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Uproar over Secret Inter-Korean Meetings

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On June 1st, the National Defense Commission (NDC) of North Korea took the Lee Myung Bak administration off-guard with a bombshell revelation. They officially rejected South Korea's proposal for a series of inter-Korean summits made at several secret meetings since May 9th. The Lee administration, while admitting its secret contacts with North Korea, dismissed the North's claims that South Korea "begged for the summits" as a mere "unilateral fabrication", denounced the North for "the reckless act unprecedented in the history of inter-Korean talks" and took the stance of "not reacting to every move" of North Korea.

North Korea's raw exposure and the Lee administration's lame response remind us of a scene from a surrealism movie. How could the inter-Korean relationship have deteriorated to this level? Actually I appreciate that the Lee administration had secret meetings with North Korea to resume inter-Korean dialogues and hold a summit, even violating its self-imposed principle of openness and transparency. But the results are really pathetic.

However, if you go back and re-read the overall situation, it was a foreseeable disaster. More than anything else, our preparation wasn't proper enough. When we plan to make an important proposal such as a summit, we should send them the signals, directly or indirectly, that our North Korea policy has changed before or after the secret talks. We should have resumed humanitarian aids to North Korea as if pushed by the US request and allowed NGO's contacts with and visits to North Korea. Especially to guarantee the sincerity of our proposal, we had to have follow-up measures for reconciliation after the meeting. We should have refrained from our psychological warfare like floating propaganda leaflets to North Korea or any hostile activities that could provoke the North.

We can not see any signs of such changes since the May 9th when secret contacts with North Korea started and President Lee's Berlin proposal. Rather, the psychological warfare continued and our provocative actions went to excess with our soldiers using pictures of three Kims - Kim Il-sung, Jong-il and Jong-un - for target practice. The statement made by the NDC spokesman on May 30 that it "would no longer engage with the South" shows their reaction clearly. The statement warned that they "will take physical action without any notice any time against any target to cope with the anti-North Korea psychological warfare (like floating of anti-North Korea propaganda leaflets) as already warned" and pointed out that "the puppet military warmongers went mad driving myriads of puppet soldiers to the shooting ranges filled with gunpowder smell in Yangju and Incheon-city in Gyeonggi-do to fire guns and canons with abandon." This shows how sensitive issues the psychological warfare and using pictures of three Kims as shooting targets are.

There was a procedural problem as well. End of April, the North tried to convey “the great leader’s message regarding the North-South dialogues” through Jimmy Carter who then visited North Korea. But Carter’s meeting with President Lee didn’t materialize and the South refused to receive the message taking the position of “if you have something to propose, do it yourself.” In a sense, it’s not different than our government snubbed Chairman Kim’s special envoy and it will be a gross miscalculation if we expect some positive responses from the North through a secret meeting. To make it worse, the North is strongly condemning the remarks by the presidential spokesman of May 18 saying that “the government’s genuine intention regarding inviting Chairman Kim to Seoul had been conveyed to the North” as “outrageous breach of diplomatic protocol that divulged secret contact.” It wouldn’t be a stretch to presume that the North is retaliating for our government’s acts that disregarded the usual process.

Our government didn’t give much consideration to the meeting format either. It proposed to “hold three summits in late June, August and next March respectively and have a ministerial talk in late May to discuss them.” According to the North Korean way of policy decision, important proposals such as summits are never the subjects that can be handled in a working-level meeting. They are the ones our top-level official dispatched to Pyongyang as a special envoy should negotiate with Chairman Kim. Working-level talks should have been a preliminary step to pave the way to send a special envoy, which wasn’t the case.

The most difficult to understand is acts of Kim Tae-hyo, Presidential secretary for national security strategy. When pursuing any preliminary or working-level talk, we always should keep in mind the possibility of failure. That’s why the Blue House didn’t work on the front lines and instead utilized National Intelligence Agency channels in the past. Because that way you can avoid being responsible for failure and reap the fruits of success. In that sense, it was a lethal move that the Blue House took to the front. If Secretary Kim had not been involved, the North wouldn’t have taken such a tough stance.

Of course, there are underlying political considerations by both parties in the background of this incident. It’s very likely that the South’s move to contact North Korea was driven by political calculation to allow President Lee to leave political legacy and same time set a favorable stage for the ruling party in the upcoming general election in next April by inviting Kim Jung-il to the Nuclear Security Summit in March. On the other hand, North Korea saw through this and we can’t exclude the North’s possible intention to deal a political blow to President Lee and to deepen conflict within the South, especially the rift among the conservative camps. In the end we can say that the political calculations became obstacles in normalizing inter-Korea relations.

Normalizing the inter-Korean relation during the term of current administration has become water under the bridge. Because it turned into an unruly drama of mud fights. We can learn two lessons from the incident. One is that we can not lead the negotiation to our advantage without expert level understanding for and mature experience of North Korea. Another is it will be difficult to improve North-South relations without trust building.

