

Briefing Memo

How Should We View the Lee Myung-bak Administration's Policies?

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South Korea's new administration has been emphasizing its intention of changing the policies implemented over the past decade and, thus the term "Lee Myung-bak revolution" has become a symbol of such aspiration. However, once the administration was installed and at the stage of policy-making, the age-old issue as to whether to give priority to "international cooperation" or "race" came to the fore. The Lee administration may be confronted with the same problems the previous administrations had to contend with. The parties that South Korea has to negotiate with now are parties of a regime that has not been changed for sixty years.

Top-level Diplomacy that has Achieved Results

In April 2008, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak commenced diplomacy under the new administration by completing his visits to the United States and Japan. During the US-South Korea heads of state meeting, both countries agreed to develop the current US-South Korea Alliance into a strategic alliance that can effectively address new security challenges of the 21st century and contribute to world peace. The aim is to revamp the US-South Korea Alliance, which has been playing an instrumental role in the deterrent against North Korea, into an alliance with broader functions. The United States is eager to maintain a US-South Korea alliance that seeks to enlarge common interests on the basis of universal values and strong trust, following the words of President George W. Bush, who stated at the Camp David joint press with President Lee Myung-bak that a good relationship is (possible when it is)

based upon common values.

President Lee then visited Japan. During his talks with Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, both parties agreed to build up Japan-South Korea relations to a more mature partnership and reaffirmed that they would open a new era in Japan-South Korea relations through the summit (heads of state) shuttle diplomacy. On 1 March 2008, prior to the heads of state meeting, President Lee made a speech at the commemorative ceremony marking the 89th anniversary of the March First Independence Movement, which took place during the period of Japanese rule. In this speech, he proposed that South Korea and Japan stop feuding over their history and instead build a future-oriented bilateral relationship with a pragmatic attitude. He also said that while the historical facts should not be ignored, they should not lose sight of the way forward lest they get endlessly caught up with the disputes over the past. With the inauguration of a new South Korean administration that emphasizes forward-looking Japan-South Korea relations and a departure from the previous administrations, there is a possibility that Japan's relations with South Korea may follow a course which is different from that of the last decade.

Beyond improving its relations with the United States and Japan, the Lee administration has set its sights on "joining the ranks of advanced countries". In his inaugural address, President Lee proclaimed the year 2008 as "the starting year of another sixty years for the advancement of the Republic of Korea". Currently, the expression "a lost decade"—a term that has also been used in Japan to describe a depressed economic period—is being used in South Korea to mean that the country had lost its opportunity to join the ranks of advanced nations during a decade under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations. It may well be that the Korean people's desire for "joining the ranks of advanced countries" has supported the rise of

the Lee administration.

The Lee administration was blessed with favorable conditions at the time of its inauguration. The United States had been looking forward to the inauguration of a new administration with which it could hold close discussions regarding the stability of Northeast Asia and the US-South Korea Alliance. Japan has also welcomed the inception of a forward-looking administration and the South Korean people were hoping for a leader who would change direction and uplift the South Korean economy.

It can be said that the Lee administration started sailing on a smooth course.

Significance of the Fall in Approval Ratings

Only two months after the swearing-in of the Lee administration, however, severe criticism against the administration began to emerge in South Korea, though such fact had not been widely reported in Japan. In mid-May 2008, while attending an international conference in South Korea, the author had the opportunity to listen to various reports from some specialists who commented on the noticeable fall in the approval ratings of the new administration. For example, on 9 April 2008, the ratio of people who approved of the Lee administration's management of national affairs was 54.8 per cent. On 16 April 2008, in the space of one week, it plummeted to 44.6 per cent, and followed by further declines to 35.1 per cent on April 30 and 28.4 per cent on May 5 in the same year (Sisa Journal, 20 May 2008). In other words, the government's approval rating was effectively halved in less than one month. Demonstrations in the streets began to take place following the government's decision to resume the importation of US beef. However, the fact that the approval ratings were already falling prior to the demonstrations indicates that the street demonstrations were not one of the causes of the government's abysmal approval ratings.

As explained by the South Korean media and the Korean specialists, a number of factors came into play when the government's approval ratings fell: the lack of political cohesion; the president's excessive desire to decide everything on his own; inadequate planning of state affairs and public relations functions by the Presidential Office; managing national affairs as if they were corporate affairs; the lack of a core support segment; and the non-existence of a strong central command at the Presidential Office.

