

## Strategic Insight

### U.S.-North Korea: From Brinkmanship to Dialogue

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Tensions surrounding North Korea escalate unpredictably on an almost daily basis. Much of this volatile situation can be ascribed to Pyongyang's willingness to engage in a reckless combination of provocative acts and rhetorical tirades that constitute its infamous diplomatic brinkmanship. North Korea's willingness to make use of its nuclear option in a U.S.-DPRK diplomatic meeting last October seems to have been motivated by a desire to reinforce its peculiar brand of deterrence. The Kim Jong-il government was further emboldened in subsequent months by the combination of two sets of circumstances. First were favorable political developments in South Korea—in the form of December's election of President Roh Moo-hyun, who strongly favors ROK engagement of the DPRK and took office riding a wave of strident anti-Americanism. The second were the United States' commitments within its war on terrorism and related tensions in the Middle East that stretched U.S. strategic resources. Against this background North Korea saw an opportunity.

Pyongyang proceeded to do its utmost to make the international community, with the United States as the sole superpower, pay more attention to North Korea's dire economic straits by taking its geopolitical posture more seriously. It has been in bad shape for years, causing many foreign observers to anticipate its collapse—even as more hopeful South Koreans viewed these conditions as an opportunity to reach out to their fellow Koreans in an attempt to induce inter-Korean reconciliation through the provision of economic assistance that would, in turn, lead to the transformation of Pyongyang's policies. Despite some sporadic accomplishments, not much of genuine substance was being done. Given the Kim Jong-il regime's odd world view based on its *juche* ideology, Pyongyang decided to maximize its leverage amidst the multiple pressures upon its American foes by upping the ante in the form of several cage rattling endeavors.

From late 2002 through early 2003 North Korea consciously pushed the envelope. With one eye on the United States' decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty, Pyongyang announced its plans to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, inflaming tensions surrounding its violations of the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework. Then, with an eye on the Bush administration's development of a controversial preemptive strategic doctrine that diminishes the United States' reliance on the principles of deterrence, Pyongyang claimed the same prerogative—stating "preemptive attacks are not the exclusive right of the United States." Also, knowing full well that the armistice that had halted the Korean War had an ambiguous legacy in South Korea and that South Koreans were still hopeful that an ROK-DPRK "Agreement on Reconciliation, *Non-Aggression*, Exchanges & Cooperation" (emphasis added) that went into effect in 1992 is fully viable, Pyongyang pushed the non-aggression pact theme vis-a-vis the United States. North Korea had to know this idea would resonate positively among South Korea's progressive leaders. Given the long-standing American aversion to unenforceable international agreements to outlaw war that American skeptics consider to be utopian, Pyongyang presumably knew this was a non-starter for the United States, but pushed it in order to embarrass Washington conservatives and complicate U.S. relations with Seoul's more idealistic liberal leaders.

All of these maneuvers were compounded by a series of North Korean military provocations—including violations of the DMZ air space, missile tests into the East Sea, and pursuit of a U.S. reconnaissance plane in international air space. Most observers of North Korea anticipate these military provocations will continue and may well be escalated. While it is clear that North Korea's approach to international affairs is motivated by its economic vulnerabilities that are undermining its strategic assets, those weaknesses do not prevent it from being a major threat to stability in Asia via such brinkmanship. As such it poses an enormous challenge to U.S. policy in the region.

Arguably the greatest danger is North Korea's perception that contemporary U.S. strategic policy increasingly is in the hands of neo-conservatives who intend to deal with North Korea after achieving 'regime change' in Iraq—either by toppling the DPRK via sanctions or via preemptive military strikes aimed at eliminating its nuclear capabilities. The accuracy of this perception is debatable, but North Korean analysts who follow the American policy debate in the major media will have found prominent examples of U.S. neo-conservatives advocating a more assertive U.S. policy toward North Korea.<sup>[1]</sup> North Korean analysts of U.S. policy-making, who inform the views of their leaders in Pyongyang, cannot have missed the U.S. media's extensive coverage of American neo-conservatives' impact upon U.S. strategy toward Iraq. North Korean anxieties in that regard were unlikely to have been calmed by repeated reassurances from the White House that the United States "has no intention of invading North Korea." The more a ground force, conventionally armed "invasion" is disavowed, the more the North Koreans seem to be convinced the United States has other military plans for a preemptive attack. Although the details of this North Korean perspective have not received much attention in the United States, they have appeared in the press. The DPRK Foreign Ministry's Deputy Director, Ri Pyong-gap said—using the phrase noted above—"The United States says that after Iraq, we are next, but we have our own countermeasures. Preemptive attacks are not the exclusive right of the United States." And the KCNA, North Korea's news agency, noted "the U.S. intention to make a preemptive strike at [North Korea's] nuclear facilities." North Korea's perceptions of U.S. motives clearly are open to serious question because they may reflect the regime's paranoia, but that does not diminish their salience for the Northeast Asian threat environment.

