

# INCONSISTENCY OR FLEXIBILITY? THE KIM YOUNG SAM GOVERNMENT'S NORTH KOREA POLICY AND ITS DOMESTIC VARIANTS

*Yongho Kim*

This article deals with domestic sources of the Kim Young Sam (KYS) government's North Korea policy. The main argument is that the inconsistency of KYS's North Korea policy, which often became the target of domestic criticisms, was the result of KYS's effort to flexibly reflect public opinion toward North Korea and unification issues. It was amusing to see how major shifts of KYS's North Korea policy took place before or after elections. Especially, the first vessel carrying a rice donation to North Korea started for Chongjin two days before the 1995 local election. The Four Party Talks proposal in 1996 was made five days after the general election. There may be various reasons, however, domestic variants offer reasonable explanations. Most important is the tendency to utilize North Korea policy as a campaign tool. With hard line policy toward North Korea, the ruling party won and the opposite was true with soft line policy. The inconsistency of KYS's North Korea policy also attributes to South Korea's public opinion. Public opinion toward North Korea and unification affairs appeared to vary according to generation and issues. Political obsession to make historic achievements on unification affairs in addition to KYS's personal character play important roles in the making of the KYS government's North Korea policy.

## I. Introduction

The Kim Young Sam government's policy toward North Korea has seldom been favorably evaluated. The government has always been the target of domestic criticism either when it reached its hard line peak with heightened tension or when it softened to provide unconditional food aid to Pyongyang. In general, the South Korean media has not given favorable coverage of the administration's Pyongyang policy. Opposition parties also took advantage of domestic complaints toward Kim Young Sam government's North Korea policy by employing harsh criticisms in the election campaign.

Indeed, the Kim Young Sam (hereafter, KYS) government's policy toward Pyongyang shifted seven times during its term in office, tilting between dovish and hawkish extremes. As a result, "inconsistency" has been the focal point of media and legislative criticism. The frequent replacement of unification ministers has been often indicated as representative of the inconsistency in the Kim Young Sam government's policy toward North Korea.

There are more analyses that indicate KYS's inconsistency rather than those which explain the reasons for his inconsistency. One obvious explanation for this trend may come from North Korea. The Pyongyang regime is quite unpredictable and eccentric in its external policy. In 1993, right after the inauguration of Kim Young Sam as the 14th president of South Korea, Pyongyang declared its withdrawal from the NPT. In 1995, it forced a South Korean freight vessel carrying rice aid from Seoul to hoist the North Korean flag. In 1996, a secret incursion of North Korean commandos, uncovered when a North Korean submarine washed ashore due to engine trouble, drove the whole nation into a state of panic. There is no doubt that all these events were independent variables which influenced KYS's policy changes.

Even when we acknowledge North Korean variables as indepen-

dent, we have to consider several intervening variables which have constrained KYS's policy toward Pyongyang. The international environment surrounding the Korean peninsula, including Pyongyang's approach toward Washington, North Korea's domestic situation and food crisis, and Kim Jong Il's political stability, have been major variables in KYS's policymaking process.

Along with these factors, concerns about South Korea's domestic politics appeared to be one of the major factors influencing KYS's policy toward Pyongyang. The literature of international relations theory indicates that foreign policymaking tends to be subject to change according to various domestic influences. It is amusing to see that each shift of KYS's North Korea policy accompanied a major agenda in Seoul's domestic politics - in particular, elections. This suggests that domestic concerns have been major constraints in Seoul's North Korea policy.

There was ample room for these domestic variants to intervene in the making of KYS government's North Korea policy. First, in the public mentality of most Koreans, an emotional value is embedded in issues regarding unification. That is why each government has sought to make its own historic accomplishment by improving its relations with Pyongyang. Each government has registered its own unification policy, often different in form but basically similar in content from the one developed by the previous regime. In so doing, each leader sought to assure the public about his desire for unification and consolidate political support.

In addition, issues regarding North Korea and unification are often spotlighted by the media, which often turn them into the most popular topic for domestic debate. The South Korean media usually places itself in a position that represents the public's deep interests and politicians often try to raise as many issues as possible to attract media attention. Thus, North Korea and unification issues are frequently the topic of sarcastic editorials by the print media and anti-government criticisms

by opposition parties. Seldom has the response from the media and the National Assembly been favorable to the KYS government's North Korea policy.

