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Direction and Tasks for Supporting the Settlement of North Korean Defectors: From Protection to Integration

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Recently, the Moon Jae-in government announced a “life-tailored” support for North Korean defectors as one of the 100 tasks of its five-year policy roadmap. This “tailored” policy aims to differentiate from one-time support measures of the past, such as subsidy and housing and help their settlement in a more concrete and realistic way from a longer perspective. This recently-unveiled plan implies that the Moon administration is emphasizing social integration of North Korean defectors. In the past, North Korean defectors were thought to be easily integrated into the South Korean society as long as they were given protection measures and financial support. This naive belief was based upon the mere fact that they share the same bloodline with South Korean citizens. However, North Korean defectors experienced various difficulties and hardships in the settlement process and in many cases have become socially and economically disadvantaged. Furthermore, recent cases of North Korean defectors, who returned to North Korea, are raising concerns over their struggle to adjust to South Korean society. In this regard, the Moon government's policy direction emphasizing the defectors' social

integration rather than protection is appropriate and timely.

Depoliticizing the Settlement Issues of North Korean Defectors

In order to facilitate the integration of North Korean defectors, it is necessary to separate their settlement from other North Korean issues. While North Korea-related issues often accompany heated ideological debates, we should avoid discussing the defectors' settlement from the same ideological lens because it could severely harm their integration. Support for North Korean defectors should focus more on their human rights *per se* and the cohesion of South Korean society in a broad sense. This idea can also be found in the recent remarks of Tomás Ojea Quintana, UN special rapporteur on North Korean human rights, who recently visited South Korea. He urged both South and North Korea to avoid politicizing the situation of twelve North Korean restaurant workers, who defected to the South from China last year, and to strictly focus on their interests and protection. While many political, ideological and strategic factors must be taken into account in the defection process, their welfare and wellbeing should be the utmost concern once they enter South Korea.

Developing Policies “Tailored to Life”

For the Moon government's policy to succeed, tailored-support should be provided for each defector considering their diverse conditions and circumstances. North Korean defectors are not a homogeneous group but rather are diverse in sex, age, education level, motivation for defection, and place of origin, and accordingly experience different levels and types of difficulties. Therefore, it is necessary to have more detailed and diversified policies to support North Korean defectors. First, their demographic and socio-economic background should be fully identified, and the policies should be designed based on such information. Moreover, the support system should be reorganized so that the policies can be efficiently enforced. The

central government, local governments, and civic groups should work closely together and communicate with each other so that the problems are easily identified and corrected quickly. Furthermore, inter-governmental consulting body should have more discretion to ensure that support measures and tasks are not overlapped between different ministries.

Understanding and Respecting North Korean Defectors

The emphasis on holistic and tailored support for North Korean defectors is grounded on the assumption that South and North Koreans are different. The Korean Peninsula has been separated more than 70 years, which created a widening cultural divide and produced misunderstandings. However, the difference was avoided being discussed out of fear that it would hamper unification. From now on, policy-makers must examine such differences first and delve into how to enhance mutual understanding thereby narrowing the gap. To this end, it is important to educate South Korean citizens to improve their perception about North Korean defectors. The government should develop educational programs to help the public better understand the North Korean society and distribute them to South Korean citizens with the help of the local governments and NGOs. Moreover, the current unification education given at elementary, middle, and high schools should be strengthened. Current programs are focusing on justifying the necessity of unification, emphasizing the importance of full restoration of national territory and Korean ethnic community. However, to promote the mutual understanding and respect, it is necessary to approach the issue from the perspective of anti-discrimination rather than nationalism. Calling for understanding based on nationalistic sentiment does not match the broader cause of social integration.

Balancing Between Special Care for North Korean Defectors and General Public

The issue of equity is one of the hurdles that should be dealt with in

implementing policies on North Korean defectors. Act on the Protection and Settlement Support of Residents Escaping from North Korea stipulates, “The Republic of Korea shall provide persons requiring protection with special protection on the principle of humanitarianism”(Article 4). However, this special position provided by the law might undermine the defectors' willingness to stand on their own feet and thus adversely affect their full integration into the society. Deepening social inequality in South Korea is currently triggering a criticism that the settlement support given to North Korean defectors is reverse discrimination. This resistance indicates that special support for defectors is losing ground among the public. It would be more desirable to integrate the defector policies within the regular welfare policies and allow special support only when their unique situations must be taken into account.

Integration and Harmonization of Value Systems

One important consideration in promoting the tailored support is how to adjust value system. Values are not merely abstract thoughts but actually affect the way people behave. One notable example is an understanding on gender norms. North Korean defectors, who are used to the patriarchal culture of the North Korean society, are more likely to have gender-discriminatory ideas, which may lead to conflicts in relationships with friends and family in South Korea. Therefore, the gender perspective must be taken into consideration when developing support measures for defectors. Also, human rights education should also be strengthened for them. Understanding human rights is prerequisite to become a sound citizen of South Korea and the world. Defectors with better understanding of human rights will not only easily adapt to the society but possibly convey the concept of human rights through various routes to their families and friends left behind in North Korea, thereby effectively speeding up the process of unification.

Conclusion

The most important aspect of social integration is that efforts should be made by both parties involved. So far, most of the defector policies have required the defectors to assimilate in South Korean society unilaterally. The Moon government's "life-tailored" support measures will also probably call for their efforts, but the government should make an equal effort to enhance South Koreans' perception of North Korean defectors. In the process of implementing the integration policy, a normative appeal based on the necessity for unification would not be enough: concrete incentives for South Korean citizens should be provided so that they are encouraged to actively intervene and participate in the process. ©KINU 2017

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