North Korea's perceptions of American motivations and U.S. strategic intentions toward the DPRK also should be taken more seriously because of the apparent impact they have had among South Koreans as a result of Pyongyang's appeals to pan-Korean solidarity. Although South Korean officials are well aware that North Korea long has sought to drive wedges between the United States and the ROK, and routinely discount such efforts, Pyongyang's recent appeals seem to be reaching a more amenable South Korean audience. Partly because of sporadic South Korean anti-American sentiments that feed ambiguity about U.S. interests regarding Korea, and partly because of South Korean unease about the Bush administration's usage of the "axis of evil" metaphor with attendant fears that the United States will successively pursue "regime change" in each member of the axis, North Korea's message is effective among a sizable proportion of South Koreans. Because of South Korean fears about the impact U.S. military action against North Korea almost certainly would have on the ROK, South Koreans have become more critical of what is perceived as a U.S. tendency toward unilateralism. Against this background South Korea's new president, Roh Moo-hyun, shortly before taking office observed "Koreans should stand together, although things will get difficult when the United States bosses us around." And, after he took office President Roh, as part of a campaign to encourage the United States to pursue a bilateral dialogue process with North Korea, urged the United States "not to go too far" in its pressures to resolve the nuclear problem. His Unification Minister, Jeong Se-hyun, elaborated on that approach when he asked "How can the U.S. ignore South Korea and go against our will in pursuing its North Korean policy?"

Because of such anxieties about North Korea, and their ability to disrupt U.S.-ROK harmony, there is great risk that North Korea will try to take advantage of the United States being stretched thin during war in Iraq, by escalating its brinkmanship. Taking a provocative military step that could lead to a second front war may well be seen by Pyongyang as a way to compel the United

States to negotiate bilaterally on North Korea's terms. Such circumstances could easily get out of control—escalating to a full scale war that could be far more daunting than the situation in Iraq. Pyongyang will not necessarily wait until the United States wraps thing up in Iraq and can turn its full attention—diplomatically or militarily—to North Korea. Although the United States seems poised to cope with more North Korean reckless brinkmanship in the heat of war with Iraq, Pyongyang may well take advantage of the United States being stretched thin to use its own preemptive preemption strategy. In this sense North Korea represents a profoundly serious threat to world peace.

One way out of this potential disaster would be for the United States to recognize and accept the ways Pyongyang's bid for a bilateral dialogue process with Washington meshes with Seoul's objectives. South Korea's long-standing aspirations for regional multilateralism aimed at Korean reconciliation and reunification is predicated on providing North Korea with the same level of bilateral connections that South Korea has had for years as a result of the success of the ROK's late Cold War *nordpolitik* "cross recognition" plan. This enabled Seoul to use its newly established bilateral ties with China and Russia to reinforce its existing ties with the United States and Japan in order to strengthen multilateralism designed to induce moderation in North Korea.

The origins of this evolving conceptual framework are significant for the current U.S. administration. This South Korean paradigm's roots are partially in the approach the previous Bush administration took toward post-Cold War limited multilateralism based on a foundation of bilateralism. That approach is what caused so much consternation for the Kim Dae-jung government when Henry Kissinger, in a March 2001 *Washington Post* column, advised the current Bush administration "Pyongyang must be convinced that the road to Washington leads through Seoul and not the other way around." Secretary Kissinger revived this approach in another *Washington Post* column after President Roh took office. This approach is contrary to how former President Kim and current President Roh Moo-hyun visualize achieving a positive U.S.-North Korea dialogue process intended to reduce tensions and encourage the DPRK to join in a multilateral engagement process designed to facilitate inter-Korean peaceful reconciliation. In short, a genuine solution may be "the other way around," despite President Bush's well intended emphasis on diplomatic multilateralism at his March 6 press conference.

U.S.-North Korea bilateral negotiations can be integral to broader multilateral talks fostering tension reduction and inter-Korean reconciliation. North Korea continues to press for a non-aggression pact from the United States, despite its 'poison pill' qualities among the intended American policy-making audience. Nonetheless, if one juxtaposes North Korea's desires for ousting a U.S. armed presence from Korea and American desires for eliminating North Korea's threat potentials—especially its weapons of mass destruction—these desires could be ground for a consensus providing a de facto security guarantee. In exchange for verifiable North Korean demobilization of most of its conventional forces and elimination of its WMD, the United States can offer reciprocal removal of *all* U.S. forces from Korea, enabling both sides to get what they want from each other. Equally important, such a bilateral exchange will incite mutual confidence building, facilitating North Korea's regime transformation within a multilateral effort to bring North and South Korea together en route to national unification.

Instead of running the risks so apparent in the current environment, it would be much more prudent for the United States to innovatively utilize South Korea's approach to coping with North Korea. Rather than impeding our South Korean ally's diplomatic agenda in ways that aggravate anti-Americanism among South Koreans, it would be far better if Washington adopted Seoul's approach to defusing the current round of nuclear crises and treated U.S.-North Korean bilateral negotiations as part of the foundation for multilateralism intended to mitigate North Korea's threat potentials and be a catalyst for it to live in harmony with its neighbors.

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## References

1. For a cross-section of such perspectives during a formative phase of U.S.-ROK policy making, see: Ju Yong-jung, "[US Hawk \[Richard Perle\] Warns Not to Rule Out Military Option](#)," *Chosun Ilbo*, December 18, 2002; Max Boot, "Korean Crisis Reveals U.S. War Flaws," *USA Today*, January 8, 2003; Charles Krauthammer, "Korean Follies," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2003; and William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "[North Korea Goes South](#)," *The Weekly Standard*, January 20, 2003.