



# UNISCI Discussion Papers

## SOUTH KOREA'S POSITION BETWEEN NORTH KOREA AND THE U.S.

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The current crisis over North Korea once again brought world attention on the Korean Peninsula. The emergence of the North Korean nuclear issue escalating to international tension is truly tragic, given the enormous progress toward reconciliation between North and South Korea that had been achieved.

Since the late 1980s, the “Nordpolitik” or “Northern policy” of South Korea opened a new chapter in Korean history. While maintaining its previous goals of enhancing political legitimacy, military security, and economic development by maintaining close ties with the West, South Korea greatly expanded its relations with socialist countries. Without a doubt, one of the main objectives of this policy was to open contacts and dialogue with North Korea.

In dealing with North Korea, President Roh Tae-woo first applied an engagement policy in his determination to build an era of reconciliation and cooperation with the North, while reducing military tensions in the Korean Peninsula. This engagement policy toward the North has been continued through President Kim Young-sam and became even a more consistent part of President Kim Dae-jung's policy toward North Korea.<sup>2</sup> President Kim Dae-jung's “Sunshine policy” has differed in kind from the Northern Policies of his predecessors, who energetically sought improved relations with the North.

Although ups and downs occurred in Northern Policies in the 1990's administrations, the inter-Korean relations had much improved. The historic Korean Summit, held in June 2000 in Pyongyang, produced the June 15 Joint Declaration, which serves as the basic document guiding peaceful co-existence and national unification on the Korean peninsula. It was a major turning point in dealing with the Korean issue worldwide. The 3-days Summit between the Chairman of North Korea, Kim Jong-il, and the President of South Korea, Kim Dae-jung, signalled that the first step had been taken on the long road toward dismantling the confrontational structure on the Korean Peninsula. The groundwork was laid for the peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas.

The Summit has greatly contributed to confidence building between the two Koreas and to tension reduction on the Korean Peninsula. The inter-Korean economic cooperation has

<sup>1</sup> Las opiniones expresadas en estos artículos son propias de sus autores. Estos artículos no reflejan necesariamente la opinión de UNISCI. The views expressed in these articles are those of the authors. These articles do not necessarily reflect the views of UNISCI

<sup>2</sup>Country study:South Korea (Foreign policy), “South Korea's Basic Goals and Accomplishments,” Sinformation Courtesy” The Library of Congress, ([www.Korea.gov](http://www.Korea.gov)), June, 1990. p.1-2.



increased (US\$221,943 in 1998 to US\$402,957 in 2001)<sup>3</sup> and the issue of separated families is in the process of being resolved steadily. Ministerial-level inter-Korean talks already have been held to discuss several current agendas and to formalize inter-governmental talks.<sup>4</sup>

No doubt, the Kim Dae-jung administration's "Sunshine policy" has significantly changed the dynamics of diplomacy on the peninsula. This policy based on five principles--gradualism, change in the North, the separation of economic and political relations, reciprocity, and solidarity with allied and friendly nations--has played a substantial role in pushing the U.S. to consider normalizing political and economic relations with Pyongyang.

Some U.S. government policy makers supported limited engagement and steps towards normalization of relations of the inter-Korean policies, while many specialists in the CIA and the Pentagon, along with conservatives in Congress, bureaucratic agencies in Washington and the media, were deeply skeptical of engagement. This tension rendered U.S. foreign policy towards North Korea inconsistent and deeply flawed.

Nevertheless, during the last years of Clinton administration, the U.S. and North Korea entered into a phase of improved relations. In July 1999, the U.S. Council of Foreign Relations issued various recommendations on North Korea. Among them was the "selective engagement" policy, which advocated first, lifting the U.S. embargo on North Korea.<sup>5</sup> The Clinton administration also adopted a tolerance policy toward North Korea to avert instability on the Korean Peninsula. These steps opened bilateral relations between the U.S. and North Korea.