It is amusing to see that all these factors have been closely related to elections. One clear-cut way for abstracting a correlation between KYS's North Korea policy and its domestic variants is to examine how the policy has been turned and twisted before and after elections. Elections have provided timely moments in which domestic variants have extended their utmost influence on the making of North Korea policy.

The timing of policy shifts suggests that elections were one of the major determinants of KYS's North Korea policy. In June 1992, six months before the presidential election, Seoul's policy toward the North shifted from dovish to hawkish as the Nuclear Control Commission was unable to reach an agreement on North-South mutual nuclear inspection. Seven months before the 1995 local election, there was another policy shift to a warm period after the conclusion of the U.S.-North Korean nuclear negotiations in Geneva. Just three days before the 1995 local election there was a nationwide televised moment in which the *Sea Apex*, a South Korean freight vessel, departed for the North with 50,000 tons of rice. The joint proposal for the Four Party Talks made by Presidents Clinton and Kim at Cheju Island was publicized five days after the 1996 National Assembly election.

This paper's aim is to clarify the correlation between KYS's North Korea policy and his concern for domestic politics, with emphasis on elections. This study is divided into two parts. The first part (chapter II) builds a nexus between KYS's Pyongyang policy and domestic political issues in order to figure out whether elections really caused KYS's policy shift from soft line to hard line, and vice versa. The second part (chapter III) suggests an array of explanations why KYS's North Korea policy had to fluctuate in accordance with the domestic political agenda, mainly with elections.

To answer whether KYS's North Korea policy was inconsistent or

excessively flexible depends on the viewpoint of the analyst. In terms of the overall effectiveness of North Korea policy, it obviously was inconsistent. When we look into domestic sources of KYS's North Korea policy, however, it appears to have responded flexibly to domestic repercussions. Unfortunately, blame never falls on domestic society, but to the leader who tried to represent public opinion.

## II. KYS's North Korea Policy & Domestic Politics

### *Before the Startline: the 1992 presidential election*

The starting point of KYS's North Korea policy may be traced back to 1992 when KYS, as the ruling party's presidential candidate, employed an election strategy which utilized a hawkish policy toward North Korea. The presidential election was scheduled to be held in December and it was in May when Pyongyang announced its rejection of mutual inspections of nuclear sites. South Korea's hardline policy, which had been visible since May, became conspicuous around October, two months before the election.

Around this time, the symptoms of hardline policy toward North Korea became evident. The resumption of Team Spirit Exercises and the arrest of North Korean spies were publicized. Then South Korean Prime Minister Hyun Seung-chong issued a letter to his counterpart in the North, requesting an apology for the espionage scheme. In response, North Korea officially disclosed its decision to boycott the South-North Coordinating Commission, thereby deepening the cool down of inter-Korean relations. It was also at this time when the South Korean government finally decided not to repatriate Mr. In-mo Lee, a long-time convict who had been arrested just after the end of the Korean War for guerrilla warfare activities in Chiri Mountain.

It was ironical to see that both KYS's election strategy and the South

Korean government's North Korea policy were deliberately orchestrated to be hawkish almost simultaneously. Seoul's tough stance toward the North continued while South Korea's presidential elections drew the public's attention away from the North Korean nuclear issue. KYS's election strategy deliberately stimulated South Korean voters' "threat syndrome," which dates back to the Korean War in the 1950s.

In addition, KYS's election strategy was to spotlight the alleged ideological ambiguity of his rival, Kim Dae Jung. The trend of utilizing the North Korea issue as a campaign strategy continued in a more noticeable fashion as the official campaign period began. KYS spotlighted his hard line stance toward North Korea as a means to distinguish himself from the somewhat liberal and progressive policy lines pursued by the opposition party candidate, Kim Dae Jung. KYS stressed the North Korea issue in his campaign speech of December 9, 1992, near the DMZ area. In a more obvious attack against Kim Dae Jung, he further argued that "for unification, a man of solid ideology must be elected as the President."<sup>1</sup>

KYS's overall election strategy to distinguish his conservative hard line policy toward North Korea from Kim Dae Jung's relatively flexible stance was not difficult to detect throughout the campaign period. The 1992 presidential elections ended with KYS's victory. Once KYS became president, however, he tried to improve inter-Korean relations by launching a series of dovish policies toward the North—contrary to his hard line stance during the election campaign.

