

A Conversation with Lee Jong-seok*

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About the interviewee

Lee Jong-seok is Emeritus Research Fellow at the Sejong Institute. In 2006, he served as Minister of Unification and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Security Council of South Korea. From 2003 to 2005, he served as Deputy Secretary-General of the National Security Council. He has published numerous books on North Korea and North Korea–China relations.

Vision and Values for a Unified Korean Peninsula

The Korean Peninsula Issue: Implications beyond Its Borders

Jeon Looking at the Korean peninsula issue, various thoughts come to mind. Where is the Korean peninsula going? What should be done? Many complex thoughts arise. The issues surrounding the Korean peninsula are not simple. There are inter-Korean relations, but I think the problems with neighboring countries are also significant. In solving inter-Korean issues and reunification problems, we must also consider how to handle relations with neighboring countries. We're seeing a pattern of hegemonic conflict among the countries surrounding the Korean peninsula. The eyes and ears of the international community are also focused on the Korean peninsula. These problems seem to be both geopolitical problems of the Korean peninsula and remnants of the Cold War system. How should we deal with the current problems of the Korean peninsula, especially relations with neighboring countries?

Lee That is how I see it. The important thing is philosophy. Our relations with neighboring countries are directly related to the question, "What kind of country and international community will we create when reunification takes place?" We tend to look only at the present situation. In other words, we approach it as a problem of "How will the state continue to cooperate with neighboring countries for reunification?"

Instead of approaching it in this way, we need a more fundamental approach, that is, a philosophical approach. We need a philosophy and vision for a unified Korean peninsula that we should live in and develop. The issue of the Korean peninsula should also involve contemplation about our future development and how we can lead better lives. The reunification issue should also include thinking about living well and having a better future. We need to think about what kind of East Asia would be beneficial for us to live a better life. In conclusion, it would be most beneficial for us to form a common economic and security cooperation organization. This is because we have the basic asset of the ROK-US alliance. We should realize that the ROK-US alliance is a fundamental asset.

Another factor to consider is the relationship between South Korea and China. As the ROK-China relationship has developed, its importance has increased significantly. It's a relationship that has been formed with considerable weight on top of the basic framework of the ROK-US alliance. So, what should we do? Let's look at the US-China relationship. Isn't the US-China relationship driven by two elements: conflict and cooperation? The important thing is how to manage the elements that can lead to conflict. Regarding the Korean peninsula, we cannot control all issues between the US and China. We cannot control every issue, but we must choose wise policies for the issues that affect our destiny. We can mitigate the elements of conflict and strengthen the elements of cooperation in our relations with the U.S. and China. That should be our survival strategy.

What would make this possible is a multilateral cooperative body in East Asia, especially in Northeast Asia. This means creating a cooperative body for both security and economic issues. As a result, unification itself on the Korean peninsula can be realized within a structure where various countries in East Asia and Northeast Asia work together organically. For example, we can have China participate in inter-Korean economic cooperation. Then Japan will participate, followed by Russia, forming an economic network in the northern region. This can lead to a path of reunification. This is the natural way to reunification. This will lessen the possibility

of political and military confrontation structures intervening and destroying progress. In this sense, if the structure of “multilateral cooperation” continues not only in the security sector but also in the economic sector—if this orientation continues—it will become a way for us to coexist and prosper together with neighboring countries in the future.

Jeon

I believe that strengthening economic cooperation networks rather than security-focused systems could become a realistic framework. When we talk about neighboring countries, we often overlook Japan. In fact, we tend to give less thought to Japan in inter-Korean relations or in other issues on the Korean peninsula. What do you think about this?

Lee

Japan will also influence the unification of the Korean peninsula. But I’m concerned about the extent of that influence. From my point of view, it will have some influence, but I don’t think it will be significant. I believe your question, Dr. Jeon, is about how we will persuade China, the United States, and Japan, and how we will cooperate with them, given that the interests of the countries surrounding the Korean peninsula are different. I think it’s difficult to talk about persuading individual countries around the Korean peninsula. It’s not going to be easy, and it’s not particularly desirable. In solving problems, it will be difficult to discuss Korean reunification by verbally persuading the other party. Action is needed. Through action, we must create cooperative relations by showing that it’s a structure that benefits everyone and does not threaten anyone. Regarding the issue of the Korean peninsula, many people present their own opinions. They suggest what should be done through academic papers. These opinions are necessary. At the same time, action is necessary. Through policies and practices, we must show how the community of the Republic of Korea moves together as a cooperative body in the process of reunification. Improving relations with countries surrounding the Korean peninsula is a long-term process, like a lengthy journey. We’ve only just begun this process, and there are many challenges ahead. The concerns and tensions in the region are persistent and complex. Simply sending diplomatic

delegations to explain our position isn't sufficient to solve these deep-rooted problems.