On the basis of this normalization of relations with the North, the Clinton administration wanted to move beyond the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea to a more stable relationship that would resolve outstanding issues related to (Weapons of Mass Destruction) WMD, including especially nuclear and long-range missile issues, and thus contribute to the Korean unification.<sup>6</sup>

In return North Korea offered to discontinue all testing, production, and deployment of missiles with a range over 500Km (300 miles) as part of the broad normalization agreement.<sup>7</sup>

The two countries exchanged high-level visits: second-in-command Jo Myong-rok to Washington, Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang. Clinton was prepared to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. A meeting was prevented by the controversies of President Clinton's last

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<sup>3</sup> Korea and the World: "Inter-Korean Interaction & Cooperation," Korean Information Service 2000-2002 ([www.Korea.net](http://www.Korea.net)), p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Chang Noh-soon, "After the Korean Summit: The Challenging Consequences of the Détente," East Asian Review, Vol.12, No.3, August 2000, p.63.

<sup>5</sup> Paik Hak-soon, "Continuity or Change? : The New U.S. Policy Toward North Korea," East Asian Review, Vol.13, No.2, Summer 2001, p.29.

<sup>6</sup> Oh Kong-dan, "Terrorism Eclipses the Sunshine Policy: Inter-Korean Rel. and the U.S." Asia Society Publication, March 2002, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> Quinones C. Kenneth, "Dualism in the Bush Administration's North Korea Policy," Asian Perspective, Vol.27, No.1, 2003, p.198-199. See also, The Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy, "Crisis on the Korean Peninsula," A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs, Vol. 102, No.663, April 2003, p.155.



days in office. The media indirectly advised against a presidential visit to Pyongyang on the grounds that no satisfactory agreement was ready for the president to sign.<sup>8</sup>

These efforts toward Korean Peninsula stability could not work out independently but only with close consultation between the U.S. and the South Korean government and with Japan, China and Russia as well. Policy coordination among these countries is an essential element, since the crisis in the Korean Peninsula is not just a Korean problem; it is closely related to Northeast Asian security as well. It is also an outright rejection of the plan for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, a plan supported apart from the U.S. and Japan by China and Russia as well.

Without a doubt, the U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia inevitably has an impact on R.O.K.-U.S. relations, inter-Korean relations, and South Korea's domestic political situation. Subsequent changes in inter-Korean relations, in return, have a positive or negative effect on Washington's North Korean policy and Northeast Asian issues.<sup>9</sup> Former President Kim Dae-jung said that the development of U.S.-DPRK relations is closely correlated with that of inter-Korean relations and therefore, it is desirable for the U.S. to continue its engagement policy and seek dialogue with North Korea, allowing the North to save face.<sup>10</sup>

However, on taking office, the Bush administration immediately announced a full review of U.S. policy toward North Korea. The conservative Bush administration unveiled a hard-line policy toward North Korea, saying that it would proceed based on the principles of transparency, verification, and reciprocity. This was the Reagan administration's policy toward the former Soviet Union, "Trust but verify." Somehow this has been modified to "Do not trust before you verify" in dealing with the North Korea issue.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the Clinton administration's approach, which first offered some carrots to encourage North Korea to come forward, the Bush administration's approach requires North Korea to act first before the U.S. "expands its efforts to help the North Korean people, ease sanctions and take other political steps."<sup>12</sup> In other words, if North Korea's stance remains consistent, no serious discussions can be expected.

When the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacked by a terrorist group, American policy makers rearranged the country's national security position. Terrorism became the new threat and brought a new downturn in Bush administration attitude toward North Korea.

In the wake of the disaster, Bush divided the world into two groups, friends and enemies, forces of light and darkness, good and evil. As one of the few nations still on the U.S. list of those practicing international terrorism and a Communist nation threatening a U.S. ally, North Korea was on the dark side of Bush's world divide. Consequently, in January 2002

<sup>8</sup> Oh Kong-dan, cited, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Chung Ok-nim, "The New U.S. Administration's Korea Policy and Its Impact on the Inter-Korean Relations," *East Asian Review*, Vol.13, No.1, Spring 2001, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> *Peopledaily* January 14, 2002. See also, Kim Kyung-woong, "Changes in Inter-Korean Relations: The Vicissitudes of Politics," *East Asian Review*, Vol.13, No.4, Winter 2001, p. 9-11, 18-20.