### *Dovish Start: the first 16 days*

The new KYS government, right after its inauguration, proclaimed a thoroughly new and dovish North Korea policy. Han Wan-sang, the first unification minister, signaled his dovish blueprint of North Korea

---

1 *Hankook Ilbo*, December 10, 1992.

policy. He disclosed that the KYS government would show flexibility in dealing with Pyongyang in areas such as its nuclear program, economic exchanges, and repatriation of the long-term convict, Lee In-mo. He also announced KYS's plan to pursue a South-North summit.<sup>2</sup>

However, KYS's dovish blueprint was abandoned exactly 16 days after his inauguration when Pyongyang announced its withdrawal from the NPT on March 12, 1993.<sup>3</sup> It was also around this time that KYS, now South Korea's President, was criticized for the first time by the media for his reckless North Korea policy. Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT reversed KYS's dovish blueprint into a 19-month-long deadlock.

#### *19-Month-Long Hawkish Deadlock: 1993-1994*

The KYS government tried to quell infuriated public opinion by reversing its dovish policy into a hawkish one and even replacing the Unification Minister, Han Wan-sang. When North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT, negative views prevailed in South Korea's public opinion. The media criticized KYS's early optimistic attitude toward Pyongyang, including his decision to repatriate Lee In-mo. Three days after Pyongyang's withdrawal announcement, KYS confirmed the return of hard line policies by suspending all levels of economic exchanges with Pyongyang.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of KYS's flexible attempt to reverse North Korea policy, he could not avoid harsh criticism during the next 19 months. When Washington and Pyongyang negotiated on the nuclear issue in New York and Geneva, most criticism centered on his lack of diplomatic

2 *Joong-ang Ilbo*, March 1, 1993.

3 Pyongyang announced its withdrawal from the NPT "to preserve the utmost interests of the Republic" and stated its withdrawal would never be reversed "until the U.S. nuclear threat is abandoned and the IAEA recovers its independence and objectivity." For details, see, *Rodong Sinmun*, March 12, 1993.

4 *Chosun Ilbo*, March 15, 1993.

capability, acrimoniously labeling the KYS government's North Korea policy as a total failure. When North Korea repeatedly stimulated South Korea by its test of the Nodong missile, intentional deception toward the IAEA inspection teams, and verbal provocations at a negotiation table indicating that Seoul would be turned into a sea of flames,<sup>5</sup> the media described the KYS government as sitting idly by at a time of the greatest security threat to Seoul since the end of the Korean War.

In summary, the KYS government was driven into a corner. Its failure to manage North Korea policy was viewed as its total lack of capability to manage overall national affairs. The only way out of this dead-end street was to resume economic exchanges and enlarge trade volumes, thereby boosting up an image that the KYS government was managing its relations with North Korea on its own, rather than depending on Washington's diplomatic assistance.

### *The Coming of Spring: 1994-1995*

As soon as the U.S.-North Korean nuclear negotiations were concluded, the KYS government hurried to shift its hard line policy into a more friendly approach. The KYS government's policy shift was not a result of consolidated transparency of North Korea's nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> The KYS government seemed to have forgotten why it had maintained hawkish relations with Pyongyang for more than a year and a half. It

5 On March 19, 1994, one of the North Korean delegates for the 8th Inter-Korean Working Level Conference stated for the record that Seoul could be turned into a sea of flames in case of a war.

