



Evaluating North Korea's attitude towards the restoration of inter-Korean communication lines and South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises

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The inter-Korean communication line, which was cut off on June 9th last year due to strong opposition from North Korea to the distribution of leaflets by some South Korean defectors, was restored after 413 days upon an agreement between President Moon Jae In and Chairman Kim Jong-un. The South Korean government announced on July 27th that President Moon and Chairman Kim have exchanged letters several times since April to communicate and improve inter-Korean relations and have agreed to restore the communication line. It was added that the two leaders have agreed to restore mutual trust and improve inter-Korean relations as soon as possible.

On the same day, North Korea reported through Central News Agency that everyone is now eager for inter-Korean relations, which is in a state of frustration and stagnation, to recover as soon as possible. The report indicated that the leaders of North and South Korea have taken a big step toward restoring confidence and seeking reconciliation by restoring communication channels after exchanging several personal letters.

The restoration of communication lines around the third anniversary of the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration serves as a signal to improve inter-Korean relations. Upon the restoration of communication lines, the South Korean government has begun preparing for inter-Korean video talks and face-to-face talks. Reports say that it is considering food aid to North Korea, COVID-19 vaccine aid through the COVAX Facility, and video reunions of separated families. Some predict that the restoration of the communication line will lead to an inter-Korean video summit.

The South Korean government's effort to resume inter-Korean dialogue is believed to have played an important role for North Korea to agree to restore the communication lines. Kim Yo-jong, Kim Jong-un's younger sister, criticized North Korean defectors for distributing leaflets to the North on June 4, 2020, and threatened to com-

pletely dismantle the Gaesong Industrial Complex, close the inter-Korean joint liaison office, and scrap the inter-Korean military agreement unless South Korea takes actions to stop the distribution. A complete cut-off of all communication lines between the two Koreas was ordered at a meeting of North Korea's business department on June 8; all communication channels, including a hotline, were suspended from 12:00 p.m. on June 9. In addition, North Korea blasted an inter-Korean joint liaison office on June 16, one of the key achievements of the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration.

Since Kim Jong-un seized power, North Korea has raised tensions between the two Koreas by strongly opposing the South Korean NGOs' distribution of leaflets and South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises. In October 2014, North Korea fired anti-aircraft guns at balloons sent by South Korean civic groups to distribute leaflets to the North. In June 2020, North Korea claimed that groups of North Korean defectors distributed leaflets under the Moon administration's tacit approval and cut off inter-Korean communication lines. North Korea is believed to have reevaluated the South Korean government's commitment to promoting inter-Korean dialogue as the South Korean government passed a ban on leaflets at the National Assembly in December last year—all despite the opposition from the South Korean conservatives.

It is true that the announcement was similarly made by the two Koreas on July 27th. However, it must be noted that the South Korean government publicly announced its intention to improve inter-Korean relations while North Korea announced through its 'news agency report' that is mainly used by foreign media, not through an official channel like the United Front Department of the Worker's Party of Korea or the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland. In other words, North Korea does not consider the restoration of the communication lines as important as South Korea does.

North Korea's position on the restoration of the inter-Korean communication line was clearly confirmed by Kim Yo-jong, vice-minister of the party's Central Committee, on the night of August 1st. Her statement indicates that North Korea is simply reconnecting what had been physically disconnected, unlike the South Korean media that is attaching a lot of meanings. She further warned that South Korea is making a 'careless judgment' by publicly discussing an inter-Korean summit, only to await another disappointment as a result of hasty speculation and groundless interpretation.

In addition, Kim Yo-jong warned that conducting a South Korea-U.S. joint military exercise, which is scheduled to take place in August, will not only hurt the will of the leaders of the two Koreas to restore trust but also cloud the future of inter-Korean relations. She further pressed South Korea to cancel the joint military exercise by saying that North Korea will closely monitor whether South Korea conducts another war drill or make a bold decision in August.

In a statement on March 16th, Kim Yo-jong criticized the South Korean gov-

ernment's request of North Korea's "flexible judgment" and "understanding" of reducing the scale of the joint military exercise, saying "it is childish, brazen, and foolish." She also added that North Korea never discussed the scale and form of the joint military exercise but is simply opposed to joint military exercises aimed at its own people.

Currently, the South Korean government can downscale South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, it will be difficult to completely stop them as North Korea's nuclear threat keeps growing. In fact, there is no reason for the South Korean government to downscale South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises, given the public criticism by Kim Yo-jong.

With North Korea showing an uncompromising stance on South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises, it is unlikely that the restoration of communication lines will lead to inter-Korean dialogue or video reunions of separated families. Therefore, the South Korean government should not forcefully downscale South Korea-U.S. joint military exercises but should conduct them as scheduled and seek the transfer of wartime operational control.

If the South Korean government's COVID-19 vaccination plan goes smoothly this year, it will be able to aid North Korea with a large number of vaccines next year. It will not be too late for the South Korean government to seek full-fledged quarantine cooperation with North Korea, then.

North Korea had unilaterally suspended inter-Korean dialogue when it did not deem beneficial and had suddenly bent its policy whenever necessary. Therefore, it will be wise for South Korea to pursue denuclearization, peacebuilding, and inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula instead of fluctuating between hopes and fears based on a mere message from North Korea.

※ Translator's note: This is a third party's unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

※ This article is written based on the author's personal opinions and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.