

The Role of Religious Communities in Peacemaking and Reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula

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Peace on the Korean peninsula is integral to peace in north-east Asia and the world. Since it was partitioned into two halves in 1945, the peninsula has been in the grip of prolonged conflict and confrontation between the socialist and the capitalist regimes. In particular, tragic consequences of the Korean War (1950-53) were so traumatic that it created a seemingly insurmountable internal obstacle to reconciliation between the two Koreas, unlike the situation between East and West Germany. Therefore, achieving peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula requires changes in both external and internal circumstances, that is to say, geopolitical landscape surrounding the Korean peninsula as well as inter-Korean ties should move in a favorable direction at the same time.

● Changes in geopolitical landscape and peace on the Korean peninsula

External circumstances that impact peace on the Peninsula is mostly driven by relation between Washington and Pyongyang. Since the collapse of the communism in late 1980s, North Korea has been playing its nuclear card for survival of the regime. Depending on the US' response to such Pyongyang's brinkmanship, the security environment for the peninsula and Northeast Asia has been oscillating between tension and negotiation.

Fortunately, today, tensions surrounding the Korean peninsula are easing thanks to the positive progress of the six-party talks which successfully induced North Korea to agree to dismantle its nuclear program. Such changes are attributable to the U.S' shift in its policy toward North Korea from hard-lined stance which defined Pyongyang as an 'axis of evil' to soft-line policy that assures survival of the North Korean regime under the premise of nuclear disarmament.

The U.S. states that once North Korea disables its nuclear program, they will start discussing ways to build a peace regime on the Korean peninsula as well as in north-east Asia through foreign ministerial talks of the six party frameworks etc. If such discussion on building a peace regime similar to Helsinki Accords proceeds and bears fruits in north-east Asia, it will usher in a new era towards peace on the peninsula and more broadly, in north-east Asia and the world.

The 62nd session of the UN General Assembly held on Nov. 1 this year welcomed “Oct. 4 Declaration(The Declaration on the Advancement of South-North Korean Relations, Peace and Prosperity)” of the 2nd inter-Korean summit meeting, and adopted by consensus a resolution for 'Peace, security, and unification of the Korean peninsula' to support it. The resolution was jointly proposed by the two Koreas, who made concerted efforts to persuade other member states in the General Assembly. Such efforts jointly made by the North and South Korean delegations impressed participating members of the general assembly, who all welcomed it and expressed their endorsement. In particular, Ban, Ki-Moon, Secretary General of the U.N declared, “I am convinced that the historic inter-Korean summit will pave the way for a permanent peace regime and eventual reunification on the Korean Peninsula,” and added the summit would also act as a catalyst for continued progress in the six-party talks on denuclearizing the peninsula, toward reconciliation, cooperation and co-prosperity. US ambassador to the UN Khalilzad also said that the U.S. welcomes the Joint Declaration from the recent historic summit talks between the two Koreas, which identified agendas for improving inter-Korean ties and constructing cooperative paradigm.

● Changes in inter-Korean ties and national reconciliation

Relation between North and South Korea has undergone different phases: era of 'Confrontation without dialogue' starting from the division of the peninsula until the July 4 North-South Joint Statement in 1972; 'Confrontation with dialogue' from the time of July 4 Joint Statement to 1991 when both sides signed 'the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement'; era of 'Inter-Korean Cooperation' from the time of 'the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement' to 2000 when 'June 15 Joint Declaration' was signed; and 'Rapprochement between the North and the South' since the June.15 Joint Declaration to date.

What have internally driven such transformation in inter-Korean relations are changes in the South Korean society itself. The South Korean society had experienced struggles for democratization for three decades starting in 1960s. Those who were involved in the struggle for democratization came to see that authoritarian regimes justified their dictatorships with reference to the division of the peninsula, particularly the North's threat to the national security. And they began to develop reunification movement toward overcoming ideology-driven, non-democratic structure of the division. In so doing, they were able to take a fresh approach for seeking national reconciliation, while moving away from the path of blind confrontation based on zero-sum game forcibly inflicted by the difference in regimes and ideologies. Such internal changes coupled with leaders' resolution and commitment to pave the way for national reconciliation made it possible to hold the historic 1st summit meeting between Pyongyang and Seoul in June, 2000.