6 In the Geneva Agreement, Washington and Pyongyang agreed to the construction of a 2,000 MW light-water reactor by the year 2003, the supply of heavy oil to North Korea, and the lifting of the trade ban in return for Pyongyang's acceptance of IAEA inspections and canceling its withdrawal from the NPT. However, there was clear and prompt measure to secure the transparency of North Korea's past nuclear development activity. According to the agreement, Pyongyang must accept IAEA measures for transparency around 2003 when the core equipment of the light-water reactor are delivered.



had repeatedly indicated that, without the transparency of North Korea's nuclear program, no dialogue would be possible. Nevertheless, the KYS government abandoned its own principle of "no dialogue and economic cooperation without a satisfactory solution of the nuclear issue."

KYS was quite successful in satisfying the public with his reversed North Korea policy. From late October of 1994, the KYS government began to pursue a massive investment program toward the North.<sup>7</sup> Media and public attention had shifted from Pyongyang's nuclear program and centered on how to allocate the financial burden and secure a leading role in KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization). The warning by Hans Blix, the Secretary-General of IAEA, that the content of Pyongyang's report about its nuclear activity was not reliable failed to draw the public's attention. Instead, newspapers were filled with articles about how much money specific companies were planning to invest in the North.

The climax of the KYS government's dovish North Korea policy occurred on June 25, 1995, just two days before the local elections, when 50,000 tons of rice was shipped to the North. As soon as Pyongyang was reported to have requested food aid from Japan, Seoul asked the Japanese to abstain from providing food aid to Pyongyang so that South Korea's shipping could proceed. Tokyo respected Seoul's request and finally, after a series of secret working level contacts between the two Koreas in Beijing, food aid from Seoul to Pyongyang was agreed upon.

The realization of rice aid two days before the election was an excellent election strategy for KYS's ruling party. On June 25, the 45th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, the KYS government

---

7 With the shift in KYS's North Korea policy, inter-Korean trade volume jumped from \$19 million in 1994 to \$28 million in 1995. See Ministry of Unification, *Wolkan Nam-buk Kyoryu Hyonhwan* (Monthly Statistics for North-South Trade Transactions), No. 77, December, 1997.

successfully produced a nation-wide televised drama in which the South Korean Prime Minister saw off the *Sea Apex*, a freighter with rice aboard, to North Korea.

The ruling party seemed to expect that the historic food aid to the North would give an image of a competent government successfully managing its relations with North Korea, and therefore, serve as an effective election strategy. The event was brought up during the election campaigning of two prominent ruling party candidates. On the eve of June 25, Won-sik Chong and In-che Lee, respectively running for the mayorship of Seoul and the governorship of Kyonggi Province, made use of the food aid to convince their voters to vote for the ruling party. The former went on to promise a regular exchange of soccer games between Seoul and Pyongyang, while the latter suggested a blueprint to develop the relatively underdeveloped northern Kyonggi province as a base for unification.

### *Being Slapped for Doing Good: Freezing Again, 1995-1996*

The KYS government's expectations for better relations with North Korea vanished after the "flag incident" and Pyongyang's capture of the South Korean freight carrying rice from Seoul. The *Sea Apex*, which had departed from South Korea on June 25, was forced to hoist the North Korean flag when it entered the North Korean port of Ch'ong-chin. This went against the Beijing agreement between Seoul and Pyongyang, which stated that no flag would be hoisted when entering the port. Consequently, the South Korean government ordered all freighters on their way to North Korea with rice on board to retreat on June 29. However, on the 30th, North Korea explained that the incident had occurred due to a miscommunication between Pyongyang and the Ch'ong-chin port. The explanation was accompanied by a formal expression of apology signed by Chon Kum-ch'ol, the North Korean delegate at the Beijing rice negotiation with Seoul. Again on August 2,

the port authority of Ch'ong-chin captured a South Korean freighter, the *Samson Venus*, on charges of espionage. One of its crew took a picture at the port as a memento of his visit although the two sides had agreed not to take any pictures at the port. This time, it was Seoul's turn to officially express regrets by the name of Lee Suk-ch'ae, the South Korean delegate at the rice negotiation.

The public anger against "being slapped for doing good" became serious enough to dramatically affect KYS's popularity.<sup>8</sup> The South Korean public was infuriated by these two incidents in which South Korea was totally humiliated by North Korea for its good will. The government received harsh criticism for having been "slapped in return for a gift" not only from opposition parties but from the ruling party.<sup>9</sup> Daily criticisms by media and opposition parties resulted in public discontent against the KYS government's overall North Korea policy. Again, the KYS government was put into a situation in which its capability to manage overall national affairs was questioned.