<sup>11</sup> *East Asia Review*, Vol.13, No.1, SP 2001, cited., p.13.

<sup>12</sup> *N.Y. Times*, "Bush Opens Talks with North Korea," June 7, 2001.



in the State of the Union address, President Bush labeled North Korea as one of the “axis of evil,” intent on developing weapons of mass destruction.<sup>13</sup> In response to this new hard-line approach, North Korea not only pulled away from negotiations with the U.S. but derailed ongoing efforts to reconcile with South Korea. In October 2002, North Korea’s uranium enrichment program was revealed, resulting in North Korea’s declaration to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty on January 10, 2003.<sup>14</sup>

The U.S. issued a series of warnings and has insisted that the North comply before material compensation would be considered. The U.S. asserts its power to take any means necessary, including diplomatic pressure, strong economic sanctions, and search and seizure of North Korean vessels in international waters, to prevent the sale of mass destruction weapons.<sup>15</sup>

In this critical moment, a presidential election in South Korea elected human rights lawyer and liberal democrat Roh Moo-hyun as the sixteenth President of the R.O.K. To many people’s surprise, Roh Moo-hyun was chosen by the Korean people. Roh, one time cabinet minister<sup>16</sup> of the Kim Dae-jung administration, is widely expected to maintain the general framework of the Sunshine policy.

It was an open secret that Roh was not the favorite candidate of the U.S. The Bush administration would have felt more comfortable with the conservative candidate, Lee Hoe-chang, whose policies would be less proactive and more skeptical toward North Korea and, thus, more in tune with the current reality in Washington.

Upon his inauguration on February 25, 2003, Roh pledged to keep peace with North Korea and said he remains skeptical about the “tailored containment” policy of the U.S. toward the North. This signaled some discrepancies in dealing with the North Korean nuclear crisis.

Basically, Seoul and Washington agree that the North Korea’s nuclear crisis should be resolved peacefully. However, Washington said it is keeping all options on the table, including the possibility of economic sanctions and even the use of military force. Newly elected President Roh has made it clear that U.S. sanctions against the North only increase the

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<sup>13</sup> Effer John, “Bush Policy Undermines Progress on Korean Peninsula,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol.7, No.2, March 2002, p.2-5. According to the U.S. State Department, North Korea hasn’t engaged in terrorism since the 1980s. See also, *International Herald Tribune*, Feb.1, 2002, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization.9047.pdf>. *Issues for Congress*. and *EAR*, Vol14, No.1, SP 2002, p.32. In these article, upon the North Korea’s request, Pyongyang had been offered the chance to get off the list near the end of the Clinton Administration but failed to take the few steps necessary. In addition, in response to the terrorist attack of September 11, North Korea issued statements opposing terrorism and signed two U.N. conventions against terrorism.

<sup>14</sup> Mansourov Alezander, “North Korea Goes Nuclear, Washington Readies for War, South Korea Holds Key,” *Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online*, PFO 02-23A: Dec.9,2002, p.2-9. See also, *Digital Chosun-ilbo* (S.Korean daily in English), “U.S.-Noth Korea Korean Negotiations ” Contributed by Henry Kissinger. March 14, 2003, p.1-5.

<sup>15</sup> *N.Y. Times*, “Bush Shifts Focus to Nuclear Sales by North Korea,” May 5, 2003, p.1-3. Se also *Washington Post*, “Plan for North Korea will Mix Diplomacy and Pressure,” May 7, 2003, p.A1, A15.

<sup>16</sup> He has been the Minister of Martime Affairs and Fisheries from August 2000 to March 2001. See A *Biographical Sketch*, “The Story of Roh Moo-hyun,” *Cheong Wa Dae: Office of the President. R.O.K.*, ([www.President.go.kr/warp/en/president/story/basis/](http://www.President.go.kr/warp/en/president/story/basis/)).



risk of a war on the Korean Peninsula. Roh and his administration perceive the nuclear issue as the biggest challenge they have to face now and have called for direct talks between the North and the United States. Washington has refused to talk only to Pyongyang, seeking to deal with the issue through an international framework.

