



## **Korea Peninsula Peace Initiative:**

### **Prospects and Challenges of President Moon Jae-in's North Korea Policy**

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President Moon Jae-in unveiled his approach to North Korea, 'Korean Peninsula Peace Initiative (KPPI)' in a speech delivered in Berlin on July 7, 2017.<sup>1</sup> Berlin Declaration, is in fact, a consolidated document of the new administration's vision and policy direction to unification and inter-Korean relations, articulated in bits and pieces during President Moon's election campaign and two months in office. With the introduction of KPPI President Moon is sending a message to Pyongyang that the new government in Seoul is willing to reset the course of inter-Korean relations, which have turned very hostile during the last decade.

Being a divided nation, since its inception in 1948, the goal of achieving unification remained the most important policy for South Korean government. Under the authoritarian regimes until the late 1980s, the dominant approach to unification was "unification by force", the idea of the unification as the crushing victory of South Korea over the North. Under this approach, there was no room for engagement or even acknowledging the legitimacy of the other side.

The democratisation of South Korea changed the political discourse on unification and inter-Korean relations. The North Korea policy of President Kim Dae-jung referred to as the 'Sunshine Policy' in the late 1990s and then carried forth by his successor Roh Moo-hyun till 2008 had a long-term vision to unification prioritising immediate reconciliation and engagement. The Sunshine era ended with the return of the conservative party to power under the leadership of Lee Myung-bak in 2008 and Park Geun-hye in 2013, adopting a quid-pro-quo focused on the nuclear issue. During the last decade, the inter-Korean relations reached its lowest point in decades, involving military conflicts like Cheonan sinking and Yeonpyeong shelling.

#### **'Korean Peninsula Peace Initiative': Moon's Berlin Doctrine**

The choice of Berlin to declare such an important policy has symbolic and historical reasons. The German Unification has always been a motivation for Korean politicians for approaching the question of unification in the Korean Peninsula and has drawn lessons from the German

experience. President Moon is the fourth South Korean President to unveil their North Korea policy in Germany. First, one to do was President Kim Young-sam in 1995 in Berlin, President Kim Dae-jung in 2000 in Berlin and President Park Guen-hye in 2014 in Dresden.<sup>2</sup>

At the outset, drawing on the German experience, Moon defined unification as a process than an end, which demands continuity and consistency in the policies of engagement and cooperation despite domestic political change. President Moon presented KPPI as the continuity of Sunshine Policy and envisions a 'return' of inter-Korean relations upholding the principle of June 15 Joint Declaration and the October 4 Declaration.<sup>3</sup>

KPPI outlines five policy directions and broad objectives of President Moon's North Korea policy. The first point highlights the overall thrust on achieving peace in the Korean Peninsula as the primary goal. As an assurance to Pyongyang Moon emphasises on the "four no's" that underpins KPPI; no use of force, no wish for regime collapse or change, no unification through absorption, and no artificial unification.

The second policy direction focuses on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. KPPI proposes a step by step approach and a comprehensive approach to finding a solution to the nuclear issue. Such an approach is based on the belief that nuclear problem cannot be solved without addressing the larger issue of North Korean's "security concern" and its diplomatic isolation. The step-by-step approach starts with a freeze of nuclear and missile tests and ends with the dismantling of the North Korean nuclear programme. The comprehensive plan seeks to replace the armistice agreement with a peace treaty, which would also end the diplomatic isolation of Pyongyang improving relations with Japan and the US.

The third point directs the institutionalisation of the peace process in inter-Korean relations. Moon proposes to enact inter-Korean agreements into law, to ensure continuity of the process of engagement and sustainability of past achievements even under conditions of political change. The fourth, direct inter-Korean economic cooperation aimed at establishing an economic community through connectivity projects. However, progress in economic cooperation is subject to the development on the nuclear issue. Fifth item proposes the separation of non-political exchange between the two Korea from military and political issues.

Towards initiating the peace process, President Moon recognises the necessity of rebuilding trust and channels of communication. In this direction, KPPI proposed an incremental approach starting with relatively easy issues. Three such steps are identified for an immediate breakthrough in inter-Korea relations; family reunion, an invitation for North Korea to attend 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea and talks to end hostilities around the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). President Moon also announced his willingness to meet Kim Jong-un "at any time anywhere" however, only "if the conditions are met". However, he has not given any hint on what those conditions are.

## **Prospects and Challenges**

As a policy direction to reset the course of inter-Korea relations, President Moon's Berlin Doctrine is a substantive and a nuanced proposal. However, the prospect of bringing back inter-Korean relations to that of the Sunshine era is limited. First of all the strategic environment of inter-Korean relations is very different from a decade before. North Korea today is a de facto nuclear weapon state with ballistic missile capability. North Korea under Kim Jong-un is more isolated

and belligerent than during his father, Kim Jong-il. The regional geopolitical situation of an assertive China and the mounting geopolitical competition between the US and China for regional dominance is also a critical factor that affects the trajectory of inter-Korean relations.

