Good News and Bad News from the Korean Peninsula

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The good news out of the Koreas is that President Barack Obama, as no other president before him, has recognized that South Korea is America's most reliable and active ally in Asia. The President mentioned South Korea in his January 25 State of the Union speech far more than any other country, praising its teachers, its technical prowess, its growing economic status, and urging quick ratification of the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement. If any further proof of Seoul's current status was needed, David Sanger in *The New York Times* of February 20, 2011, said flatly, "South Korea…is now Washington's favorite ally in Asia."

This is a strongly positive and overdue development, and brings South Korea closer to becoming what I have long hoped for, a status as an American ally in Asia equivalent to the United Kingdom's status as an American ally in Europe. A close allied relationship, however, is no guarantee of agreement on all issues by the two nations concerned. Think of the crisis of 1956, when President Eisenhower refused to support an Anglo-French plan to seize the Suez Canal after it had been nationalized by Egypt. The Anglo-American alliance survived this incident, and went on to become stronger than ever.

South Korea is a strong, and sometimes bumptious democracy, which like the United States, elects chief executives of widely differing persuasions, depending on paramount political issues pertaining at the time of presidential elections. This is a sign of the healthy and free-swinging democratic process that exists in both countries. At the same time, it has caused coordination problems and led to misunderstandings. A notable example was the first official meeting between former Presidents Kim Dae-jung and George W. Bush, held in early 2001, that signaled an end to the Clinton policy of reconciliation toward North Korea.

This pattern has been especially difficult for North Korea to adjust to, given the fact that it has been ruled by one family since its creation at the end of World War II, and thus finds it hard to fathom how democracies can function effectively when they elect presidents who appear to have very little in common with their predecessors. Such was the case when George W. Bush replaced Bill Clinton. Clinton had been invited by North Korea to visit Pyongyang in the fall of 2000, and clearly wanted to go, but the time ran out on his presidency. The North Koreans hoped for a continuation of friendly relations with the Bush administration, but this did not happen. Direct contact was suspended between Pyongyang and Washington in 2001, and the North Koreans were slapped in the face by the infamous "axis of evil" appellation used by Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address, linking North Korea with Iraq, which we invaded in 2003, and Iran with which we have had increasingly hostile relations for more than a decade. America's relations with North Korea have never recovered from this drastic change in American policy. Professor

Robert Carlin of Stanford University, a distinguished former State Department official and North Korean expert put it this way in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 1: "The talking stopped in 2001, all gains were lost…and a fog of myths has been adopted by the US" (in its dealing with Pyongyang).

A similar pattern of sudden political change has taken place more recently in South Korea. Following his election in late 2007, beginning during the transition period even before his inauguration in February 2008, President Lee Myung-bak has reversed and/or abandoned the policies of accommodation toward North Korea carried out over a ten-year period by his two predecessors, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. The dangerous impact in Pyongyang of this marked change in Seoul's policies, from a search for reconciliation to a thinly disguised push for regime change, has become increasingly evident. Last December, in response to a prolonged South Korean live-fire exercise from Yeonpyong island, into seas near the hotly contested Northern Limit Line north of Incheon International Airport, the North Koreans fired back on the island, causing the first two civilian casualties since the end of the Korean War. This tragic response was observed on television in South Korea as it took place, and has aroused to an unprecedented degree great feelings of hostility among the people of South Korea toward the North.

The dangerous deterioration of relations between Seoul and Pyongyang has not been counterbalanced by any positive political developments in Washington. The Obama administration, put off by some ham-handed North Korean moves in 2009, and with several other major crises to deal with, has more or less let the Lee administration set the pace in terms of developing relations with Pyongyang. In addition, there is no high-level Korean expert operating full-time in the Obama White House, to tell the president on a regular basis what he needs to hear about both North and South Korea.

So, here is the bad news. It comes from the fact that there has not been a single policy level discussion with North Korea since either President Lee or President Obama took office. The so-called American policy of "strategic patience" has only resulted in a stronger North Korean nuclear capability, increased Chinese influence in Pyongyang, and higher tension between North and South Korea than at any time in the last 15 years. And Washington currently says that it will not consider any significant bilateral approach to Pyongyang until North-South relations improve.