Structural problems in policy decision-making processes in South Korea were also noted. It was indicated that information filtered upwards to the president was not appropriately scrutinized or sorted to ensure that highly reliable information could be identified and selected for perusal by the Presidential Office. For the most part, the president receives information from the commander of the Defense Security Command (formerly the Army Counter-intelligence Corps), the director of the National Information Bureau and the commissioner general of the Korean National Police Agency. However, because information from various sources tend to compete with each other for attention and is forwarded on an individual basis, the information section of the Presidential Office is supposedly flooded with information, creating a situation where obtaining decisions based on precise information turns out to be difficult. As a result, the Presidential Office has come under severe attack (ibid).

In the six-month period (from December 2007 to May 2008) following the presidential election in December 2007, South Korean politics experienced a change almost overnight while harsh criticisms against the government were levied. The political culture of South Korea is characterized by politics with volatile tendencies, high expectations of political leaders, as well as harsh and immediate reactions when the expectations are not met. Widespread use of the internet also buoys such South Korean political culture, which is fond

of instant results. If the Lee administration reformulates its policies in response to the expectations of the South Korean people who are focused on the administration's results, one can not help but wonder what will happen to the government's "non-nuclear, openness, 3,000 plan", i.e. a plan to provide assistance equal to a per capita income of 3,000 dollars if North Korea switches to non-nuclear and open door policy stances.

Differences with the Sunshine Policy

The most significant issue confronting the Lee administration is the North Korean policy. The administration has emphasized that its North Korean policy is different from those of the two previous governments and has adopted a policy not to provide assistance to North Korea unless it fulfills its obligations. The transitional committee prior to the inauguration of the president rejected the Sunshine Policy and repeatedly stated that it would carefully examine the details of its assistance to North Korea. Furthermore, for the foreseeable future, no change will be made to the basic policy to withhold assistance for infrastructure development in North Korea.

What does come across in the statements made by President Lee concerning North Korea is the awareness that the people of North Korea are of the same race. While indirectly criticizing the previous administration's policy towards North Korea by saying that "...the North-South problem cannot be solved by exclusive nationalism", the president has also added that "...we need to see this problem as both an internal problem of race and, at the same time, an international problem". Since the president is simultaneously emphasizing both areas, whenever any inconsistency occurs between policies on the North-South dialogue and the United States and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the decision on the

course of action will fall within the scope of the President's discretion. In fact, the current administration is not rejecting the Sunshine Policy per se. The South Korean Foreign Minister, Yu Myung-hwan, has stated that the North-South relationship would be based on a policy of engagement.

In May 2008, South Korea made its decision to provide food aid to North Korea. Such decision came immediately after the United States' decision to provide 500,000 tons of food aid. However, the argument within South Korea concerning its decision to give aid following the US decision focused on South Korea's own pride in "being of the same race" rather than the government's placing priority on cooperation with the United States.

South Korea's practice of acting ahead of its policy of engagement with North Korea has already begun in April 2008. On 17 April 2008, during his visit to the United States, President Lee commented that when he returned to Korea, he intended to propose to North Korea that a permanent North-South dialogue channel be established by setting up full-time liaison offices in Seoul and Pyongyang. Since the first North-South high-level talks in Seoul in September 1990, the South Korean government had, in fact, proposed establishing a North-South liaison office over six times to North Korea but this was the first time for the president to make mention of it. In speaking of the US-North Korea Meeting concerning the issue of North Korean nuclear program, the president also made statements to the effect that North Korea had indirectly confirmed the suspicions about the two issues of its uranium enrichment program (UEP) and nuclear program cooperation with Syria at the time of the US-North Korea Meeting in Singapore. It could be that President Lee really believes that North Korea is faithfully taking steps forward in the nuclear-free process. He even stated that North Korea

had “made a promise not to engage in nuclear proliferation activities”. It could be inferred that this shows that the South Korean president believes that the “non-nuclear, openness, 3,000” process is making progress.

