

This opinion piece by PCI Board Member Dr. Chung-in Moon appeared in Korea JoongAng Daily on June 11, 2013.



Headed toward a summit

A hard-won opportunity for President Park has arrived and just because there are risks, she mustn't turn away..

June 11, 2013

Until recently, President Park Geun-hye's so-called "trustpolitik" - a strategy of building trust between the two Koreas to attain the common goal of peace and security in the region - drew more skepticism than encouragement. Many were unsure if her government was sincere about whether the strategy would have any effect on normalizing inter-Korean relations. Last Thursday, Pyongyang accepted Seoul's repeated call for dialogue and proposed official talks on pending issues through its official mouthpiece, the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of Korea. Seoul quickly responded and the two gladly agreed over the weekend to hold their first high-level talks in six years.

It was an abrupt yet fortunate change of atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula, which has been heavy with war-like tensions for months. The foreign media, which sent news alerts from Seoul as if war was imminent, now reports a possible breakthrough in the countries' deadlock. After living with such alarming headlines for months, many Koreans will be letting out a sigh of relief. The weekend summit between Presidents Barack Obama of the United States and Xi Jinping of China also may have played a part. The fact that representatives of the two Koreas will be sitting across a table to talk is a hopeful sign.

President Park should be praised for her part in the development. Her consistent emphasis on "principles and trust" paid off. She refused any behind-the-scenes endeavors, but publicly proposed formal government-level dialogue. She also has demonstrated her sincerity. The people who organized the meeting between her and North Korea's then-leader Kim Jong-il in 2002 are now orchestrating North Korean policy. Her impressive visit to Pyongyang and meeting with the elder Kim may have drawn a favorable response from current young leader Kim Jong-un, who is determined to follow his father's legacy. North Koreans also proposed ceremonies to commemorate the July 4 North-South Joint Statement in 1972. A cool attitude and pressure from Beijing may also have contributed to Pyongyang's conciliatory gesture.

But the real work begins from now and the path will be bumpy. First, the government must deal with die-hard conservatives at home. Some of them oppose the July 4, 1972 North-South Joint Statement to pursue reunification on the principles of sovereignty and a grand coalition of Korean people. They believe North Korea regards tourism to Mount Kumgang, the Kaesong industrial complex and reunions of separated families as money-making ventures. They may not be happy with renewed dialogue between the two Koreas. The same goes for the hawkish group in North Korea. The North Korean military will want to keep up the tensions and hostile mood to buttress its power.

The mood in Washington is also not that favorable. Susan Rice, who was behind resolution and sanctions against North Korea while serving as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has been picked by Obama to serve as his new national security adviser. The conservative Rice may demand stronger actions against the nuclear-armed North Korea. Can a dramatic turning point in inter-Korean talks be possible under such hawkish eyes in Washington?

More fundamentally, the two Koreas are poles apart on key issues. North Korea wants to pursue economic prosperity while maintaining nuclear weapons. But President Park warned that North Korea cannot pursue its nuclear weapons program and economic prosperity at the same time, nor can it succeed even if it tries. That recipe will only lead to isolation and self-destruction, she predicted.

When times are tough, it's best to fall back on old, wise ideas such as: Solve the easy problem first and difficult ones later. The two Koreas could provide a dramatic breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and mutual trust-building by making some progress in the impasse over the Kaesong and Mount Kumgang ventures and reunions of separated families. Then they could move onto the next stage. The delegates coming to Seoul this time won't likely have the authority to speak and decide on the big framework issues of denuclearization and a lasting peace structure on the peninsula.

The upcoming high-level talks, therefore, should set the agenda for a summit meeting. Only the leaders of the two states can discuss resolution of the nuclear issue. If a summit meeting is held in the early stage of a presidential term, Seoul could take a stronger initiative in finding a solution to the nuclear conundrum and peace mechanism. Park has already proposed aid for North Korea's economic recovery, normalization of ties with the U.S., and regime security. The two leaders can discuss detailed actions.

To establish and build mutual trust, the two Koreas should discuss nuclear as well as overall development in bilateral relations. Resumption of Pyongyang-Washington talks and six-party negotiations are also necessary. South Korea must build its own internal consensus on its North Korean policy. Park, who won a majority vote from her conservative base, has more leverage than her predecessors to win support from the country's conservative population.

A hard-won opportunity has arrived. Just because there are risks, we must not turn away. We expect Park to demonstrate her unique will and leadership to pave the way for the success of her trustpolitik vision.

Translation by the Korea JoongAng Daily staff.

*The author is a political professor at Yonsei University.

By Moon Chung-in