



EVALUATION OF 2010 INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR 2011

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An atmosphere of hope regarding the future of relations lingered on the eve of the New Year 2010, as the latter half of 2009 witnessed a series of positive measures taken by North Korea toward South Korea. Entering 2010, it seemed as though Pyongyang and Seoul were progressing toward a better relationship.

The same cannot be said now, one year later, in early 2011, as inter-Korean relations ended at an all-time low at years' end 2010.

Historically Bad Inter-Korean Relations in 2010

Several positive events occurred in the summer of 2009. Following former US President Bill Clinton's August visit to North Korea to win the release of two incarcerated American journalists, Hyundai Group Chairwoman Hyeon Jeong-eun visited Pyongyang to secure the release of the South Korean employee who had been working at the Kaesong Industrial Park but was being held by North Korean authorities. She not only secured his release but was also able to negotiate the release of the crew of the South Korean fishing boat "800 Yeonan," which had strayed into North Korean waters in late July, resulting in the capture of its crew by the North Korean coast guard. North Korea also proposed separated-family reunions and eased transport restrictions across the Military Demarcation Line. This all made it appear as though North Korea was working to improve inter-Korean relations. Pyongyang also dispatched a special delegation to the memorial service for former ROK President Kim Dae-jung, and as this delegation met with incumbent President Lee Myung-bak. There were also rumors of high-level discussions between North and South Korea in Singapore and talk of a possible inter-Korean summit. With all this going on, we entered 2010 with reason to believe inter-Korean relations were on the upswing.

North Korea's 2010 New Year's Joint Editorial refrained from any direct criticism of the Lee Myung-bak government, and called for inter-Korean dialogue and improved relations. This created a very different atmosphere than the 2009 editorial that had labeled the Lee government's policy toward North Korea as a "confrontational policy not in keeping with the



times” and branded South Korean authorities as “traitorous sell-outs” and “fascists.” The 2010 editorial reflected an ongoing thaw in inter-Korean relations and expectations of South Korea possibly even wanting a summit meeting.

However, the events that played out in 2010 led to the complete breakdown of inter-Korean relations. Mutual mistrust and stubbornness in both governments quickly reversed any hopes for repaired relations. North Korea demanded the re-opening of the Mt. Keumgang tourism facilities, which have been essentially shut down since 2008 with the Lee administration’s refusal to allow South Korean tourists to visit, while the Lee administration demanded that North Korea first denuclearize before relations could be improved. In working-level talks on Mt. Keumgang tourism on February 8, the North demand that tourism be restarted was rejected and South Korea maintained its demands for North Korean reform. Chances for resumption of Mt. Keumgang tourism practically dried up. With dialogue failing to move forward, North Korea’s expectations for the Lee government and for the possibility of repaired relations were greatly reduced. Both sides’ hard-line policies collided and continued to keep relations in a deep freeze.

Then on March 26, the *ROKS Cheonan* was sunk. An investigation conducted by the Lee administration into the sinking found North Korea culpable. On May 24, South Korea announced sanctions against the North. North Korea’s response to the sanctions the following day for all practical purposes severed inter-Korean relations, announcing that inter-Korean relations had completely failed, that the non-aggression treaty was void, inter-Korean cooperation was over, and that conditions had reverted to those seen before the two sides had signed the Basic Agreement in 1991.

But the failure to restart Mt. Keumgang tourism and the sinking of the *Cheonan* was just the beginning of the downward spiral of inter-Korean relations in 2010. By sanctioning North Korea through international diplomacy and joint exercises with U.S. forces, the confrontation on the Korean peninsula negatively impacted relations throughout Northeast Asia. Not only were inter-Korean exchanges severed, South Korean humanitarian assistance to the North was non-existent as North Korea was practically blockaded.

Some instances of inter-Korean dialogue did take place after the *Cheonan* incident, but nothing comparable to the talks in late 2009. Both Koreas had lowered expectations of the other. With no improvement in the chill between Pyongyang and Seoul, North Korea, wanting to re-open Six-Party Talks, sought to engage Washington, which was demanding better relations between the two Koreas. North Korea’s return of the sailors of the South Korean fishing boat *Daeseung* (which had been captured by North Korea in the East Sea in August), the restarting of



separated-family reunions (in October), and the South Korean offer of rice and relief goods to victims of the floods in North Korea (September), raised hopes of improved relations. But the North's demand for re-opening Mt. Keumgang and the South's consistent stance on the need for North Korean denuclearization first ultimately squashed those hopes.

The breakdown in inter-Korean relations in 2010 culminated with the North Korean military's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island on November 23. The bombardment marked North Korea's first attack on soil Korean soil since the Korean War. Four ROK citizens were killed in the attack, including two civilians. Inter-Korean relations went past being frozen; the two Koreas were on the verge of going to war. President Lee Myung-bak announced that it was now difficult to expect North Korea to abandon its military adventurism or nuclear development. South Korea displayed a hard-line response, adopting a policy based on expectations of region collapse in North Korea.

The Lee administration is growing frustrated with its lack of options to respond to North Korea's provocations and continuing nuclear development. It would appear that Lee Myung-bak has no options other than to promote the active blockade of North Korea and the collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime, or to stand on the sideline with his arms crossed. In the brink-of-war atmosphere, the Ministry of Unification published a working paper in early 2011 that suggests South Korea adopt a "unification preparation" approach, distinguish between the North Korean people and the Kim Jong Il regime, and actively promote regime change. It stands to reason that the South is adopting a policy of North Korean regime collapse and unification of the Korean peninsula under South Korean control through absorption of the North. The Lee Myung-bak government's policy toward the North is one of absorption, which makes inter-Korean dialogue no longer meaningful. With respect to these moves taken by the Lee administration, the chances are fading that inter-Korean relations will improve in 2011.