In truth, discrepancy exists and debates are raging among the security policy communities in the U.S. and R.O.K over North Korean motives and intentions and how best to deal with Pyongyang. While the two sides may not be as far apart as many believe, significant policy and perception gaps clearly remain between the two allies.

These are mainly due to different national interests, strategic considerations, and policy concerns and priorities of each nation. First, there are somewhat different perceptions toward the North Korean regime itself. President Bush and his advisors harbor mistrust of the North Korean leader. Bush sees the North Korea regime as a suspicious and terrorist-supporting state. He did not deny his intense dislike of North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il. From this point on, U.S policymaking toward North Korea became much more complicated. Some officials in the National Security Council, many in the Defense Department, and some at the State Department raised fierce objections to dealing with North Korea.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, South Korea believes that the North has been trying to adopt a more practical policy for its system's stability and economic recovery. North Korea wanted to improve relations with the U.S. desperately. According to John Feffer, East Asian policy analyst, they sell weapons not as part of a global anti-American conspiracy but because they need the hard currency so badly. In the 1990s, Pyongyang prioritized dealings with Washington in order to solve its dire economic problems.

Given the inflexible characteristics of the Pyongyang regime itself, South Korea believes that the efforts by North Korea during the Clinton administration could be understood as meaningful changes, even though they fall short of fundamental reforms, such as system change or the introduction of a market economy. In fact, South Korean authorities see the North Korean regime as a partner, necessary to improve inter-Korean relations. For them, Pyongyang's recent insistence on a North Korea-U.S. non-aggression pact originated from its real worries about its stability, mainly caused by the recent U.S-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>18</sup>

Roh Moo-hyun has seen how his predecessor Kim Dae-jung succeeded brilliantly with his diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea but failed poorly in gaining Washington's support for engagement because it had other priorities. Roh does not want to let this happen to his administration. Learning from past administrations' errors, the new government initiated a three-stage institutional measure, Peace and Prosperity Policy, to resolve the impending North Korean problem. As a first step, the Roh administration intends to continue to engage in regular inter-Korean talks between high level officials and defense chiefs. The second step is to expand inter-Korean cooperation and exchange programs in every field, with special efforts

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<sup>17</sup> Oberdorfer Don, "Korea and the U.S.: Partnership under Stress," *The Korea Society Quarterly*, Vo.3, No.2 &3, Summer 2002, p.6-8.

<sup>18</sup> Dong-A Ilbo South Korean daily, Nov.27, 2002.





in building military confidence to ease the tensions. Ultimately they hope to replace the armistice agreement with a peace treaty.<sup>19</sup>

The best strategy for handling the North is not obvious, but it is not surprising that policymakers in Seoul, within easy reach of North Korean artillery and missiles, have a different perspective than those in Washington. The most momentous issue involving the Korean Peninsula today is Pyongyang's continuing pursuit of nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup>

Reviewing all the factors mentioned above, the final analysis is that both South Korea and the U.S will undergo an uneasy task to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. Korean unification analyst Park Young-ho characterized the current atmosphere between the U.S. and the South Korea: "although they are in the same bed but with different dreams."<sup>21</sup>

The Roh government is sure not only to continue the Kim Dae-jung's policy of brisk and comprehensive engagement with the North but also is likely to act to save Kim Jong-il's regime from the threat of a U.S military action and block any use of force at the final hour. In this perspective, the Bush administration will have a very hard time in persuading the R.O.K government to join it in its all-out campaign to isolate and compel the DPRK to disarm and change.