South Korea’s policy of “non-nuclear, openness, 3,000” is a grand plan based on international cooperation and includes benevolence towards the people of the same race. In this plan, South Korea’s desire to assume responsibility for the renunciation of North Korea’s nuclear program and for the reconstruction of its economy is evident. However, the meaning of “non-nuclear” is extremely vague. North Korea itself claims to have no plans to pursue nuclear weapons development through the enrichment of uranium. It remains to be seen whether South Korea will judge that the “non-nuclear” goal has been achieved when North Korea abandons its plutonium-model nuclear development plan. If South Korea does not consider “non-nuclear” as having been fully achieved, it will probably be criticized by North Korea. If, on the other hand, South Korea does judge that it has been achieved and begins to provide aid without clearing once and for all any lingering suspicions about the veracity of North Korea’s claims, there will be criticism from within South Korea that the government has acted rashly. If at the time a conclusion is reached at the US-North Korea talks that the “nuclear-free process” is almost complete, South Korea, on the basis of its fundamental principle of maintaining favorable relations with the United States, may also concur that the “non-nuclear” goal has been achieved and move ahead with plans to provide aid to North Korea. If this is the case, the current government’s policy will differ little from the previous governments’ North Korean policy.

In the context of the catch phrases used by the Lee administration, the notion of “pragmatism”

may be easy for people to understand, but when it comes to the concrete stage of choosing policies, the new administration may be confronted with the age-old problem other administrations were burdened with when torn between the issue of “international cooperation” and “the same race”. It may be that “resource diplomacy” is at the core of pragmatic diplomacy. In April 2008, the South Korean prime minister made a series of visits to Central Asia where he secured contracts in resource development, and it became clear that the new administration’s diplomacy was giving priority to securing resources. As the administration promotes pragmatism in securing resources, promoting joint resource development projects with North Korea also becomes plausible. In this case, the question arises as to how long the current administration will be able to maintain its “non-nuclear, openness, 3,000” principle. Mindful of its competition with China, South Korea may proceed with its cooperation with North Korea to improve the latter’s infrastructure and, at the same time, may not rule out the possibility of initiating a Sunshine Policy based on pragmatism.

A New Strategic Landscape

There is a change occurring in the strategic landscape of the Korean Peninsula due to the formation of the new South Korean administration. The US-South Korea Alliance is now based on a broader concept. China remains silent over the cooperation between the United States, South Korea and Japan. Both China and North Korea are quite keen to make their relationship closer. To clear any suspicions about its nuclear program, North Korea is giving top priority to reaching agreement in its discussions with the United States. At the same time, North Korea maintains powerful military capabilities. The reason that North Korea does not withdraw its statement that it has “nuclear deterrent capability” may be an indication that North Korea intends to maintain its nuclear capability even after its plutonium-model nuclear

weapons facility is destroyed. Within the United States, there are arguments for and against the relaxing of sanctions against North Korea. In Japan too, there is a view that perhaps the Japan-North Korea relations should remain deadlocked. The trilateral relationship between South Korea, China and North Korea is becoming a relationship of delicate diplomacy over the development of North Korean resources.

Given the complex strategic landscape in Northeast Asia, the framework of the Six-Party Talks plays an important role. The most enduring multilateral talks on the Korean Peninsula, the Six-Party Talks involve a complicated matrix of conflicting groups that can regroup depending on the point of contention. There are five subcommittees, and countries which cannot be involved in a specific topic do not participate in that particular subcommittee. It is therefore possible to hold more in-depth discussions at the subcommittee level. There is no doubt that the Six-Party Talks have achieved certain results as a framework of multilateral policy discussions.

However, whether this is a framework that will lead to the solution of the North Korean nuclear problem is a different matter altogether. Such a solution will be obtained only when North Korea makes a strategic decision to abandon all of its plans for nuclear weapons development. In other words, it is a matter for the North Korean leader to decide and only time will tell which way he will go. As long as Chairman of Defense Kim Jong Il entertains the scenario of unifying the two countries under the leadership of North Korea on a wager that the United States will refrain from intervention in the event of an emergency on the Korean Peninsula because of North Korea's nuclear deterrent, negotiations for resolving the nuclear problem will encounter rough seas.

One wonders whether there is to be a scenario where resolution of the nuclear issue will have to wait until unification is emerging.

The purpose of this column is to respond to reader interests in security issues and at the same time to promote a greater understanding of NIDS.

A "briefing" provides background information, among others. We hope these columns will help everyone to better understand the complex of issues involved in security affairs. Please note that the views in this column do not represent the official opinion of NIDS.

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