



YEONPYEONG ON FIRE AND ENRICHED URANIUM

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Each time North Korea hits the headlines for its rash behavior, the world seems to react with surprise. This year, so far, there was the tragic Cheonan incident, the cross border firing, and now, the most worrying incident of all, the artillery strikes on Yeonpyeong. Two South Korean soldiers and two civilians were killed after North Korea fired dozens of artillery shells on Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea. It came only a few days after North Korea's surprising disclosure of uranium-enrichment facilities to the U.S. nuclear scientists. Larger questions remain; what is the North's plan after announcing the uranium enrichment capability and the Yeonpyeong attack? What is the main goal of North Korea? This policy brief outlines the reasons behind the Yeonpyeong Island attack and the revelations of the enriched uranium supply, and shows how they are symptoms of deeper issues.

No Hope from Lee Myung-bak

North Korea has felt the effects of a change in policy by Lee Myung-bak since he took office in 2008. The pursuing of the Sunshine Policy has ceased, and since 2008, aid to North Korea has fallen to a minimum and is conditional on progress mainly related to denuclearization. This has come at a time when North Korea has been plagued with flooding and starvation. It is commonly believed that North Korea cannot feed its people. In such a situation, sanctions added to decreasing aid will only add insult to injury.

However, there were some changes with the resumption of rice aid to North Korea and the launching of the family reunion meetings in October 2010. There was an expectation that such activities may help improve inter-Korean relations. Furthermore, some South Korean politicians suggested that South Korea needs to improve the possibility for dialogue with North Korea in order to handle potential crises. Indeed, there is a rumor that North Korea sent a message to Seoul to hold an inter-Korean Summit. According to the rumors, a secret meeting has taken place in China. The meeting was held at the request of the North Korean side and Kim Deok-ryong (an advisor to the South Korean president) left for Shanghai on November 17 for the meeting. Even though North Korea asked for aid and an inter-Korean summit, there was speculation that Seoul refused. However, this is not the first time such requests have been rejected. In October last year, rumors of a se-

cret meeting in Singapore between Seoul's then Minister of Labor and Environment, Im Tae-hee, and Kim Yang Gun, the chief of North Korea's United Front Department, were strenuously denied before ultimately being admitted. Shortly thereafter, the Cheonan incident, the sinking of a South Korean navy ship that killed 46 sailors, occurred in March. Whether it was unwanted or not, the Yeonpyeong incident also happened soon after, due to the failure of an inter-Korea summit discussion.

It seems that the North is still longing for the previous positive benefits of the Sunshine Policy. Yet, last week the South Korean government published a report, stating that South Korea's peaceful Sunshine Policy towards North Korea had failed. Moreover, South Korea rejected an offer to resume a joint tourism project on the Diamond Mountain resort last week. It seems that Kim Jong Il is aware that Seoul is not pursuing the cash-for-summits policy as former governments have done.

Therefore, it is likely that the reason for North Korea's provocation of Yeonpyeong was an expression of North Korea's dissatisfaction with Lee Myung-bak's policy or a warning to Seoul that North Korea's provocations will continue, even more aggressively, if their demands are ignored. It is expected that, sooner or later, South Korea will respond, but Lee's political position with the public is getting weaker. Many South Koreans have mixed feelings regarding the way their government should deal with the North in the future.



Negotiation with Obama

Dr. Siegfried S. Hecker, the U.S. nuclear scientist, reported after his visit to the Yongbyon nuclear plant that North Korea has now more advanced enriched uranium facilities than expected. According to his report, there was impressive progress in the enrichment plant, including 2,000 centrifuges. If North Korea has indeed succeeded in acquiring uranium enrichment technology, the nuclear crisis would enter a completely new phase, which would affect the whole world. Nevertheless, the Obama administration did not react to North Korea's uranium capacity until now.

On November 2, 2010, midterm elections were held in the United States. The outcome of the elections saw the Republicans take majority control of the House of Representatives. The Republican Party has criticized the Obama administration for its failed domestic economy. It seems that Obama cannot afford to pay much attention to North Korea as there are many other issues on his desk such as the economic crisis and the war in Afghanistan. At the same time, it can be said that he has ignored North Korea's nuclear promotion on purpose.