The Creation of Practical Cooperative Relationships

Jeon I think it is important to show it through practical actions. Ultimately, we are the main parties in the Korean peninsula issue. Neighboring countries will view and consider the Korean peninsula issue within their own relationships. Does this judgment correspond with your experience?

Lee Yes, that's right. My thoughts on the issue are largely based on the experience I gained while working in the government and managing state affairs. Many progressive people also think this way. They talk about America's rules and influence as if they were final. Even now, I believe that the South Korean government is the most important variable in determining whether North Korea-US relations are going well or not. If the South Korean government raises an issue, it can derail things. That's why our position is important, even when dealing with administrations like the Bush administration, which some call a hegemonic administration in the history of America, or in various other relationships. I was in a position of responsibility serving the president in the Blue House. I felt something in the ROK-US relationship. Even with President Bush, when our government said, "It can't be done," the Bush administration couldn't do it, even though it was difficult for us to say that. When we argued that it couldn't be done in South Korea's national interest, the U.S. government would respond angrily, criticizing our government through the media by claiming, saying, "the Korean government is opposing the U.S." However, they couldn't simply overpower us down to get their way. Seeing this in the ROK-US relationship, I strongly felt that "It is we who are important." If we go forward with the attitude that we are the masters of the Republic of Korea, I think there's nothing we can't do. However, some people tend to be dependent rather than confident, and others say "U.S. control is too strong" rather than being confident. As a

result, I've often thought that the crucial "we" is missing in our diplomacy.

Jeon That's an important point. In diplomacy and international relations, the most fundamental thing is our national interest, but we often seem to forget that. It makes me think again that we need to deal with our problems autonomously.

Lee We shouldn't try to solve diplomacy through persuasion or language alone. It's important to continuously pursue structures that are mutually beneficial. Then we can automatically say "we can do it" and move forward. Would people from any country listen to us just because we speak well? International relations aren't about words. Shouldn't we pursue our interests while constantly consulting and meeting with neighboring countries?

Jeon It makes me think about the fundamentals of international relations and diplomacy. While rational and excellent ideas are necessary, the fundamental problem is that of structure. We need to create practical structures in which everyone can win. I think the situations and interests of each country are now well known.

I'd like to ask another question. It's a question regarding basics. Unification is an issue that cuts across various areas. But there's still a strong tendency to interpret reunification issues in political terms. Just like in international relations, I believe we now need practical preparations for reunification, rather than relying solely on theories or slogans. In a way, I think we now find ourselves in a situation where we need to rebuild the foundation, the basis for reunification. Although the approach based on existing logic and practice isn't completely useless, I believe that unification issues require open thinking about the future in addition to existing issues. Unification should be pursued on a structural level in our society, but the foundation for unification is very weak. What do you think about the foundation for reunification? I'd like to hear your opinion on how we can build a domestic and international foundation for reunification.

Lee

This is indeed a fundamental question. The situation isn't easy. Right now, even if a leader or a group has their own philosophy of unification, it's not easy to spread and develop it. The issue of unification has become so intertwined with ideology. The issue seems to be a factor that activates the axis of division in our society. This makes it extremely difficult to address the issue. It's incredibly important to expand the area of public consensus in solving reunification issues. The important thing is how we expand the public consensus. It's a question of what kind of unification we're going to talk about. Our world has changed. The new generations don't empathize with reunification issues on a normative or humanitarian level. We need an approach that suits their situation.

To meet this situation, we must explain that inter-Korean cooperation is our livelihood, or in other words that reunification provides us with enormous benefits and nourishment in many aspects of our lives—practical, economic, and cultural. We must explain this clearly and provide experiences so that people can understand it. Many such places of experience need to be created. So, it's important to let people experience that the path of inter-Korean reunification and cooperation is our future livelihood and a future that will greatly improve our future lives. And we must let them know that reunification is part of it. Instead of putting reunification in an abstract realm as we do now, we must explain how important reunification is to us in our daily lives and how it makes our lives better. We must expand the public consensus with such logic and ideas.