It was several months before the 1996 April National Assembly election when the KYS government flexibly reflected public discontent by changing its course of North Korea policy again. The KYS government reportedly decided not to consider any food aid to Pyongyang before April 11 when the National Assembly election would be held. It also reportedly requested cooperation from Washington and Tokyo to abstain from further food aid to Pyongyang.<sup>10</sup>

For its part, North Korea also played a role. One week before the National Assembly election, North Korean heavy armored troops entered the DMZ zone, violating the armistice treaty in an alleged

---

8 In addition to these two incidents, North Korea's kidnapping of the Wusongho, a South Korean fishing boat, and the alleged kidnapping of a South Korean reverend further infuriated the South Korean public. For details, see *Korea Times* December 23 and 26, 1995.

9 *Segye Ilbo*, August 11, 1995.

10 *Dong-a Ilbo*, January 25, 1996; *Korea Times*, December 28, 1995.

attempt to nullify it. Its political effect on South Korea's election was enormous. Opposition parties raised unconfirmed suspicions that Pyongyang orchestrated the incident in return for big unknown concessions from Seoul. The "north wind" became one of the hottest issues even after the election ended. Media, academic analyses, as well as politicians raised various viewpoints as to whether there had been orchestrated efforts between Pyongyang and Seoul or that Pyongyang had miscalculated that doing so might be a political burden to the ruling party.<sup>11</sup>

### *Return of Soft line Policy: The Four Party Talks Proposal, 1996*

Five days after the 1996 National Assembly election, which ended with the victory of the KYS's ruling party, the four party talks were proposed at Cheju Island. Presidents Kim and Clinton jointly suggested the proposal after the summit in Cheju on April 16, 1996. The joint-proposal was to replace the armistice treaty which had been signed in 1953 by a more effective and permanent peace treaty. North Korea's reluctance in accepting the proposal was evident in its efforts to drag down the procedure by avoiding the issue for the first five months, then requesting preparatory talks, before they finally acquiesced to participate in the talks. In fact, the proposal's aim was to drag Pyongyang into the framework of the four-party talks and open the way for official Seoul-Pyongyang contacts. Food aid, the launch of KEDO construction, the lifting of the U.S. trade ban, and further rapprochement with Washington: all of these became linked with North Korean acceptance of the proposal.

The only successful case in which the KYS government maintained consistency with regard to its policy toward North Korea was on the

---

11 For details, see *Chosun Ilbo*, April 5 and 7, 1996; *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, April 9 and 11, 1996; *Seoul Shinmun*, April 9, 1996; *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, April 10, 1996; *Joong-ang Ilbo*, April 12, 1996; *Hankuk Ilbo*, April 12, 1996.

four-party talks. In spite of North Korea's intended and time consuming delay, it steadily pursued the four-party talks. The submarine incident of September 1996 which caused the highest tension between the two Koreas since 1983 Rangoon bombing could not reverse South Korea's softline policy. North Korea's unprecedented apology for the incident was registered on December 29, 1996 in the form of an official memorandum signed by its Foreign Ministry's spokesperson. As soon as the apology was released, Seoul and Washington seemed to accept it and decided to continue their drive toward the four party talks. The KYS government's soft line posture continued.

### *1997 Presidential Election and North Korea*

The 1997 presidential election was one of the rare cases in which candidates paid relatively less attention to the North Korea issue. It was hard to find any discrepancies between the three forerunner candidates with regard to their North Korea policy. The other side of the coin is that it was hard for the candidates to make their North Korea policy distinguishable from that of the others. None wanted to be considered as having a progressive posture toward Pyongyang.

