

Is North Korea now willing to make an accommodation with South Korea?

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Construction halted in April 3, 2013 at the Kaesang Industrial Complex and began again on September 16, 2013.

The following analysis refers to the re-opening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex (a joint manufacturing venture involving South Korean companies) in North Korea. It had been closed since April 3, 2013 during a national security crisis. Following the comment on North Korea, by Dr. Mark Barry, a subject expert on North Korea, is a translated interview with Mr. Sang Kwon Park, former head of Peace Motors. Both men are Unificationists.



Map and aerial view of the Kaesang Industrial Complex.

Dr. Mark Barry:

I see current events in North-South Korean relations as being filled with opportunity right now. We had the recent weightlifting championships in Pyongyang, where South Koreans won medals and the South Korean flag and national anthem were publicly played, even on live North Korean TV. This was huge in terms of symbolism. On Sept. 16, 2013 we had the re-opening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex. As Mr. Park explains below, the Kaesong closure in April was spurred by wounded North Korean pride over provocative South Korean statements. And starting Sept. 25, 2013, we will have more reunions of some families separated between North and South.

Overall, my impression is that the North is willing to make an accommodation with the South, since it knows in the end it can rely neither on China nor the U.S. for support. I don't regard evidence of accommodation as merely tactical, but it is the North's way of stating that the only secure future is among fellow Koreans, especially given the success South Korea has achieved. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) now sees the Republic of Korea (ROK) as its principal partner, with the United States (and not China) in a facilitative role. Previously, the North saw the South at best as a junior partner, and it gave priority mostly to dealing with the United States.

Mr. Park reminds us that Kim Jong Un is not even 30. He has many years ahead of him. He has succeeded in

taking command, and he must be planning for the long-term. We have to remember, as was the case with Gorbachev in 1986-88, that positive political change is not always recognizable at first. It takes years to become clear, and sometimes only in the view of hindsight. But, let's encourage Kim Jong Un to be an agent of change!



Kim Jong Un greets Sang Kwon Park during a recent visit to North Korea on July 30, 2013.

Sang Kwon Park Comments on Changes in North Korea

The following is an interview with Mr. Sang Kwon Park, former president of Peace Motors, by Weekly Newsmagazine. It was published in Korea on August 21, 2013.

Weekly Newsmagazine - I know that you have visited North Korea since the 1990's. When was the first time you visited North Korea?

Sang Kwon Park - I visited North Korea in 1994. It has been nearly 20 years.

Weekly Newsmagazine - I believe you are watching North Korea's changes carefully. What do you think about Kim Jong Un now that you have met him in person?

Sang Kwon Park – It has only been two years since the new leadership came in to North Korea. And I think it's less than a year since the new leader got actual power to govern. But compared to the last 20 years, in the last seven to eight in which Kim Jong Un has governed [in the regime of his late father, Kim Jong Il], he has done a lot of work. He is planning many things as well. Almost every plan is fitted for the economy. We can predict what he will do by noting the things that he accomplished in this short time period, and he is not even 30 years old. Until now some people judged Kim Jong Un as a weak leader, but now we should focus on him more intelligently.

Weekly Newsmagazine - Do you think he has firm control of the North Korean regime?

Sang Kwon Park - North Korea is somewhat similar to South Korea. Do you think when Kim Jong Un became a supreme leader that he didn't think about "How should I do better than my grandfather and my father so that I can get the people's trust?" If he doesn't think about it, it will be hard for him to stay in leadership for two to three years. North Korean executives are not that different from our [South Korean] politicians. They are impetuous; they love to do things quickly. They are same as us [South Koreans]. When I met North Korean executives, they said, "(Kim Jong Un) he is not just in his 20's. He has accomplished many things in a short time period. It is hard to follow him. It is hard to serve him." This shows that the executives approved of Kim Jong Un. How did he gain their approval so quickly? It means that Kim Jong Un knows what he needs to do -- which is getting out from under international sanction and economic poverty – in order to feed his people, give hope and earn the trust of foreign governments.

Weekly Newsmagazine - Does that mean Kim Jong Un has a global awareness?

