

# 5 Sustainable Peace through South–North Green Détente

Na, Yongwoo | Research Fellow, Humanitarianism and Cooperation Research Division

## Abstract

The Yoon Suk-yeol administration's South–North Green Détente Initiative may provide a breakthrough in the normalization of inter-Korean relations while functioning as a starting point to bring about sustainable peace. In particular, the Green Détente Initiative has the potential to expand the scope of inter-Korean cooperation beyond environmental and ecological issues to humanitarian issues—including the improvement of the livelihood of the North Korean people. To improve the chances for success, the following conditions should be met. First, the governments of the two Koreas must have the will to resume talks. Second, North Korea must actively engage with the international community. The international community must be flexible in engagement with North Korea. Last, the South Korean government should pursue a paradigm shift in its exchanges with North Korea. South Korea should prepare and implement a detailed roadmap for the Green Détente Initiative that includes joint responses to climate change and the creation of a “Green Peace Zone” in the border regions. South Korea should also induce changes from the bottom-up by implementing the Green Détente Initiative with pragmatism and flexibility. These efforts will contribute to the normalization of inter-Korean relations and the bringing about of sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula.

※ The views expressed in this paper are entirely those of the author and are not to be construed as representing those of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU).

217, Banpo-daero, Seocho-gu, Seoul 06578, Korea  
<http://www.kinu.or.kr>

“Peace is not simply avoiding war – real peace is about allowing freedom and prosperity to flourish. Real peace is a lasting peace. Real peace is a sustainable peace.”

From President Yoon Suk-yeol’s Inaugural Speech, May 10, 2022

“Peace is not simply avoiding war – real peace is about allowing freedom and prosperity to flourish. Real peace is a lasting peace. Real peace is a sustainable peace,” said the 20th President of South Korea Yoon Suk-yeol, who took office on May 20, 2022. President Yoon said he will pursue a breakthrough in inter-Korean relations in line with progress on the denuclearization of North Korea. Previously on May 3, the 20th Presidential Transition Committee proposed Korea’s development into “a global and central nation that contributes to freedom, peace and prosperity” as the goal of his administration’s unification policy. In this vein, Yoon stated as his “18th Promise to the People” that “We will normalize inter-Korean relations and bring peace to the Korean Peninsula.” According to the committee, there are three tasks that must be performed to fulfill this promise. One of them is to “normalize inter-Korean relations and prepare for national unification together with the people.” At the heart of this, according to the committee, is the “achievement of South-North Green Détente.” The Green Détente Initiative aims to ease tensions between North and South Korea through dialogue and normalize inter-Korean relations under the principles of reciprocity and pragmatism to achieve common interests. Notably, the new ROK administration has put a special emphasis on pragmatism and flexibility in inter-Korean relations. In this regard, the Green Détente Initiative will serve as a litmus test for the success of the administration’s unification policy. Although the Green Détente Initiative originated in the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations, the Yoon administration has upgraded the initiative in terms of

its content.

## An Upgrade to the South–North Green Détente

“Green Détente” is not a rigorously defined academic term. Instead, Green Détente refers to a policy concept that reflects political orientations. The term is a combination of “green,” which refers to the environment and ecology, and “détente,” which denotes a transition from confrontation and conflict to reconciliation and cooperation. The Green Détente Initiative seeks to resolve the political and military confrontation between North and South Korea through environmental and ecological cooperation. By doing so, the Green Détente Initiative seeks to ease tensions and realize peaceful co-existence on the Korean Peninsula that can lay a foundation for national unification. With this in mind, the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations had used “green” cooperation as a policy tool to reduce tensions in the traditional security environment, adopting a low-carbon green growth strategy and the Korean Peninsula Green Détente strategy, respectively. While the two administrations’ North Korea policies were on the same page in that both of them pursued “green” cooperation to lower tensions, they had significant dissimilarities as well. The former emphasized economic growth based on green industries, while the latter recognized “green” cooperation as a direction for its North Korea policies. These similarities and dissimilarities formed the basis of the Green Détente Initiative in the Yoon administration.