North Korea still remembers that after the midterm elections in November 2006, the Democrats criticized the Bush administration's policy, which pursued a unilateral approach of sanctions and pressure towards North Korea. Pyongyang called for bilateral talks between the U.S. and North Korea in order to find a solution to the nuclear issue. North Korea may intend to stimulate Obama to change his "Strategic Patience" policy and get his attention by delivering the information about its uranium capacity, particularly after the Republican victory in the midterm elections, which can influence the foreign policy of the Obama administration towards North Korea.

With the recent events of the Yeongpyeong attack and the Yongbyon uranium, it seems that North Korea made a strategic decision, betting on the side of negotiation with Obama rather than Lee Myung-bak's aid. Indeed, North Korea has consistently requested bilateral dialogue with the U.S. since its nuclear issue surfaced. Pyongyang considers the U.S. (not South Korea) its most important negotiation partner, because it regards the U.S. as the greatest threat to its security. What is more, North Korea pursues bilateral talks because North Korea is willing to have a strategic leverage to China which is now the only North Korean politi-

cal and economic supporter.

It seems that North Korea still has nostalgia from the Clinton administration where there had been much progress on engagement. In October 2000, the First Deputy Chairman of North Korea, Jo Myong Rok, and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright exchanged visits. Prior to this, on June 15, 2000, the Inter-Korean Summit was hosted by the South Korean president Kim Dae-jung in order to promote dialogue between the two Koreas, while at the same time Japan quickened its attempts to improve its own relations with North Korea. Therefore, North Korea might be now dreaming that Hillary Clinton and Lee Myung-bak will visit Pyongyang to discuss the exchange of aid in return for steps towards denuclearization.

The Succession

Many analysts stress that the succession issue in Pyongyang would be a main reason for these two events. Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill recently said that it is unclear to what extent the military are even taking orders from the government, meaning that Kim Jong Un's reputation will have to be bolstered with military actions in order to win any sort of respect. Therefore it is reasonable to assume that more hostile acts will be on the cards in the near future.

This is true but it is probably not the main reason. At the moment, the most helpful factor for a successful transition would be stability in North Korea rather than military confrontations. To have a more stable power transition, North Korea needs to have more aid from the South and the U.S. in order to improve its economic situation. North Korea, in the past months, has been trying to get the attention of the U.S. and South Korea and has called for a resumption of the nuclear talks in exchange for economic aid, albeit under very strict, and quite unrealistic, terms. In the past, North Korea have used "over the top" provoking acts of aggression as a way to gain momentum and position themselves higher on the agenda of the U.S., South Korea and the international community. This time would be the same and North Korea showed that they will continue to provoke until they get some reaction. Therefore, to strengthen Kim Jong Un's position with military actions is an option but economic stability is an imperative factor for the future transition.



Need for Reassessment of Strategy towards North Korea

There are no positive changes to North Korea's position that correspond to aid or sanctions by South Korea and the U.S. In fact, North Korea has not changed under Seoul's Sunshine and anti-North Korean policies. Aid shipped to the North during the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun from 1998 to 2008 failed to make a difference to the lives of destitute North Koreans. Also Lee Myung-bak's anti-North Korea policy could not change its pursuit of nuclear arms. Similarly, North Korean behavior hasn't changed under the Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, or Barack Obama administrations.

It is likely that North Korea will keep pursuing the path to becoming a nuclear strong nation by 2012, considering the current situation. Furthermore, North Korea will continue to provoke until they get huge economic aid from others because North Korean has strong Chinese support and believes that the U.S. and South Korea are not going to start a war.

Obama and Lee only have roughly two years left until the next presidential elections in 2012, which is the same year when North Korea aims to be a "strong nation." It might be the time for both the U.S. and South Korean administrations to call for a reassessment of their entire strategy towards North Korea even if it is hard to accept for Obama and Lee now.

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