The Significance and Value of Cooperation

Jeon

I think the issue of building consensus on reunification is about creating momentum for reunification. The South Korean government has done various projects to build this consensus. They've held exhibitions, concerts, and other events, but I think they've missed the core messaging. As I said, there's no philosophy or vision in them. Suddenly, we tell the young people to talk about unification. We say unification

is good. We say that unification is a jackpot. Hearing these things makes people wonder if unification is good. I believe that unification can change our lives and become our future livelihood. But it requires a lot of planning and effort. We must train people who can do this planning. If government departments don't plan for the era of unification and truly pursue unification in specialized areas, unification will become a concern only for a minority. I think it's already becoming a minority issue. When it comes to training specialists related to unification or solving problems in unification education, where should we start?

Lee We need to open up the future and cultivate unification related experts. I think the basic problem is this: how can we make a wasteland habitable for birds? Just putting a few birds there won't solve the problem. Eventually, grass and trees have to grow. Then the birds will come. The most important thing is to improve inter-Korean relations and create a series of situations for cooperation. To do this, we'll need many people and personnel related to unification education. Then people will feel the need and go there. In fact, the answer to all essential problems is cooperation. I'd like to say that putting cooperation into practice is the answer. Otherwise, no matter how many experts we train, there won't be any jobs. To put it more basically, as inter-Korean cooperation progresses, people will think that there is a need for many personnel. Then there will be various discussions about personnel training. Of course, there are things that need to be prepared in advance, but personnel training isn't important unless there is a so-called new transition in inter-Korean relations. Ultimately, I think it's about the "transition of inter-Korean relations."

Jeon First, I think that personnel training should be considered from the planning stage. I also believe it's necessary to plan for unification with government-level personnel and make it into policy. That's my opinion. In the current situation on the Korean peninsula, what would be appropriate methods to make a transition?

There are one negative factor and one positive factor. The negative factor is that inter-Korean relations have regressed tremendously over the past ten years. In this sense it means that we can't suddenly jump from this regression in inter-Korean relations to a much better stage than before. The positive aspect is that the situation has improved compared to the past when the Korean government oversaw inter-Korean relations. As North Korea has opened its economy, there are more things we can do through inter-Korean relations. During the ten years of the past democratic governments, there was a goal to move toward de facto unification through economic cooperation and resolve tensions and conflicts between the North and South. Now the conditions for realizing this goal are much better. In other words, the other party's conditions are in place. Before, we had to convince Kim Jong-il. While receiving explanations, Kim Jong-il had "something he was afraid of."

But now, in the era of Kim Jong-un, there's a wider opening. So, we can cooperate in inter-Korean relations. As a result, North Korea is better equipped than before to create a future through inter-Korean cooperation. So, although inter-Korean relations have regressed, I believe there is considerable potential for future inter-Korean cooperation to pursue something qualitatively different from before, even though there will be issues to coordinate in a short period of time when establishing new inter-Korean relations. First, we have to think about how to eliminate the structures that created mistrust and suspicion, which led to the casualties of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and various physical collisions between the North and the South. When we establish new inter-Korean relations by doing so, it won't be a continuation of the end of the Roh Moo-hyun government in 2007, but a new beginning. On the other hand, we also have many lessons to learn from the tremendous conflicts in inter-Korean relations over the past ten years.

Visions and Planning of Unification

Jeon

In retrospect, the early to mid-2000s was a period when inter-Korean cooperation in various fields was possible. One of the ideas that the conservatives had in the political sphere was “the collapse of North Korea” or “the fall of North Korea.” It can be said that such talk was quite widespread. Now it is cautious to say but I think there’s a need to set long-term relations between the future of North Korea and the Korean peninsula and between the North and South, rather than focusing solely on the issue of unification. The future of North and South Korea culminates in unification, but I think it’s time for a perspective shift on how to peacefully coexist and mutually cooperate between the North and South.

Lee

That’s right. We say that “unification is a process.” In inter-Korean relations, the North and the South should first move toward peaceful coexistence and mutual prosperity. It’s important to move toward peaceful coexistence and mutual prosperity. After that, the question of how to build a unified society can be left to future generations.

We cannot make every move with calculations. The important thing is to create a minimum body of economic cooperation. The rest, such as how political changes will come to North Korea, don’t need to be calculated now. These are questions for future generations to decide. It’s important to create a structure on the Korean peninsula where war cannot occur. If we can create such a structure on the Korean peninsula, the rest can be decided by future generations. It is not very feasible to say that we can decide and do it now. Moreover, it’s interfering with what future generations will be able to do, when nothing has been achieved yet.