The issue of the "north wind" was raised again. About four months before the presidential election, one of Kim Dae Jung's party members, Mr. Oh Ik-che, defected to North Korea. Ten days before the election, it was reported that Kim Dae Jung received letters from Oh Ik-che in North Korea. Kim Dae Jung's party strongly protested that KYS government's release of such information was a deliberate political maneuver. It also issued a warning memorandum to North Korea on December 16, 1997. In addition, the "Hwang Jang-yop file"<sup>12</sup> had always been

---

12 Mr. Hwang, North Korea's former party secretary in charge of foreign affairs, had defected to South Korea in February 1997. It was reported that he carried a file in which the names of all South Koreans who had cooperated with North Korea were listed. Some reports indicate that about 50,000 names were on his list.

a potential source for the north wind.

Unlike other occasions, in the 1997 election both the media and public opinion suspiciously raised the issue of the coincidence between the north wind and the election.<sup>13</sup> In retrospect, the overall attention given to the issue by the media and the public was low-key, apparently because they had become quite accustomed to hearing about the north wind whenever there was election. Consequently, the North Korea issue had little influence on the 1997 presidential election.

### **III. Inconsistency or Flexibility: Looking into Domestic Sources**

The inconsistency of the KYS government's North Korea policy resulted from KYS's efforts to flexibly reflect public opinion represented by the media and his attempt to utilize the North Korea issue as campaign strategy. To KYS, unification issues seemed to be one of the major means to distinguish himself from his predecessors.

#### *Public Opinion*

A thorough analysis of South Korea's public opinion on North Korea and unification issues suggests that they are the last things one should count on when making a policy. KYS's misfortune stemmed from the fact that his public views on North Korea issues have never been constant. As far as public opinion on North Korea is concerned, it is difficult to find an absolute majority and almost impossible to figure out any clear-cut direction of what the public wants. There may be various reasons for this.

First, there is a significant differentiation between the older and the younger generation with regard to what ought to be the government's

---

<sup>13</sup> See *Munhwa Ilbo*, August 19, 1997; *Dong-a Ilbo*, August 20, 1997; *Joong-ang Ilbo*, August 20, 1997; *Hankuk Ilbo*, August 20, 1997.

North Korea policy. For example, those in their forties and fifties appeared to care about unification far more than the younger generation in their twenties and thirties, who appeared to care "only a little". According to a poll which was performed by one of the leading poll companies in Korea, the Gallup, in 1995 52.1% of those in their forties and 69.1% in their fifties considered the unification issue as one of the major concerns in their daily life while 45.2% in the thirties and 50.6% in the twenties replied that they cared about unification affairs "only a little". On the KYS government's food aid and supply of light-water reactors, the poll showed that 36.3% of those in their twenties indicated them as failures while 44.7% of those in the fifties and over group negatively evaluated KYS's decision to give aid to Pyongyang.<sup>14</sup> In a similar poll asking whether additional food aid was necessary, 56.7% of the younger generation answered favorably while 56.9% of the older generation responded negatively.<sup>15</sup>

Second, in addition to the striking split of opinions between the younger and the older generations, the percentage of voters from each generation is roughly the same, with marginal superiority of the younger. In the recent presidential election in December 1997, people in their twenties (29%) and thirties (28%) occupied about 57% of all voters. These numbers seem to suggest that the older generation is in the minority. However, 43% of electorate is still indispensable. In addition, most opinion leaders are in their forties and fifties and it is their views which are shown in the media and thus, lead the public opinion.

Third, public opinion itself has never been constant, sometimes extremely volatile and at other times irrationally indifferent. When the relations between Seoul and Pyongyang reached a stalemate in 1994 due to the nuclear program of North Korea, one poll showed that 60.2% favored massive aid policy toward North Korea.<sup>16</sup> Another poll

---

14 *Chosun Ilbo*, August 15, 1995.

15 *Joong-ang Ilbo*, August 22, 1995.

16 The poll was held in May 1994. *Chosun Ilbo*, August 15, 1995.

held in August 1995, taken just after the KYS government was "slapped" by Pyongyang for its rice aid, showed that only 39.1% favored further concessions to North Korea, while 57.2% answered in the opposite way. The dovish public opinion of 60.2% dropped into 39.1% and the hawkish jumped from 32.1% to 57.2% within a time span of one year and three months. This signifies that the South Korean public opinion tends to become more conservative when the image of North Korea as a source of threat or provocation is elevated.