The summit between the President Roh and Bush on May 14, 2003 enabled both leaders to build a mutual personal trust and to agree on future cooperation about the North Korea issue.<sup>22</sup> Compared to the summit of the then South Korean President Kim Dae-jung with Bush two years ago, considered a "diplomatic disaster" due to his failure to convince the Bush administration with his "Sunshine policy," it appears that President Roh has achieved his goal.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, although the two leaders agreed to closely cooperate to have nuclear weapons free Korean Peninsula through peaceful means, based on international cooperation, the differing approaches of the two allies are still evident.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In order to accomplish the Policy for Peace and Prosperity, the administration established 15 commitments as a guide line: 1. Normalization of inter-Korean summits 2. Institutionalisation of inter-Korean dialogues at every level. 3. Conclusion of a peace agreement 4. Resolving weapons of mass destructions issues 5. Building military confidence and disarmament 6. Making the demilitarised zone a peaceful area 7. Resolving the issue of separated families 8. Devising an inter-Korean joint economic zone 10. Aid for North Korea 11. International cooperation 12. Trust-building 13. Gaining support and consensus from the people 14. Revitalizing social and cultural exchange 15. Cooperating on environment and disaster prevention. See EAR, Vol. 15, No.1 SP. 2003, cited., p.7.

<sup>20</sup> Japan Times, "Time for a U.S.-Soputh Korean divorce," January 6, 2003, p.1-2.

<sup>21</sup> EAR, Vol.15, No.1, SP 2003, cited, p.28.

<sup>22</sup> White House News releases, "Joint statement Between the United States of American and the Republic of Korea," May 15, 2003, p.1, [http://www. Whitehouse.gov/news/reases](http://www.Whitehouse.gov/news/reases), print.17. See also "President Bush Delivers Remarks with South Korean President," print.18. p.1

<sup>23</sup> The N.Y. times, "Bush and South Korean President are Vague on North Korea Strategy" written by David E. Sanger, May 15, p. 3. See also The Korea Times, "Roh, Bush United Against North Korea Nukes," written by Oh Young-jin, May 15, 2003, p.1-2.

<sup>24</sup> The Korea Herald, "After Roh-Bush Summit," and "Summit gets mixed reactions," p.1. May 15, p.1. See also The Chosun daily newspaper, "Summit Firms Stance Against North," May 15, p.1.



Some critics said that the summit talks failed to narrow the gap on the North's nuclear issue. At the summit, South Korea accepted the U.S. hard line policy by agreeing on "further steps" on the North Korea's possible provocative actions, but President Roh has so far refused to include the military option in dealing with the North.

On the U.S side, following day of the summit, President Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, and White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer showed the differences in strategy with Seoul saying "it would be unwise to rule out the use of military force, even while pursuing a peaceful resolution of the problem."<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, it is a matter of concern that the Bush administration is divided on dealing with North Korea issue: Secretary of State Colin L. Powell takes the option opening negotiations with the North Korean regime while Secretary of Defense H. Rumsfeld and members of Vice President Dick Cheney's staff stand to push a hard line policy. Nonetheless, neither the parties reject the idea of working together with other countries to increase pressure on North Korea as one of the first further steps.<sup>26</sup>

To sum up with these important factors, a better strategy toward the North will require a coordinated response from all of its neighbours, particularly China, Japan and Russia. It will be wise to seek cooperation from these neighbouring countries, as none of these states want war on the Peninsula, none want a nuclear North Korea, and all possess some degree of leverage over Pyongyang.

As for Washington and South Korea, their 50 years as strong allies should narrow the gap on their North Korean policies to bring a peaceful solution. The South Koreans have to do their best to convince the North with a basic message: significant diplomatic and economic rewards are possible, but only for positive, verifiable disarmament. The Americans, on the other hand, should realize the hard time in which South Korea now finds itself and its efforts to protect peace on the Korean Peninsula. When the two countries reach a common understanding, sufficient for a breakthrough with North Korea, and receive strong support from the neighbouring countries, there will be no other option for North Korea but to abandon the WMD and to incorporate in the international community for the good of its people.

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<sup>25</sup> The Korea Times, "Roh, bush United Against North Korea Nukes," cited., p.1. See also the N.Y Times, "Bush and South Korean President are Vague on North Korea Strategy," cited. P.1-2.

<sup>26</sup> The Korea Herald (national), "Peaceful Solution Unites Roh and Bush," May 15, p.2.