No one can guarantee the possibility of a sudden change in North Korea. But as of now, I don’t think that the possibility is very high. And we should always be prepared for possibilities. At the same time, we should continue our efforts to build a single community between North and South Korea. The only way for the North and South to create such a community is for the North Korean people or the North Korean leadership to

have continuous close cooperative relations with South Korea, so that they think, “After all, the South is our counterpart.” In the current state of confrontation, North Korea won’t come to us.

Jeon

Every government wants to show that “North Korea changed because of us.” So, they approached inter-Korean issues with the idea that “this is how North Korea should change” or “this is how North Korea will behave.” I think this policy has paradoxically strengthened North Korea’s independent actions and capabilities. In the future, we should reconstruct inter-Korean relations in terms of peaceful coexistence and mutual symbiosis before unification, which is the issue of the unification process. Among our citizens, there are concerns about how to approach the issue of unification and how to ensure it.

Lee

We need to make people think that unification is a means of livelihood. Reunification is indeed a means of livelihood. We can prove this in many ways. Let’s just think about it. For those of us who live with only three sides of the sea, with the land blocked off, what would be the significance to our lives of removing the barriers? It’s not a difficult question. We don’t need an economist to explain it. Anyone can easily think about it. But what’s blocking this idea is our confrontational attitude toward and distrust of North Korea. So, we can’t think, “What benefits can I get?” Although the present is important, we always talk about looking to the future.

Jeon

In inter-Korean relations, exchange and human rights are in some ways at a point of conflict. How should these two be handled in the future peaceful coexistence or unification of North and South Korea? What does it mean to let exchange and human rights coexist or coordinate them? What are the alternatives?

Lee

Human rights issues fundamentally have a higher purpose. But the issue of human rights itself is connected to the peace on the Korean peninsula. We need to continuously promote peace on the Korean peninsula and create a stable Korean

peninsula through trust between the North and South. We need to resolve the point of conflict between creating a stable Korean peninsula and human rights issues. Human rights are very important. There are different ways to solve human rights issues. For example, if North Korea develops economically, its people will increasingly think about civil liberties accordingly. Then there will be other issues related to civil liberties and the right to economic survival within human rights issues. I think the more important issue is to make the North and South live well through economic cooperation. The issues surrounding fundamental rights of survival in North Korea have been resolved much more than in the past. The important thing is that the advancement of peace on the Korean peninsula is, I believe, the key to promoting the human rights of South Korean citizens. I see peace as (achieving) human rights.

It's important to find points where we can address North Korea's human rights issues while maintaining peaceful inter-Korean relations. So, I am basically in favor of (improving) human rights. If there's an opportunity for development where the North and South can do something through cooperation, if there's such a change in the strategic environment, human rights resolutions could become one of the many methods to solve North Korean human rights issues according to the changes. Therefore, I think there has to be a variable element when dealing with North Korean human rights issues. Abstention is not opposition. In voting, there are four types: "approve," "abstain," "excused," and "oppose." Regarding the North Korean human rights issue, we agree with the cause of improving human rights, but due to various circumstances, we've abstained in the past. As a result, it would be good if we could always agree on issues concerning North Korean human rights to the extent that we understand North Korea, but coordination is needed in the process of creating such understanding. I think coordination is needed between promoting peace on the Korean peninsula and what we can raise about North Korean human rights issues. I see this as a strategy.

For example, if we pass a human rights resolution but North Korea criticizes it and creates tension, our citizens

would be concerned. I always put us first. So, I think we can coordinate it to some extent. Human rights issues are human rights issues, but in reality there are two things to consider.

One is nuclear weapons and the other is inter-Korean relations. Changes in these two factors should be taken into consideration when passing formal resolutions on North Korean issues at the UN, not our individual actions in dealing with North Korean human rights issues at the UN. The North Korean nuclear issue or inter-Korean relations inevitably function as factors determining how we will act. Why is that? Every country in the world uses human rights issues strategically. The U.S. is no different. And when it comes to human rights, we should always keep our doors open to those who are genuinely concerned about North Korean human rights. But the reality is that when North Korean defectors come out, putting them on television and naming them puts their families in North Korea at a disadvantage. Yet, we're doing it openly. This is ultimately to show that we have a superior system to North Korea. Showing the faces of North Korean defectors puts their North Korean families in trouble. In other words, these people and forces who commit anti-human rights acts in the name of human rights issues should be distinguished from those who genuinely talk about North Korean human rights.