Sang Kwon Park - Yes. If he didn't have it, he wouldn't have started the tourist business for foreigners. Recently, he invited foreign reporters and prepared hotels and food for free. They never did that before. They also offered free hotel and food for me. What is the meaning of inviting international reporters to Pyongyang and meeting with them? Wouldn't it mean that he has a passion and desire to know the world and show himself to others? It means he wants other people to want to learn about him.

Weekly Newsmagazine - Currently, talks are going on for the reopening and development of the Kaesong Industrial [Complex]. North Korea's attitude is changing to become positive; that's a change. Some people speculate that North Korea is obsessed with it because it was Kim Jong Il's dying request and because if Kaesong

Industrial complex fails it will be hard to attract foreign investors.

Sang Kwon Park - There are probably various reasons [for the shutdown]. But they probably knew that if they were to close the Kaesong Industrial [Complex] there would be problems. They didn't want to close it. But there was no other way. Many South Koreans said, "There shouldn't be hostages from Kaesong," and "the American army should be prepared to do (hostage) rescue operation." For North Korea it must have hurt their pride to keep silence because Kaesong Industrial is a revenue generator. If North Korea didn't say or do anything, others would probably have said, "See? They are saying nothing because they are going to take hostages." So, North Korea probably thought it needed to do something. They needed to express their intention. Of course this is just my thoughts.



Sang Kwon Park is pictured during an interview with Weekly Newsmagazine on August 14, 2013 at the Peace Motors Headquarter.

Weekly Newsmagazine – So, are you saying that because South Korea used provocative language, North Korea closed the Kaesong Industrial [Complex]?

Sang Kwon Park - Their pride was hurt. Those words, ("rescue plan for hostages") were spread widely and made the atmosphere such that they couldn't continue. They probably heard their people saying: "Do we really need to do this even when we hear things like that?" In other words, it was just "If you are so scared of hostage-taking and kidnapping, then don't come." They weren't trying to say "Let's close it," but they were trying to say "If you are scared of a hostage situation, then why are you coming?" They have tempers too. I think we can see this as their sending of the message of "Do you know how much it hurts our pride to insinuate this?"

Weekly Newsmagazine - Kim Yang Gon, Secretary and Director of the United Front Department, said, "If the Kaesong Industrial [Complex] is successful, then the DMZ Peace Park will be possible." Is this true? Did Kim Yang Gon mention DMZ Peace Park first?

Sang Kwon Park- I asked him first (about the DMZ Peace Park). President Park Geun Hye already mentioned it (in South Korea), and lots of people were talking about it, so I wanted to ask North Korea, "What do you think about a DMZ Peace Park if South Korea officially sends a proposal?" They responded with a negative comment: "Right now, they [South Korea] are not successful on the Kaesong Industrial issue, so what kind of park can they make? Objectively is that possible? Ask the world's experts. What do you think I would say when they are not even doing well on Kaesong Industrial?" North Koreans said to me. The reporters interpreted this however they wanted.

Weekly Newsmagazine – There have been reports that Pyongyang's downtown section has gotten fancy because of Kim Jong Un's 'Showing off' his outreach to businesses. Have you noticed changes in behavior or freedom from people's appearance, actions and thoughts, and not only of the environment?

Sang Kwon Park- Twenty years ago there were no women wearing skirts. Mostly women wore pants, and they looked like army clothes. They carried weird fabric hand bags. Now, in a way, it's hard to see the difference between Seoul and Pyongyang. I think North Korea is ahead of China. Lots of women's clothes are available, and children's fashion also has changed.

Weekly Newsmagazine - Did you visit other [North Korean] provinces? Weren't there lots of differences between other provinces and Pyongyang?

Sang Kwon Park - I visited Sinuiju by train just two months ago. I also have visited lots of other regions such as Jungju, Mt. Kumgang and Mashikryeong, etc. Probably no one else has traveled North Korea like me. If Pyongyang's lawn changes then other region's lawns also change. The party orders other regions to do the same things as Pyongyang, thus Pyongyang is busy and other regions are also busy.

Thank you very much.