President Moon claims that his approach is in continuity with the Sunshine Policy. KPPI, though inherits the ideological framework of the Sunshine policy, however departs in its methods. Departure in methodology underscores the incommensurability of the current strategic situation to that of a decade before. Like Kim Dae-jung, President Moon's approach emphasises not on unification but the process of engagement prioritising reconciliation and coexistence. On the other hand Park Geun-hye's "Trustpolitik" made unification as its goal and projected unification as a 'bonanza' in economic terms. Kim and Moon presented North Korea's status as an equal partner, whereas Park viewed North Korea as a target of her approach. Unlike the Sunshine policy, KPPI does not bracket the nuclear issue. KPPI highlights the harsh reality of North Korea's nuclear and missile programme, and declares it as "the biggest challenge that Korean Peninsula is facing" and reinstated the demand for "complete, verified, irreversible denuclearisation". Similar to Park, Moon offers a quid-pro-quo. KPPI proposes a freeze of North Korean nuclear and missile test as the necessary condition for dialogue on nuclear issues. The proposed economic cooperation is also subject to development in denuclearisation process. However, in comparison to the Lee and Park administration, it doesn't make inter-Korean relations hostage to the nuclear issue. In this direction, KPPI separates political and military matters from the humanitarian and non-political interaction.

KPPI argues for a Korea centric approach. By declaring "my country must sit in the driver's seat" Moon emphasises KPPI as a Seoul led process. On proposing KPPI, President Moon claimed that "President Trump supported Korea's leading role" and has also reached consensus with President Xi on the Seoul's leading role in engaging North Korea.<sup>4</sup> Thus he argued that the "conditions are finally being fostered" for a South Korea led engagement process indicating the support of Washington and Beijing. However, the current situation in the Korean Peninsula is precarious, and Moon has little leverage over the outcome of inter-Korea relations. Washington and Tokyo are sceptical over Moon's Berlin proposal in a situation of continuing provocation from Pyongyang.<sup>5</sup> Though Moon may have received support for engagement in principle, there is no consensus between Seoul, Beijing and Washington on what constitutes an engagement approach and its modalities. KPPI also faces the risk of US-China competition for influence in the Korean Peninsula.

A primary challenge to President Moon's approach is the inter-Korean strategic competition. The contested legitimacy between North Korea and South Korea will continue to be a limiting factor. Knowing the power disparity between the two Korea, North Korea not only sees its nuclear weapon as deterrence against the US threat but also as an equaliser in its strategic competition with Seoul. On the nuclear issue, North Korea consistently rejected the idea that Seoul is a stakeholder. North Korea insists that security issues are matters that are for Pyongyang and Washington to resolve.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

North Korea so far has not made an official response to Moon's Berlin proposal and the subsequent call for dialogue on humanitarian issues and manage military hostility at the border. Silence is also quite intriguing considering Pyongyang's quick lambasting of the approaches of President Lee and President Park. The silence indicates an element of appeal to the new approach

in Pyongyang, however, the ability to respond is constrained by the new situation in the Korean Peninsula.

The subsequent missile test of July 28 is a clear message that Pyongyang is not willing to stop its provocation and its indifference to Seoul. It also indicates the strategic goal of Pyongyang to build up the leverage to gain recognition from Washington through bilateral talk. North Korea's indifference to Moon's call is also a reflection of their strategic competition and diverging calculation. Moon's attempt is to break the status in the Korean peninsula to enhance Seoul's influence and pursue an independent foreign policy. However, Pyongyang seeks leverage by building instability in the region.

Growing tension in the Peninsula is an embarrassment for a President who has repeatedly said Seoul should be in the "driving seat". But it also indicates the harsh reality that South Korea is facing, that it has little leverage in shaping the outcome in the strategic affairs of the Korean peninsula. Moon himself expressed this grave situation, when he said, "we are not strong enough to resolve this problem. We have no power to arrange a settlement (among the concerned countries), either".<sup>7</sup>

Prospect for an inter-Korea engagement in the short-term is bleak, considering the deadlock over a decade and the current tension over nuclear and missile provocation. The fact that President Moon proposed the engagement approach in the midst of a crisis just after North Korea's first ICBM test also indicates that, administration's priority for engagement approach will not change. It comes with a firm conviction that there is no alternative to dialogue.

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*Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Moon Jae-in, "Körber Global Leaders Dialogue with President Moon Jae-In in Berlin", Körber Foundation, Berlin, <https://www.koerber-stiftung.de/mediathek/koerber-global-leaders-dialogue-with-president-moon-jae-in-in-berlin-1416.html>; "Full text of Moon's speech at the Korber Foundation", Korea Herald, July 7, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170707000032> (Accessed on August 5, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Kim Dae-jung, "Lessons of German Reunification and the Korean Peninsula", March 9, 2000, *Le Monde diplomatique*, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/dossiers/coree/A/1904>; Park Guen-Hye, "An Initiative for Peaceful Unification on the Korean Peninsula. Dresden - beyond division, toward integration", March 28, 2014, *The Yonhap News*, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/full/2014/03/28/40/1200000000AEN20140328008000315F.html> (Accessed on August 5, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> 'June 15 Joint Declaration' - Joint declaration adopted between North Korea and South Korea following the Summit Meet between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il, "South-North Joint Declaration" June 15, 2000, [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace\\_agreements/n\\_skorea06152000.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/resources/collections/peace_agreements/n_skorea06152000.pdf); 'October 4 Declaration'.- Agreement between North Korea and South Korea following the Summit Meet between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il "Declaration on the Advancement of South-North

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<sup>4</sup> Op. cit Moon Jae-in

<sup>5</sup> "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sean Spicer", White House, July 17, 2017,

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<sup>6</sup> "S. Korea rejects N.K. claim Seoul not stakeholder to nuke issue", The Yonhap News, JUne 19, 2017,

<http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/northkorea/2017/06/19/0401000000AEN20170619005400315.html> (Accessed on August5, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Na Jeong-ju, "Moon's N. Korea Approach", The Korea Times, July 26,

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