Jeon

Whether it be unification, democracy, or human rights, there are people and forces that use them as means to an end.

Lee

They use them as means to an end. They should be differentiated from others who talk genuinely about human rights. We must understand that although human rights are very precious, there are aspects in our reality where we must consider strategic concerns. Principles are principles and strategies are strategies. We should not think that we can just unconditionally demand everything regarding North Korean human rights resolutions and human rights. It would be nice if we were living in such a comfortable place, but we are walking on thin ice on the Korean peninsula. I think we should know how to examine these situations as well.

The Unification Issue and Humanistic Imagination

Jeon Lastly, I'd like you to talk about the potential of "unification humanities" and in what direction it should progress.

Lee When we speak of Korean unification, we are referring to a spectrum ranging from the basic idea of North and South Koreans regarding each other as kin rather than foes, through peaceful coexistence, and ultimately to full political and social integration—but what do these stages truly entail in practice? At this level, what's most needed is to heal the various wounds we have suffered due to division. Healing is not something that can be coerced or forced by political strategy. It's a matter of naturally finding a way to become one in our human life, in our psychology, in our culture, in all these things. For us to move toward unification, we need to create many areas that heal division through the meeting of humanities and social sciences in the sense "consilience" and create such values and attitudes of life. To do so, unification humanities must be developed. Therefore, I think unification humanities advancing the message of consilience, especially those combined with social sciences, are very important.

Jeon What do you think are the causes and solutions for current inter-Korean relations?

Lee Everyone feels that inter-Korean relations are in a poor state. They're at their worst. When we say that inter-Korean relations are bad, there are also political intentions. I am not saying this as a political criticism, but in fact inter-Korean relations seem to be at their worst these days. What could be the reason for the worst state of inter-Korean relations? Well, I think there's a fundamental lack of philosophy among the leaders about inter-Korean relations and how to guide the future of our nation and people. Also, there's a strong tendency to look at and solve issues like inter-Korean relations or diplomacy not from their inherent dimension but based on each party's political or ideological interest. In addition, I think there's a problem with the perspective

of looking at inter-Korean relations. In the end, I think the most important thing in solving inter-Korean relations is the perspective of “How can we, the community and people of the Republic of Korea, live more comfortably and stably than we do now while pursuing a better future?” I think we should look at inter-Korean relations from the perspective of “Can we live more peacefully and prosperously?” However, the inter-Korean relations and North Korea policy we observe today are centered on how each of our actions will harm or benefit North Korea, which we see as a competitor to be destroyed. In other words, they are focused on North Korea, or on the impact on North Korea. They are not conceived for our own sake, but in terms of what North Korea will be like. It’s objectifying ourselves centered on North Korea, thinking, “If North Korea does this, where will it hurt or not?” I think this is the misfortune of the North Korea policy today.

Jeon

I agree. Lately, I often wonder if inter-Korean relations are based on the idea of “who loses more,” “who can last longer,” and “even if both are incapacitated, the one who can last longer will win.” I think we need to make inter-Korean relations a more positive relationship, more structured on a virtuous cycle.

Lee

If you see yourself as the absolute good and the other as the absolute evil, one of them must disappear. You can’t just sit and wait for the other party to disappear; you have to make tremendous efforts to make it disappear. We must understand each other and complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Now that we can’t do that, even the term “peaceful coexistence,” which we could easily agree on in the past, has become a term of political strife. Peaceful coexistence is the most basic aspect of a relationship, but I think we’re destroying that social empathy. It’s not anybody else. It’s not the general public, but those in power who seem to be destroying it, which I think is really unfortunate.

Jeon

Ultimately, this is also related to domestic issues. I think at the root of this thinking lies “division.” The division of the Korean peninsula didn’t just pass by. We went through a war—a very

intense conflict. As a result, there weren't many opportunities for positive experiences in inter-Korean relations. I think the danger and terror of division made us see it as a blindly hostile relationship. I think this perception resulted in a self-defeating structure. We need wisdom to overcome division and the way we think about the Korean peninsula itself.

Lee

I completely agree. From the point of view of the division, the emergence of division itself has created an opportunity for it to be systematized and internalized within division. We need to carefully analyze and correct whether we're having lives and beliefs distorted by division. On the other hand, we must clearly understand the problem of people who are having lives and beliefs distorted by division, and those who are using division to lie to people about themselves. We need to understand clearly that division is being used for the intentional creation of distortions in our lives because it so easily distorts who we are.

