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Challenges for Building Social Consensus on Peace in the Korean Peninsula after PyongChang Winter Olympics

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PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games came to an end. Inter-Korean relations are witnessing a thaw as demonstrated by North Korea's participation in the Olympics, the formation of a single Inter-Korean team, the entry of joint Korean team, visit of North Korean high-level delegation to the South, musical performance of North Korea's Samjiyeon Orchestra, and the performance of North Korean cheering squad. The United States, which seemed to continuously hold onto its confrontation mode as shown at the beginning of the Olympics, is also hinting a signal of dialogue by mentioning the possibility of dialogue designed for exploring various options. North Korea is more active in the prospect of dialogue this time. Kim Yong-cheol, the Unification Front Department Director, who attended the closing ceremony at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, expressed his will to engage in the US-North Korea dialogue. The fact that US Vice President Mike Pence and North Korean special envoy Kim Yo Jong agreed on talks indicates that both sides have a will for dialogue although such dialogue did not actually take place at the Olympics. Therefore, the momentum of dialogue and negotiation is expected to continue, at least, after the PyeongChang Olympics.

View of the Public on PyeongChang Olympics: Half-joy and Half-fear

What is the public view on the rapidly changing inter-Korean relations that could not have been imagined just two months ago? There may be a slight difference in the context but the old saying “feeling a sense of joy on one side and fear on the other side” as described in the Analects of Confucius could be a proper analogy to what Koreans are experiencing in their minds. There are now high hope and expectation that North Korean nuclear issue can be resolved in a diplomatic way rather than through a military means, and that peace will soon arrive on the Korean Peninsula. However, even in the midst of new hope and expectation, there exist concerns and fears in the back of people’s minds that the conciliatory gestures of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) for dialogue and negotiation could be “evil smile” and that South Korea might fall into a victim of North Korea’s maneuvers once again.

Professor Herbert Kelman of Harvard University argued that once countries in conflicts enter a phase of dialogue and negotiation, their nationals inevitably experience the existential conflict and that such existential conflict will come to the surface in the form of half-joy and half-fear felt by the public. According to Professor Kelman, who studied negotiation process for peace between Israel and Palestine, once a dialogue or negotiation for peace begins, attitudes of approach and avoidance are simultaneously reinforced. Professor Kelman argues that conflicts between those two attitudes arise not only at the collective level in the form of South-South conflict but also appear in the individual minds. Each individual experiences two different minds at the same time. In other words, even those with hope and enthusiasm for dialogue and negotiation also consider risks associated with them. This existential anxiety especially becomes maximized when concessions and compromises take place in the process of dialogue or negotiation. In other words, people become concerned as to whether concessions and compromises would result in a situation that can not be reversed or if such concessions and compromises would pose a threat to national security.

Does an ambivalent attitude observed in the process of peace negotiation between Israel and Palestine also exist in Korea? *Survey of People's Opinions on South-North Integration 2017*, published by Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) suggests a positive probability. The largest number of respondents (39.3%) preferred both the engagement policy and pressure-oriented policy toward North Korea: the former reflecting the attitude of approach and the latter the attitude of avoidance towards North Korea. In a sense, Koreans have always been experiencing conflicts of two minds when it comes to North Korea.

Opportunities and Challenges

Feelings of half-joy and half-fear towards North Korea could act as an opportunity factor to build social consensus and gain public support in the dialogue and negotiation phase. Such feelings could also be a challenge factor in building social consensus and gaining public support.

North Korean policies of the past South Korean governments perceived attitudes of approach and avoidance to be in a zero-sum relation. Policies of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments, represented by the Sunshine Policy, only emphasized approach-based attitude, while policies of the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments relatively underscored avoidance-oriented attitude. In the end, the South Korean governments of the past ended up stressing only one aspect of feelings of half-joy and half-fear of the people while ignoring other aspect. Each government believed that if the attitude of approach gains ground, the attitude of avoidance will weaken and vice versa.

It is important to strengthen the intensity of approach-based attitude than avoidance-based attitude while acknowledging that the intensity of those two attitudes tends to increase simultaneously to form a national consensus on peace on the Korean Peninsula. If a policy is designed to present hope and expectation for a peaceful Korean Peninsula while at the same time offering preventive measures regarding national security, national consensus on peace and unification will

strengthen. On the other hand, if avoidance-oriented attitude is reinforced by stoking anxiety on national security, the foundation of national consensus will weaken.

Policy Tasks

The primary task for strengthening the approach-based attitude of the public toward dialogue and negotiation and preventing avoidance-based attitude from taking hold is to overcome a “zero-sum bias” that regards inter-Korean relations as zero-sum relations. The problem with this zero-sum bias is that a judgment is often made on the basis of North Korea’s interests, not on those of the Republic of Korea (ROK). Should South Korea endure damage in order to cause harm to North Korea? It would be foolish to give up practical benefits in return for psychological benefits.

Therefore, the South government needs to emphasize its national interests thoroughly in the dialogue and negotiation process. It should be stressed that the peace on the Korean Peninsula is in line with the national interests of the ROK and that the dialogue and negotiations, too, are for the sake of its national interests. South Korea taking the lead in the Korean Peninsula issue does not mean that it has become a maverick who only looks after its own national interests. It indicates that South Korea will actively build a mutually beneficial relationship by considering the interests of all concerned countries and presenting proposals after adjustments.

The second task of forming a national consensus for peace on the Korean Peninsula is to articulate the benefits that will be brought by peace. Ever since the division on the peninsula, South Koreans have lived in a state of non-peace. People have become accustomed to this non-peace state and grown comfortable with it. Considering the universal bias of human beings to maintain the status quo, the peaceful peninsula could be an uncomfortable anti-status quo under the current comfortable non-peaceful state.

The approach-based attitude for peace on the Korean Peninsula will become reinforced when people start to see a positive change in life that could be awarded by peace. Unification is a task of the future but peace is a task of the present. Peace,

by its nature, has indirect and preventative benefits. Establishing peace is similar to building social overhead capital (SOC). Peace on the Korean Peninsula provides invisible benefits that indirectly support the production and economic activities of both individuals and businesses. How the construction of Gyeongbu Expressway had impacted the South Korean economy in the 1970s provides a case in point.

Finally, the ROK should provide an opportunity to broaden the understanding of the DPRK. It should build people's capacity of empathy so that the public can become capable of viewing the Korean Peninsula issue from North Korea's perspective. Strengthened capacity will help eliminate the mirror image effect that perceives the culture and environment of others from the viewpoint of my own culture and thoughts. The controversy over Kim Il-sung mask during the PyeongChang Olympics clearly shows the importance of understanding North Korea. In South Korean society, even the president is the subject of satire and humor, a phenomenon that is unimaginable in North Korea. The Kim Il-sung mask controversy has not been further expanded thanks to an understanding of the North Korean regime.

"Peace can not be maintained by violence. It can only be maintained through understanding." - Albert Einstein - ©KINU 2018

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