ROK Desire for Unification through Absorption and the DPRK's Confrontational Attitude

Amidst these dismal times, North Korea's recent 2011 New Year's Joint Editorial oozes despair. At first glance, the editorial calls for easing the confrontational atmosphere between the two Koreas and insists that dialogue and cooperation must be promoted. However, these calls are really just demands for changes in the Lee Myung-bak government's policies and position toward the North. Expectations were already low, but it appeared to be a show of good faith that the window for improvement in the inter-Korean relationship has not completely closed. Yet the ROK Ministry of Unification's 2011 policy is not one of dialogue and improved relations, but rather one of actively changing North Korea and preparing for unification. In Lee Myung-bak's own words, the North Korean nuclear issue should be resolved through Six-Party Talks. Seoul is still open to dialogue, but is not interested in prioritizing inter-Korean relations, and is waiting for North Korea to change first. The chances are very slim that either Korea will be willing to blink first in 2011.

Therefore, the reference to inter-Korean relations in the 2011 New Year's Joint Editorial was not a real call to diffuse tensions and return to dialogue and cooperation. Rather, the editorial was full of hostility toward South Korean authorities. The editorial called the Lee government warmongering, anti-unification, confrontational fanatics, and accused the South Korean conservative authorities of illicitly colluding with unnamed "foreign powers," of being "anti-republic" and of pursuing provocative policies of seeking the opportunity to attack the North and spark a new Korean war. It also blamed the Lee government for the failure of inter-Korean dialogue and national unity.



The window for dialogue remains a crack open. However, because North Korea's mistrust in and anger at the Lee Myung-bak government are so high, Seoul must abandon its former hard-line policy and reverse its approach to the North if dialogue is to be an option. If not, it is the North's position that Lee Myung-bak is continuing to scheme for war and collaborate with foreign powers to prevent unification and oppose North Korea. Following the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, there are concerns over the possibility of additional provocations. In this atmosphere, North Korea is emphasizing through its New Year's Joint Editorial that "it will not in the least pardon those who impair [the DPRK's] absolute dignity and socialist system even a bit and violate our airspace, territory and waters even an inch," and warned that the North would retaliate "mercilessly" to defend its territory. Pyongyang also has warned of second and third waves of retaliation if provoked by South Korea.

Ultimately, if Seoul's hard-line policy toward the North (driven by the desire for unification) and the North Korean confrontational policy (aimed at the South) do clash, then the outlook for inter-Korean relations in 2011 will remain grim. Both sides' stubborn lack of communication will only increase mutual confrontation. We cannot turn back the clock; the *Cheonan* has been sunk, Yeonpyeong Island has been shelled. Seoul's distaste for dialogue and desire for unification through absorption, combined with Pyongyang's militant and confrontational posturing gives us reason to worry in 2011.

Hope and Worry within Despair

Hope -- dangling by a thread -- does however remain. In light of the existing confrontational situation and the hard-line positions of both Koreas, the chances are not high that either Korea will prioritize improved relations. Actually, what is more likely is a change in the international atmosphere that allows for a return to U.S.-DPRK dialogue. Such could create the opportunity



to repair ties between North and South Korea. The United States and China and both inserting themselves into Korean issues, and confrontation in Northeast Asia is growing. Inter-Korean relations have severely worsened and the threat of war on the Korean peninsula is politically burdensome for both Beijing and Washington. Furthermore, North Korea's playing of its uranium enrichment "card" has created a situation in which the United States and China can no longer ignore or reject negotiations with Pyongyang. Therefore, the United States and China have to try to revive either Six-Party Talks or bilateral dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang. Thus, there exists a good chance that common strategic interest could lead to a turning point in negotiations between North Korea, the United States and China.

While negotiations may arise not out of South Korean efforts, but rather, out of cooperation between Pyongyang, Washington, and Beijing, such a situation could become the driver for improvement in inter-Korean relations. If this is possible, then there may be some hope to be found 2011. However, this writer is not convinced such a possibility is more than a pipedream. It is not clear to me that the Lee Myung-bak government would welcome a return to Six-Party Talks or U.S.-DPRK bilateral dialogue, or whether its stubbornness would actually shackle the efforts to return to diplomacy.

Upon entering the New Year, North Korea called for unconditional talks and meetings between officials of the North and South, sending the message through the New Year's Joint Editorial, a joint statement by the government and the Party, an announcement by the Committee on the Peaceful Unification of the Fatherland. However, these calls were dismissed by the Lee administration as mere rhetoric. For high-level military talks, North-South Korea working-level talks have been scheduled. However, the Lee Myung-bak government still demands as a precondition to talks that the North acknowledge and apologize for the Cheonan and Yeonpyong Island incidents and prevent them from happening again, making us nothing but uneasy about



the chances of progress toward successful inter-Korean dialogue. Despite the United States' and China's moves toward restarting Six-Party Talks, the Lee Myung-bak government's conditions interfere with progress on that front, revealing that the South Korean administration has not abandoned hopes that sanctions and pressure could bring about North Korean regime collapse. This is why the outlook for 2011 is gloomy. I can only hope my concerns turn out to be unfounded.