Recently, the goal of normalizing inter-Korean relations through “green” cooperation has started to seem like a far-fetched dream, as North Korea has renounced its self-imposed moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile tests. Nonetheless, the increasing visibility of environmental and ecological damage to the Korean Peninsula caused by global climate change has spurred North and South Korea to express strong will to protect their environment and ecosystem and to tackle climate change issues. This is a positive signal for the

Yoon administration in pursuing the Green Détente Initiative and can also serve as a starting point and breakthrough from which to begin to normalize strained inter-Korean relations.

As a presidential candidate, President Yoon announced his will to implement the Green Détente Initiative, which includes programs to deal with fine dust pollution, disasters, and climate change. In addition, Yoon said he would promote humanitarian aid to North Korea (including disaster relief, nutritional support for infants and pregnant women, and health and medical assistance) even before denuclearization goals have been achieved. Although in the past Green Détente was pursued only as a matter of economic or environmental cooperation, the Yoon administration tries to strengthen the Green Détente Initiative by expanding its scope of cooperation beyond the economy to humanitarian issues, particularly those dealing with the betterment of the quality of life of the North Korean people.

### Prerequisites for South–North Green Détente

There are several preconditions for the success of the new South–North Green Détente Initiative. First, the governments of the two Koreas must have the will to resume talks. This year when a new administration took office in Seoul, Pyongyang renounced its moratorium on missile launches by resuming ICBM tests, raising military tension on the Korean Peninsula. It is also said that the number of “stealth” Omicron variant infections within the North is on the rise. After North Korea officially announced confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the country, the South Korean government offered health and medical assistance several times. During the first ROK-US summit between President Yoon Suk-yeol and President Joe Biden on May 21, South Korea and the US offered medical assistance for North Korea and China. Despite North Korea’s continued military provocations, the South Korean government should continue to make consistent efforts to create momentum for dialogue to demonstrate its

sincere interest. For its part, North Korea should refrain from committing acts like nuclear tests that cross the line, particularly when its COVID-19 cases are rapidly growing. North Korea should also seek to enhance cooperation with South Korea and the international community. These will ultimately lead to the denuclearization of North Korea and the normalization of inter-Korean relations.

Second, North Korea should actively engage with the international community, and the international community should exercise flexibility in its engagement with North Korea. North Korea submitted its National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction and its Voluntary National Review Report to international agencies in 2019 and 2021, respectively. Through the reports, North Korea disclosed some information on the current status and the limitations of its governance capabilities, basically requesting help from the international community. In light of this, it is necessary to help North Korea proactively engage with the international community in areas where it is willing to engage. Such help can only be realized when the international community shows flexibility in its dealings with North Korea. Of course, unconditionally relieving or lifting current sanctions on North Korea is not a viable option. Nevertheless the international community needs to exercise flexibility in applying sanctions or exemptions in areas related to Green Détente, including climate change, the environment, and ecology, because they affect the very survival of North Korean people. Once there is consensus and agreement on a potentially more flexible application of sanctions on North Korea—which has been grappling with rising coronavirus infections—it will become possible to induce spontaneous changes from North Korea.

Lastly, the South Korean government needs to pursue a paradigm shift in its exchanges with North Korea. So far, it has promoted exchanges and cooperation with North Korea mainly at the government-level for a short-term gain. At the same time, North Korea has demonstrated contradictory attitudes toward South Korea and the international community. In particular, North

Korea has refused to talk with Seoul on the one hand and asked for help and cooperation from the international community on the other hand. Accordingly, rather than insisting on two-way talks and exchanges, the South Korean government needs to consider acting as a stakeholder or partner while recognizing the international community as the main actor in inter-Korean exchanges. This paradigm shift may contribute to the achievement of South Korea's foreign policy goals—which emphasize participation in global cooperation networks and contribution to the international community. This, in turn, will help elevate South Korea's status in the international arena.

