

Restarting the Propaganda Offensive against North Korea

Theme: An expert discussion about restarting the propaganda offensive against North Korea

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The South Korean government has announced its intention to restart propaganda aimed at the North. North Korea considers restarting propaganda to be tantamount to an act of war and has declared that it will not stand idly by while this happens, communicating via an “important announcement” that it will make sneak attacks on any facilities or equipment related to propaganda warfare, thus increasing the threat against the South. Here several experts have gathered for a special discussion on the need, effectiveness, and importance of propaganda warfare, as well as what approach it may take.

□ Why is it necessary to restart the propaganda offensive?

○ **Kim Min Suk (Joongang Daily)**

The intrusion of a North Korean submarine into the South to launch a torpedo attack on the Cheonan was a clear armed provocation and can be interpreted by the international community as an act of war. An incident of this kind must be dealt with on an international level, and thus the issue extends beyond the problems of the Korean peninsula and must be dealt with as a threat to global peace. Many have spoken of the need to punish North Korea, and the South Korean authorities, after considering both military and non-military responses, have decided to prioritize propaganda as a non-military response. Of course, a non-military response could also include diplomatic or economic measures, but if North Korea refuses to acknowledge its responsibility and continues to make threatening actions against the South, then we must anticipate some kind of military action as well.

Because the government ministers expressly stated that they intend to take a non-military response rather than a military one, moving forward with propaganda activities is a must. If they don't carry through with this, North Korea will make even greater threats against the South. If South Korea veers away from its clearly stated intentions, I fear that we can expect more serious problems in the future.

□ What impact might propaganda have on the North Korean military and civilians?

○ **Ahn Chan Il (Sogang University)**

North Koreans have shown themselves to be very sensitive to criticism of their system. Particularly when contradictions or mistakes become known to the outside world, they harbor grave fears that their internal system is weakening. The North Korean authorities feel very uneasy about psychological attacks, but the people by comparison have a lot of curiosity about the outside world. If South Korea restarts its propaganda offensive the authorities will be disconcerted, but the people and the military are likely to follow their curiosity and directly seek it.



- What do you think of the skepticism about the effectiveness of broadcasting propaganda to the North?

- **Ahn Chan Il (Sogang University)**

North Korean society is tightly controlled, but among the middle and upper classes a considerable number of people have portable radios and secretly listen to foreign broadcasts. A majority of the tens of thousands of soldiers stationed along the DMZ come from the middle classes or higher, and if propaganda broadcasts reach these people, it is likely that they will not only listen but also pass on what they have heard to civilians and relatives in the rear areas. Therefore propaganda is likely to have a sizable impact on the North.

- What is the South Korean military's position on propaganda?

- **Kim Min Suk (Joongang Daily)**

The South Korean military authorities conducted their own study and concluded that launching a propaganda offensive would have a direct impact on North Korean society. They say that when the Ryongchon station explosion incident occurred, North Koreans near the DMZ found out about it through the propaganda broadcasts. Therefore military authorities are convinced that broadcasting propaganda along the front will have a broad impact not only on the military but also on ordinary civilians within the North. This is the reason why at every inter-Korean meeting, the North Korean side always brings up a request to “remove all devices for propaganda warfare.”

In 2006, South Korea agreed to remove its propaganda equipment as requested by the North in exchange for constructing a communications network for international merchant ships in the West Sea, which South Korea had requested in order to prevent accidental collisions. This was something North Korea had doggedly insisted upon for some time, so the South Korean government had no alternative but to agree to it. If the propaganda offensive were to start up again it would have far-reaching effects on the North Korean people, so it could be that North Korea's angry response this time is no mere threat. Suppressing the flow of propaganda appears to be a top priority for them.



□ What is the most effective means of propaganda against the North?

○ **Ahn Chan Il (Sogang University)**

There are various methods, from broadcasts to leaflets, and each has its own particular features. Broadcasts are more likely to be effective than leaflets. Once leaflets are scattered, the North Korean authorities can mobilize people to collect and dispose of them so they won't be read. With broadcasts, the same images can be shown repeatedly, and continuous exposure to these images has an indoctrination effect, bringing about a psychological breakdown. Soldiers on the frontline write to their families about what they hear from the broadcasts, so they act as a kind of "transmitting station" for information.

○ **Kim Min Suk (Joongang Daily)**

I think the best propaganda method is deployment of electronic display boards with video images.

○ **Jeung Young Tai (KINU)**

I agree that visual media is the most important means of propaganda to use against the North. The visual function can more directly stimulate the target's consciousness. Visual media can stimulate the natural yearning for the South felt by North Korean soldiers along the DMZ. The downside is that there are still various limitations to what can be done with visual media propaganda at present.

○ **Ahn Chan Il (Sogang University)**

Even when I was serving north of the DMZ, while I never once saw video propaganda, I did see large text messages on electronic display boards. In the future, if they can develop more advanced large-screen video media to stimulate the soldiers' visual senses, I think it will have an even greater impact.