To be sure, it was to the credit of leaders' resolution that Pyongyang accepted the proposal of the inter-Korean summit talks. A closer look at the situation, however, suggests that it was an inevitable solution for the North Korean authorities faced with the aftermath of the collapse of socialism in the late 1980s and subsequent economic crisis, to deal with the multi-faceted pressure from the US which emerged as the world's only super power. In that regards, the resolution on the part of Pyongyang was a strategic choice driven not by internal changes, but by changes in external circumstances. Seen from this light, it is obvious that today's agenda for national reconciliation on the Korean peninsula has inherent practical constraints, derived from asymmetric approaches between the two sides. Efforts to bridge such a gap has

been constantly made since 1980s mainly by the South Korean religious communities. And starting in late 1990s, the efforts have been doubled as they came to directly contact with the North's religious communities.

● **Joint efforts of North and South Korean religious communities in the international community**

It was 1981 that the North and South's religious leaders started gathering for dialogue on unification, mostly in cities outside of Korea. The first such meeting took place in Wien, Austria in Nov. 1981, followed by a series of other gatherings in different cities such as Helsinki (1982, 1988, 1990), Pyongyang(1983), Beijing(1984), Wien(1985,1986) and Frankfurt(1991) etc. Rev. Koh, Ki-joon of North Korea was one of the initial members who have taken part in the meetings, and South Korea's religious leaders were also able to attend the meetings starting in 1988. However, as the meeting was branded as illegal by the South Korean authorities from the very beginning, it fell short of yielding significant results.

Meanwhile, the World Council of Churches (WCC), which was taking keen interest in the 15th June 2000 Joint Declaration between North and South Korea of 1972, played an important role in raising international awareness on the issue of peace on the peninsula and facilitating contacts between churches of two Koreas. Starting with Tozanso consultation in Oct. 1984, the WCC acted as a channel of communication by setting the stage for face to face talks between Christians from North and South. In 1985, the WCC delegation visited Pyongyang for the first time and met with local Christians. The visit was followed by a trip to Seoul where they met with KNCC leaders and shared their findings from the trip to Pyongyang. Subsequent to this, there were a series of visits to North Korea by the US NCC (1986.4), Japanese NCC (1987.5), Canadian NCC (1988.11) etc., which helped get a clearer picture of religious life in North Korea. In particular, three Glion meetings held in Switzerland (Sept.1986, Nov.1988, Dec.1990) under the auspices of WCC were landmark events as the North and South's ecumenical leaders were enabled to meet face to face for the first time at the meetings.

Pan-religious meeting between the North and the South started in 1991. North Korea's Korean Council of Religionists (KCR) was founded in May 1989, representing four religions including Protestant, Catholic, Buddhists and Cheondogyo. Currently it represents five religions including Russian Orthodox Church which became its member in 2003. KCR's South Korean counterpart is Korean Conference on Religion & Peace(KCRP) established at the time of ACRP III held in Seoul in June 1986. Today, KCRP represents seven religions including four which participates in talks with KCR. Meeting of KCR and KCRP is, therefore, the largest coalition of representatives from both Korea's major religions.

KCR and KCRP came to meet in Oct. 1991 in Katmandu as KCR attended the 4th ACRP Conference which provided a platform for inter-Korean religious dialogue. Welcoming the North Korean delegation's participation in the conference, the joint statement issued at the end of the conference particularly appreciated both Korean delegations' endeavor and sharing hopes for reconciliation on the divided country. Since then, KCR has taken part not only in ACRP conferences but also its annual EC meeting, joining efforts to bring about peace on the Korean peninsula.

● **Inter-Korean joint efforts on the part of religious communities**

In the wake of the Katmandu conference, KCRP assessed key takeaways and set up Inter-Korean Exchange Sub Committee to continue to maintain its ties with KCR and began to seek cooperation with ACRP to that end. In Oct. 1995, KCRP scheduled to hold Prayer Rally for Peaceful Reunification in Seoul and invited KCR through ACRP, but to no avail. Nevertheless, it was a prelude to bigger initiatives that later followed for peace on the Korean peninsula jointly endeavored by religious leaders of the North and the South.

In Aug. 1995, the North Korean authorities officially appealed the UNDHA for emergency aid to recover from massive flood damages. Such an action on the part of Pyongyang opened the door for the international community including Seoul to directly exchange with the hermit regime through humanitarian assistance.