### South–North Green Détente through Joint Response to Climate Change and ‘Green Peace Zone’ in the DMZ

The first priority for inter-Korean cooperation in the Green Détente Initiative is joint response to climate change. Addressing climate change has now become an inexorable global movement to ensure the survival of all humanity. The South Korean government joined in the global movement to tackle climate change by adopting its 2050 Carbon Neutral Strategy in December 2020. North Korea, which is rarely present in the international arena, has taken a quite positive stance on climate change responses. Following the Paris Agreement of 2015, North Korea submitted its nationally determined contributions in 2016 and 2019, and publicly announced that it would raise the level of goals even further if international aid is provided. In North Korea, recurring natural disasters caused by climate change have dealt a heavy blow not only to the livelihood of people but to its overall economy. This explains why Chairman Kim Jong Un has emphasized the modernization of weather and water management facilities and the introduction of science-based approaches since he took power. This further shows that working together for climate change responses that affect the livelihood of the North Korean people may serve as the means of cooperation for inter-Korean Green Détente. Specific examples

of priority projects include the sharing of information and technology for North Korea's capacity-building, and renovation of water and sanitation facilities to improve the living environment for North Korean people. In addition, the Yoon administration should strive to garner support from the international community by emphasizing that the initiative can advance efforts to normalize inter-Korean relations in the humanitarian area. North and South Korea's joint efforts to respond to climate change will help North Korea enhance its capabilities to adapt and respond to climate change, while helping South Korea realize its carbon neutrality goals and its efforts to join the ranks of key players in climate change response. More broadly, the Green Détente Initiative may offer a breakthrough in stalled inter-Korean relations.

In addition, the Yoon government can consider joint response to natural disasters in the border regions near the demilitarized zone (DMZ). As one of the countries deemed most vulnerable to natural disasters, North Korea has emphasized the need for active disaster response. However, due to its lack of technological and financial resources, North Korea has failed to develop sufficient response capabilities on its own. It will be advantageous for the two Koreas, if North and South Korea would work together to respond to natural disasters that occur every year, including typhoons and floods, as well as infectious diseases like African swine fever and COVID-19. Joint responses to natural disasters that easily pass borders will provide practical benefits to people on both sides, while such benefits may spread even further throughout their respective societies. North-South sharing of weather forecasts and other weather-related information and joint surveying of areas prone to fires, landslides, or floods will help stabilize the living conditions of those living in the border regions, which will help create momentum for further improvement in inter-Korean relations. If efforts for the denuclearization of North Korea make progress, it may be possible to carry out more serious cooperation projects such as the establishment of weather communications networks, the distribution of renewable energy, and the construction of infrastructure for joint responses to climate change. It is thus necessary to explore how to utilize the "Green Peace



Zones” in the border regions that encompass the environment, ecology, and tourism (economy) to further promote common interests for both Koreas.

## Proposals to Normalize Inter-Korean Relations

The Yoon administration is coping with a challenging environment at home and abroad. Some of these challenges include increasing global instability caused by strategic conflicts between the US and China, and between the US and Russia (which has recently led to the war in Ukraine); escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula due to North Korea’s military provocations; North Korea’s internal instability due to the spread of COVID-19 infections and economic downturn; a widening split among South Koreans over national reunification; and the need to find new growth engines at a time of economic transition in South Korea. The foreign and unification policies that the administration adopts will determine how well it can perform in tackling those issues. Against this backdrop, the Green Détente Initiative offers a direction for the Yoon administration to normalize harmonious inter-Korean relations based on pragmatism and flexibility that synchronously considers international circumstances and national interests.

Past administrations in South Korea have taken functionalism-based approaches regarding the improvement of inter-Korean relations and the establishment of peace on the Korean Peninsula. Such an approach posits that non-political or military cooperation can induce political or military cooperation. The Green Détente Initiative is also grounded on this strategic line of thinking. The Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations’ policies of “green” cooperation failed because they were made conditional on progress in the denuclearization of North Korea, which took priority over all other issues. As a result, the scope of policy options for the South Korean government had been reduced. This should provide a lesson for the new ROK administration. The Green Détente Initiative is an upgraded version of its predecessors with an expanded



scope of concerns encompassing humanitarian issues for the betterment of the quality of life of North Korean people. Accordingly, the Green Détente Initiative needs to be carried out separately from denuclearization efforts. Denuclearization of North Korea should be pursued through close policy coordination between South Korea and the US as well as international cooperation—with consistency and in adherence to firm principles. At the same time, it is important to induce changes from the bottom by implementing the Green Détente Initiative with pragmatism and flexibility. These “two-track” efforts will contribute to the normalization of inter-Korean relations and the bringing about of sustainable peace to the Korean Peninsula. © KINU 2022