□ Why is South Korea persisting in restarting propaganda despite the threats from the North, and why is it necessary?

○ **Ahn Chan Il (Sogang University)**

North Korea made the initial provocation, so there is ample justification for some kind of response. If South Korea responds with a physical provocation just like what the North did, it could unravel



into all-out war, so they see propaganda as a more appropriate response. This is an opportunity to restart propaganda as a retaliatory measure in the current state of South-North confrontation, but then we also need to make efforts to expand and develop it into a more fundamental process for effecting change in North Korea. If we do that, it should be enough to persuade those people who have criticized the decision to restart propaganda.

○ **Kim Min Suk (Joongang Daily)**

There is an old expression, “Live while being prepared to die.” Although the South Korean government may be willing to pay a price to prevent another provocation from the North in response to punishing it, it is important to consistently express their determination to avoid this. They need a “deterrent strategy” against the North, and they need to use this opportunity to teach them the lesson that if they make any future provocations they will pay a corresponding price.

For the past 10 years our society has been absorbed in a benevolent policy toward the North and our attitude about security issues has weakened. We have to work to correct the problem of deficient security awareness by promoting a “mass-education drive” to foster better understanding of security issues. If the ROK government is seen behaving in confusion in response to threats from the North, the benevolent or cowardly attitudes toward the North will begin to dominate, having a negative effect on our national standing and security.

□ How important is security awareness in shaping people’s opinions about restarting propaganda?

○ **Jeung Young Tai (KINU)**

In the Cheonan case, even though the investigation was conducted by an international team of experts, there are some social groups at work in South Korea who promote an extreme denial or distortion of the facts. Among young people in their 20s and 30s, a majority say they have doubts about the investigation findings. I’ve given some thought to why younger people have more doubts about the government’s investigation findings than people in their 40s and 50s, and I think it is because young people do not have a proper awareness of the situation in North Korea.

During the previous period of benevolence, our people did not have enough opportunities to learn the truth about life inside North Korea. The habit of thinking of them as partners for exchange and



cooperation has only led to a “fantasy” image of North Korea, and the younger generation has come to think of North Korea as comparable to other “normal countries.” It is because of this easy-going attitude about North Korea that we see a tendency among young people not to believe that it could make such a dangerous military sneak attack. As a result, they even doubt the objective, scientific analysis produced by our military authorities. Similarly, we can infer that this “lax security awareness” is one reason for the opposition to use of propaganda against the North.

□ How should the forthcoming propaganda offensive be carried out?

○ **Ahn Chan Il (Sogang University)**

The term propaganda warfare denotes a method of attack which targets the opposite side’s mindset and standards. The North Koreans in the demilitarized zone who directly encounter the psychological broadcasts are people who have been well-educated in ideology, so direct criticism of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il may not be the most effective way to change their thinking. Instead of communicating negative messages about the two Kims, if we approach it as a form of external communication and offer up information in an honest and natural way on matters like the situation in the outside world, international issues, and various aspects of South Korean society, then with the help of the North Korean soldiers in their role as messengers, our messages can have a far-reaching impact.

○ **Kim Min Suk (Joongang Daily)**

I think there should be two dimensions to the propaganda offensive.

First, in order to gain public support for the government’s decision to restart propaganda, they should provide a complete explanation of why propaganda against the North is needed. It is important to emphasize the role of propaganda not as an end in itself, but as a means of enlightening the North Korean people and giving them information about the outside, so that it can advance in democracy and human rights. Second, I think we should leave open the suggestion about sharing TV broadcasts with the North as a symbolic gesture. In this way, by showing that our government is providing information about North Korea to the youth, we can help change their attitude.

Current methods for propaganda include balloons carrying goods and leaflets, loudspeaker broadcasts, FM radio, electronic displays, etc. There are plans to install more electronic displays



which are expected to have a big impact, and we also need to continue loudspeaker broadcasts. To help enable continuous listening to FM radio broadcasts, in the future we need to devise methods of providing a steady supply of radios and batteries. If a live FM system could be set up on a high altitude balloon capable of climbing over 20 km, the FM signal could carry over 200 km; we are trying to formally propose such a system to the government. We need to reformat the broadcast content to appeal to young people, and in order to do so it would be best if the military and civilian sectors could work together.

□ Is the term “propaganda warfare” appropriate?

○ **Jeung Young Tai (KINU)**

Rather than using the militaristic term “propaganda warfare,” I think we should develop it as a kind of variation on the “Korea Wave” directed at North Korea, and devise ways of transmitting and propagating cultural elements within North Korea.

○ **Kim Min Suk (Joongang Daily)**

The transmission of culture is not just useful in the here and now; when thinking ahead to unification, it is an essential step for broadening mutual understanding between our two societies at the most basic level.