Fourth, there have been strong indications that media coverage on North Korea and unification affairs often misled public opinion, which, in turn, misled the policy. There is high competition within the South Korean media because, in Seoul alone, there are ten major newspapers, five of which publish almost two million papers a day. They compete for exclusive stories, often sensational and sometimes shocking. Media coverage on North Korea and unification affairs is no exception. The majority of North Korea specialists on South Korea, in a poll, indicated that media reports on North Korea are "short-sighted, biased, sensational, commercially motivated", and finally, "distort" the reality. 68.5% of those polled pointed out that the way in which the South Korean media interpreted North Korea and unification affairs was by and large biased and limited: they tended to accept government logic without filtering (13.0%); heavily depended on governmental sources for information on North Korea (12.0%); applied only zero-sum game framework resulting from the experience of the Cold War (11.5%); often based their reports on unconfirmed rumor or aggrandized facts (11.5%).

### *Political Obsession to Make History*

It is understandable that a political leader would want to leave his name in history with brilliant historic accomplishments. Since Korea has been divided for only 50 years after being a unified country since



the 7th century, the unification issue has attracted many political leaders. Each Korean president has tended to opt for a historical accomplishment by realizing unification. That is why each president has tried to issue his own version of unification policy.<sup>17</sup>

KYS, too, seemed to have an obsession to make a great historical accomplishment within his term. His decision to arrest two former presidents, Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, was designed to symbolically end the coup d'état of December 1979. From his inauguration, he presented himself as the first civilian president in South Korean history after the long reign of military authoritarianism.

In particular, with regard to North Korea and unification affairs, KYS was obsessed about making a historic breakthrough. He was close to becoming the first South Korean President to have a summit with the North Korean leader. Being so close in making a historic accomplishment, KYS seemed anxious to employ second and third opportunities to make a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations.

### *North Korea Issue as a Campaign Tool*

It is amusing to see that the ruling party always won when the government was employing hard line policy toward North Korea and lost when soft line policy was being implemented. As we have already reviewed, South Korea's public opinion on North Korean issues has always failed to suggest any clear-cut agenda for decision makers. Likewise, as a campaign tool, both hard and soft line policy satisfy only half of the voters. It is also worth considering that those voters in favor of the ruling party tend to be conservative and favor stability while opposition party supporters often tend to be progressive and favor changes. In this section, we will review how South Korea's policy toward

---

17 For details on each president's unification policy, see Jinwook Choi and Sun-Song Park, *The Making of a Unified Korea: Policies, Positions and Proposals* (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 1997).

Pyongyang has influenced the result of each election in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup>

At the 1992 National Assembly election, the loser was the ruling party. A couple of months earlier, the Roh government hurried to conclude the Basic Agreement, signifying a new friendly relations with North Korea. However, it did not work well as a campaign strategy and the ruling party lost its control over the parliament by acquiring 149 seats while the opposition parties won 150 seats. At the 1992 presidential election, the ruling party won and KYS became the President. As we have already seen, hard line policy toward North Korea was implemented and it worked. The ruling party lost the first local election held in June 1995, despite the KYS government's efforts to utilize food aid to Pyongyang as a campaign strategy. However, the 1996 National Assembly election ended with the victory of the ruling party. Although the ruling party failed to get more than half of the majority, it acquired an adequate number of seats to control the floor. KYS himself mentioned that he was quite satisfied with the result<sup>19</sup> and the ruling party could get the majority number of seats by gladly receiving some of the independents who had won without any party affiliation. It has already been discussed that the KYS government maintained a hard line North Korea policy until the election ended.

At the 1997 presidential election, there was no evident sign that the ruling party tried to utilize the North Korean issue as a campaign strategy. However, several newspaper articles, such as the one published by the Hankyoreh Shinmun on February 9, 1998, indicated that there had been attempts to utilize the north wind at the election. This article indicated that there were evident clues signifying that another puk-p'ung had carefully been prepared: the arrest of a North Korean spy couple in October two months before the election, the arrest of a retired Seoul National University professor on charges of espionage, and finally, the release of a letter addressed to Kim Dae Jung written by a for-

18 For details, see *Joong-ang Ilbo*, February 22, 1996.

19 *Dong-a Ilbo*, April 13, 1996.

mer party member who had defected to North Korea. The article further mentioned that the Kim Dae Jung camp's intelligence staff successfully checked those attempts. After the election, the Kim Dae Jung government is now undergoing a massive investigation over the allegations that the former ruling party tried to utilize the north wind as election strategy.