The South Korean religious communities including KCRP set up an organization in Oct. 1995 to assist the North for its flood damage recovery, and sent some 66,000 US\$ contributed by citizens through Red Cross Korea in Feb. 1996. At the same time, KCRP started to persuade the government and citizens who were hesitant to provide humanitarian aid due to deep-seated mistrust and hostility towards North Korea. Such a humanitarian approach has been a very strong driving force that laid the groundwork for national reconciliation.

KCRP and KCR have held regular meetings for national reconciliation, cooperation and peace, starting in 1997. Initially the meeting took place in Beijing, China: the first meeting was held in May 1997, the second in April 1999, and the third meeting was scheduled to take place in Beijing in Mar. 2001, but was held in Mt. Geumgang in North Korea to maintain the spirit of June 15 Joint Declaration announced in 2000. And the very next meeting was held in Seoul in 2003. The timing of this meeting was very sensitive, as the new president was inaugurated on Feb. 25, 2003: whether the new administration permits the North Korean delegation of religious leaders' visit to Seoul was considered a significant indicator for direction of the new government's policy toward North Korea. Fortunately, the new administration allowed their visit to Seoul and supported the event in many aspects, which significantly helped the North trust the new government's policy toward Pyongyang. As such, the Korean religious community acted as a catalyst for national reconciliation and cooperation through inter-Korean religious exchanges.

In particular, the Mar.1 National Rally in 2003 was an important milestone in the history of inter-Korean religious exchanges. First, as the North Korean religious leaders visited Seoul, the exchange was expanded to the reciprocal and interactive level. Second, the North Korean religious leaders who visited Seoul for the first time since the division participated in worships and rituals of their respective denomination (e.g. Myeongdong Cathedral, Protestant church, Bong-eun Buddhist temple, Cheondogyo temple etc.), clearing doubt about religions in North Korea.

Since then, KCRP and KCR have met more frequently, and this year they held a meeting commemorating the 10th anniversary of exchange which started in 1997. The 10th anniversary meeting took place in Pyongyang with KCRP's delegation visiting Pyongyang in May 2007. At the meeting, the two sides assessed achievement of the

past 10 years of inter-Korean religious cooperation and agreed to work more closely for national reconciliation and cooperation and contribute to peaceful reunification.

KCRP and KCR have not been alone in religious exchanges between the two Koreas. Protestants have had such meetings initiated overseas by the North starting in early 1980s and WCC also set the stage for such meetings. In Catholics, the Vatican delegation's first visit to Pyongyang in June 1987 was the starting point. Buddhists have been most actively engaged in exchanges with its counterpart in the North, since the first joint dharma meeting was held in Kwanum temple in Los Angeles in Oct. 1991. Jogyejong demonstration of Buddhism is engaged in restoring Shin-gye temple at Mt. Geumgang while Cheontjong endeavors for restoration of Youngtong temple in Gaesong. Not only that, a South Korean monk is now serving as a resident monk at Mt. Geumgang's Shin-gye temple. Cheondogyo which used to be the most influential religion in the North when the nation was divided also had its first inter-Korean contact at the 4th ACRP conference in Katmandu in Oct. 1991. Won Buddhists began contacting its North Korean counterpart and scholars starting in early 1990s in overseas. Confucians are now seeking to restore Seongkyunkwan(National Confucian Academy) in Gaeseong. In particular, its Religion Consultative Body formed a close tie with KCR and independently held a joint event with KCR at Mt. Geumgang in 2006, with remarkable results.

● Role of Religious Communities and Prospects

As discussed earlier, there have been extensive multi-religious exchanges between the North and the South at the level of each individual religion and denomination, as well as at the pan-religious level. On the external front, such process helped raise awareness of the importance of peace on the Korean peninsula in the international community; internally, it also shed light on the need for the national reconciliation and cooperation. As religious leaders and groups of both sides join hands in hands to create a history of reconciliation, it has helped healing the old wound deeply rooted in the fratricidal war, and removed barriers in our hearts.

Now the inter-Korean relation is embarking upon the 2nd phase of rapprochement

with the recent 2nd summit talks and subsequent “1004 Declaration(Angel Declaration)”. However, with the upcoming presidential election on Dec. 19, 2007, it is regrettable that the age-old ideological debate, which is an Achilles’ heel for peace on the peninsula, is rising again. Nevertheless, religious communities on both sides have been working and will continue to work for national reconciliation, by demonstrating that it is the single most important agenda that requires collective efforts transcending differences in regimes, ideologies and systems.