

So for China, having an aircraft carrier on the East Sea is very threatening, especially considering the nationalist Chinese psyche. It can bring up very negative feelings among the Chinese public. Considering the regional analysis of these military exercises, we see that having aircraft carriers on China's doorstep is not really positive. It's not that I am supporting China. Considering the future of South Korea-China relations and U.S.-China relations, we have to take into consideration the potential role that China can play in solving North Korean problems for South Korea. That is why I'm defending China's position at this moment.

Regarding the psychological radio war against North Korea, I think it shouldn't really happen. It's not that it's not going to happen or that we should put it off forever, but it should be kept as a potential card to play later on. We should not make North-South relations worse. We have to improve them and one way could be to provide food aid to North Korea from the South Korean government. In 2005, South Korea's rice production was hundreds of thousands of tons and there have been talks about making that into fertilizer. But the public says we should give it to North Korea. Given that agricultural experts say North Korea will have very serious food problems and despite the bad situation between North and South Korea, giving food as humanitarian aid could work as leverage for South Korea.

My last point is that, as has been mentioned, given the appointment of Lee Myung Bak's new secretary, a third summit could happen. So we should think about it, study more and talk about the possibilities of exchanging envoys between North and South Korea in the fall.

EUROPEAN EXPERT: Concerning psychological warfare, obviously the North Koreans seem to be very sensitive to that, which is a sign that it hurts, right? So if I were in the South Korean government, I would not postpone it. On the contrary, I would really push it.

U.S. EXPERT: I saw an article that interviewed North Korean defectors and soldiers on the DMZ who said that they were affected by listening to South Korean radio broadcasts. They said: "Damn, this is much better than listening to our radio."

— END PART III —