### *KYS's personality*

There is one more indispensable factor determining the KYS government's North Korea policy: KYS's personal character. So far, KYS has been known to have several traits. First, he liked to make unexpected, abrupt and quite often, surprising policies. When KYS appointed his cabinet members, extremely high emphasis was put on confidentiality. He did not like to see the names of his cabinet on newspapers before his appointment was announced. Some of them were reported to have been replaced because their names had been leaked to newspapers. His emphasis on confidentiality resulted from his 30-year's experience as an opposition leader under authoritarian rulers.<sup>20</sup> In order to lead the opposition camp, most of his schedules and political plans had to be kept secret. However, it has been remarked that he disregarded transparency in dealing with national affairs even after he became the President.

Second, it is known that KYS had been too opinionated to listen to his staff. After being elected as the President, several of his close staff members who had aided KYS from his opposition days, were reported to complain that KYS no longer listened to their advice.<sup>21</sup> According to them, KYS's own thinking seemed to have been the only reliable reference on which his decision making was based. They were reported to complain that KYS seemed to think he had become the President all by

---

20 *Dong-a Ilbo*, February 25, 1994.

21 *Dong-a Ilbo*, January 5, 1994.

himself without getting any help from others.

Third, he was too sensitive to media reports. When the media responded negatively, KYS did not hesitate to change the course of his policies even after he had already announced their basic direction. His staff was kept highly alert to the media's response whenever some important policy was announced or implemented. His tendency to react sensitively to media reports was a habit formed during his days as an opposition leader because, as an opposition leader, media coverage determined his popularity.

Fourth, KYS made spontaneous statements from time to time without prior consultation with his staff. Numerous newspaper articles and editorials asked KYS to save words. They indicated that KYS was no longer an opposition leader who did not have to assume official responsibility on national affairs. KYS's tendency to blurt out what was on the top of his head, to the embarrassment of his foreign policy staff, seems to have caused frequent changes of his North Korea policy and his Unification Minister.

Fifth, KYS seemed to depend more on private staff than on his official staff appointed as governmental officials. In some cases, rather than consulting with his cabinet members and presidential staff, he depended on a private think tank allegedly run by one of his sons.<sup>22</sup> One of his cabinet members, Oh In-hwan was quoted to say that one of KYS's failures resulted from the way he ran his staff.<sup>23</sup> According to him, under the staff system of KYS, it was difficult for KYS's cabinet members to voice out their opinions. Private staffs are usually politically oriented. What they have in mind is the array of usable political cards, not long-term national interests.

---

22 *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, May 29, 1995.

23 *Hankuk Ilbo*, February 25, 1998.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

Our discussion so far has led us to the conclusion that the KYS government's North Korea policy was heavily influenced by domestic politics, especially elections. Without election variables at hand, the KYS government could have maintained a certain degree of consistency. Without elections, it was consistent in pursuing four party talks even when it was encountered with a serious incident like the submarine incident in the fall of 1996. At that time, the nearest election approaching was 1997 presidential election, more than 15 months later. If the 1997 presidential election had occurred in the spring of 1997, not in December, then, we could have witnessed another policy shift.

We can not blame a government which considers public opinion as one of its references in making foreign policy. In international relations literature, the idea of 'domestic sources of foreign policy' has long been treated as a significant subject. It is indicated in many scholarly and journalistic writings that events such as the United States' decision to launch a military operation abroad and the Japanese government's abrupt statement arguing its sovereignty over Chinese and Korean islands are often related to elections.

KYS, as a career politician, tried to reflect public opinion. However, his election strategy could satisfy only half of the voters who themselves did not show consistent tendency toward North Korea and unification issues. As the result, he was flexible in absorbing public opinion into his policymaking and his policy became inconsistent.