

Kim Jong-Un Regime and Inter-Korean Relations: A New Framework

Kim Keun-sik
Professor of Political Science, Kyungnam University

Since the Lee Myung-bak administration took the helm in South Korea four years ago, inter-Korean relations has never been worse. The North Korea policy of the incumbent government has neither brought change within nor prevented provocations from the North. Its only accomplishment has been heightened military tensions. In politics, inter-Korean relations have been pushed to the sidelines. As the whole world watched, Kim Jong-un claimed his leadership position in North Korea with relative ease. The process of his power succession appears to be sailing smoothly. Both conservative and progressive groups in South Korea are in consensus that North Korea is upholding a relatively stable system thus far, and now the Lee administration must agonize over a new North Korea policy with the recognition of the new and stable Kim Jong-un regime.

From this point forward, a new step must be taken for a fresh new approach in the inter-Korean relations. For this, a change in conception must take place. Generally speaking, liabilities of the decedent are terminated upon death. In this sense, Kim Jong-il technically has taken the liabilities between North and South Korea -- the history of confrontations and conflicts -- with him to the grave.

With the new leadership in the new era of Kim Jong-un, we need a new approach in the inter-Korean relations. This means moving on to the next chapter by putting the long, painful and confrontational history during Kim Jong-il's rule behind us. Looking back during the Lee administration, three incidents served as massive obstacles behind the souring of inter-Korean relations: the shooting of a South Korean tourist at Mt. Kungang (July 2008), sinking of the ROKS *Cheonan* warship (March 2010), and shelling of Yeonpyeong Island (November 2010). As a prerequisite to continuation or advancement of inter-Korean relations, the Lee administration demanded an apology from North Korea, and that the North take responsibility for these events. But with the person responsible (i.e., Kim Jong-il) gone, we should bury the painful history of conflict with him. In other words, there is "no right of arraignment" for the crime committed by Kim Jong-il, since a deceased person cannot appear in court to defend himself. From this angle, the trial of this painful history can be finally put to rest, and at last, we can move forward to start anew with the new regime in the North.

Albeit limited, the South Korean government's granting of permission to specific groups to visit Pyongyang so they could express their condolences on account of Kim Jong-il's passing was significant and can be interpreted as a small but positive change in the inter-Korean relations. Prompted by the death of Kim Jong-il, funeral diplomacy is effective for creating an atmosphere to confirm mutual trust and resume once deadlocked dialogue between the two Koreas. This is not an unusual practice. Even between two enemy states, condolence visits were made and the international community has naturally accepted funeral diplomacy as a common place for diplomacy to take place. Even at the time of severed relations between the two Koreas, North Korea did meet with two presidents of South Korea (i.e., Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun) for two summits. With the current mood of hostility, Lee Myung-bak has sent an official invitation to North Korea for this year's 2012 Seoul Nuclear Security Summit. Thus, South Korea must seize this golden opportunity of funeral diplomacy for the

normalization of inter-Korean relations. This is a wise and a realistic approach.

Inter-Korean relations is somewhat unique in that the death of a leader of one state can also serve as an opportunity for normalization of relations. The sudden death of former president Kim Dae-jung in 2009 also created a break to resolve the impasse between the two Koreas. Despite the hostile political atmosphere at the time, Pyongyang sent five special envoys to pay tribute to the former President Kim. This visit eventually led to the meeting between President Lee Myung-bak and the Northern delegation -- an event which stimulated the recent discussion of a possible third inter-Korean summit. Similarly, Kim Jong-il's death must also be considered as an opportunity for creating a breakthrough in improving the relations and break the gridlock. By placing the past history behind us with the death of Kim Jong-il, South Korea can experience liberation from the painful past and make a fresh start for improved inter-Korean relations of reconciliation and cooperation. To do so, engagement policy must be reconfirmed, starting with the acknowledgement of the Kim Jong-un regime as a valid and a legitimate partner of mutual coexistence, reconciliation, and cooperation for the promotion of peace on the Korean peninsula. This can naturally lead North Korea in the right direction for change. Such a new framework for inter-Korean relations in the Kim Jong-un era must begin.

The year 2012 is a year of elections in Northeast Asia. As fate would have it, North Korea has taken the first step in the power transition process. The next countries in line for a change in leadership are Russia, China, Japan, the United States, and South Korea, in that order. This means that in 2013 a new order will form in the Korean peninsula and in the Northeast Asian region. More than this year, 2013 will become an important year to promote peace and cooperation in the region, and eliminate hostility and confrontation. This will become possible when the mood of reconciliation and cooperation is created on the Korean peninsula. Such can create a ripple effect, likewise pulling the rest of Northeast Asia toward peace and cooperation. Our hope for a smooth transition in both North and South Korea in the upcoming year is to achieve exactly this common goal -- to bring the Korean peninsula back into the spirit of reconciliation and peace.