Senator John Kerry (D-MA), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was wise to call the above-mentioned hearing on North Korea that was held on March 1, entitled "Breaking the Cycle of North Korean Provocations." The first two speakers, Kurt Campbell, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, Special Representative for North Korea Policy at the State Department, both spoke in consonance with that topic. They focused on North Korean obduracy and hostility, the restraint and consistency of the Lee administration, and the close coordination between our two governments. They both stressed the strength of our sanctions against North Korea, and their hope that improvement in North-South relations, and expressions of contrition about past hostile actions by North Korea, and its

stated willingness to abide by a September 2005 agreement on denuclearization could lead to a resumption of direct talks with Pyongyang.

Senator Kerry seemed strongly interested in a resumption of direct bilateral talks with North Korea. He asked about China, and why Ambassador Bosworth had been there seven times, and only once to Pyongyang. There was no direct answer to that question, but general agreement emerged that Chinese influence on North Korea is significant, and that a regime change in North Korea is not a development that China considers to be consistent with its interests. Ambassador Bosworth stated clearly that neither China nor the United States wants North Korea as a permanent nuclear power, and that our ability to work productively together on this crucial issue is a litmus test for overall relations between Washington and Beijing.

The question of food aid to North Korea, which Pyongyang is actively seeking, was addressed, but not conclusively so. There was some reference to the extremely cold winter in North Korea, and recognition of food shortages, but these issues were not seen as having reached a critical stage. As Ambassador Bosworth put it, "We give food when there is a real need, and when food deliveries can be monitored." Secretary Campbell referred to the "enormous suffering" of the North Korea people, and made clear that the ultimate decision on giving food aid was "a humanitarian issue, not a political one." Not mentioned was the fact that up to March 1, the South Korean government had made it clear that it opposed any food aid being given to the North.

On February 28, I participated in an hour-long conference call with two Americans, representatives of charitable organizations with long records of giving food aid to North Korea. Both men had been in three northern provinces of North Korea conducting a "food security assessment," between February 8 and 15, 2011, in what the North Koreans describe as one of the coldest winters since 1945. They were allowed to go wherever they wanted, and were not restricted in any way. They saw what they called "acute malnutrition" along the Chinese border, with people already forced to eat a mixture of grass and corn. In unheated hospitals were new-born babies, unresponsive and near death. Daily food rations were already being decreased, and local officials said flatly that they would run out of food by mid-June, as the acute cold has frozen 50 to 80 percent of the winter wheat crop. This is a stark reference to the traditional "spring hunger" ("*pori kogae")* scourge from which even South Korea used to suffer.

I devoutly hope that well before the mid-June crisis point, Seoul and Washington can come together in agreement on the need for humanitarian food aid being rushed to North Korea, but I wish I were more confident that this will happen. The Lee administration seems firmly attached to its hard-edged push toward regime change in North Korea. It has been putting pressure on American nonprofit and educational institutions which receive financial support from Korea to curtail what Seoul sees as "pro-North Korean" activities. I am also very concerned by recent calls from right-wing groups in Korea for the re-introduction of American tactical nuclear weapons into South Korea as a way to put pressure on North Korea. Blue House seemingly has distanced itself from these nonsensical demands, but their very existence is totally antithetical to our stated goal

of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula, and can only make the attainment of that goal more difficult.

In raising these issues I am in no way denigrating the current relationship between South Korea and the United States. I rejoice in our close ties as democracies, and our growing economic partnership. My concern is that by not being involved enough in North Korean policy formulation, we have allowed a dangerous situation to arise on the Korean Peninsula, which if allowed to drift, will not bring about regime change but a major crisis in humanitarian terms. A quick response to North Korea's drastic food shortage would not only head off starvation but also could be a significant step toward a resumption of long-term dialogue with Pyongyang, which is the only way to deal with what Professor Carlin referred to as "North Korea's legitimate national interests" in his eloquent testimony before the Senate.