

South Korea's Squeeze Play

South Korea is the neighbor of North Korea with the most to lose if diplomacy fails and current tensions escalate to military conflict. Although President Roh Moo-hyun's administration often seems paralyzed and bewildered, the stakes involved and the pressure on Seoul to effectively influence the situation could not be higher. Nevertheless, under certain circumstances, South Korean policy decisions may very well still help determine the outcome of the current stalemate. As an independent actor, Seoul's options are almost nonexistent, as it has been and remains trapped between its obligations to the bilateral alliance with the United States and its efforts to improve relations with North Korea. Nevertheless, the Republic of Korea (ROK) may choose to play a crucial role as an honest broker, both on its own and through enhanced cooperation with China, by enticing, advising, and cajoling its alliance partner in Washington to help resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

Times have changed since the days of former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy. Much of the hope and progress that surrounded the policy at its inception has cooled as tensions have mounted. The nuclear crisis poses a direct threat to gains in the inter-Korean relationship following the 2000 inter-Korean summit and undermines many of the premises that laid the foundation for the Sunshine Policy. Yet, the most important and frustrating effect of the nuclear crisis on inter-Korean reconciliation efforts is that Seoul has been forced to cede back to Washington the leading role Kim had carved out as the primary driver in shaping the direction and focus of the inter-Korean relationship and in managing regional relations.

Scott Snyder is a senior associate at the Asia Foundation and the Pacific Forum/CSIS.

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Today, remnants of Kim's efforts can be recognized in Roh's Peace and Prosperity Policy. The escalating North Korean nuclear crisis has derailed some of its principles, however, and Roh has remained focused on domestic concerns, thus far being unable to provide the type of international leadership and focus on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) that was offered by then-President Kim. In addition, Roh labors under the widespread presumption that the U.S.-ROK alliance is deeply troubled, despite ongoing close coordination between the United States and South Korea both on the North Korean nuclear issue and the most complex reordering of the U.S. military presence in decades. These circumstances further limit South Korea's capacity to influence a U.S. approach to North Korea. One ironic effect of this situation is that South Korea's boldest and seemingly best options for enhancing its influence and contributing toward a solution to the nuclear crisis might involve attempts by Seoul to combine its leverage and influence on North Korea with that of China in pursuit of a diplomatic breakthrough.

Such a strategy holds big risks for the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance. It risks confirming the perception of many in Washington that South Korean allies are flirting with the enemy and, by acting as mediators or honest brokers, are betraying the spirit of the alliance. It also risks the likelihood that any negotiated deal involving North Korea that fails to meet Washington's standards or falls short of full "regime transformation" will further heighten political tensions between Washington and Seoul and risks being the target of political blame. Yet, short of completely ceding the response to the North Korean nuclear crisis to a distracted superpower ally with differing global priorities and accepting its inability to shape the future of the Korean peninsula, this may be the only remaining policy option for South Koreans, who seek some form of autonomous action to mitigate the negative fallout of a potential military confrontation and increasingly distrust the U.S. willingness to do everything possible to avoid a military confrontation or destabilization of North Korea as the only ways to resolve the North Korean nuclear standoff.

Peace and Prosperity Is Not All Sunshine

Since October 2002, the second North Korean nuclear crisis has been a direct and unwelcome challenge to the premises underlying Kim's Sunshine Policy, initiated in 1998. The Sunshine Policy abandoned a policy of containment of North Korea, promised not to pursue its absorption, and focused on opening and expanding inter-Korean economic, political, and cultural ties. A critical prerequisite for this engagement policy was to allay suspicions surrounding North Korean compliance with its nuclear obliga-

tions under the 1994 Agreed Framework. When U.S. inspections of a suspect nuclear weapons site near the North Korean village of Keumchangri in 1998 and 1999 failed to produce evidence of covert production, Kim was able to support unprecedented South Korean tourist visits to Mount Kumgang in 1999, a first step in developing inter-Korean economic relations and breaking down political walls between the two sides. The North also received hundreds of millions of dollars via the Hyundai group as practical evidence that South Korea had abandoned its hostile intent. This interaction led to a historic inter-Korean summit meeting between North Korean and South Korean top leaders in June 2000, which resulted in an inter-Korean Joint Declaration outlining further practical steps toward enhanced inter-Korean economic, political, and cultural exchanges and cooperation. In the summit's aftermath, Kim pushed forward plans for the development of a joint economic zone at the North Korean town of Kaesong, located just a few miles north of the demilitarized zone. Revelations in October 2002 that North Korea was in fact pursuing covert nuclear activities, however, directly challenged arguments that economic engagement and expanded political dialogue would moderate North Korean behavior and enhance the security environment by increasing the North's dependence on South Korea for its economic survival. Some even considered that Pyongyang had used the shower of economic inducements, from opening to official contacts with Seoul, to finance its covert uranium-enrichment efforts.

When Roh took office in February 2003, he inherited Kim's Sunshine Policy as well as the responsibility to respond to North Korea's rapid movement toward breaking its Agreed Framework nuclear constraints. In the months prior to Roh's inauguration, North Korea announced that it was expelling inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency, withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and restarting the five-megawatt graphite-moderated research reactor that had produced the plutonium at the heart of the 1993–1994 nuclear crisis. It also took steps to reprocess fuel rods that had been removed from the reactor at the height of the first crisis, expanding North Korean access to as much as 20–30 kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium—enough to produce an additional four to six nuclear weapons. Having campaigned on a platform that emphasized a more equal relationship with the United States, a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis, and a pledge to perpetuate Kim's Sunshine Policy, in his inaugural address on February 25, 2003, Roh unveiled several

South Korea may very well still help determine the outcome of the current stalemate.

principles for dealing with the North that came to be known as the Peace and Prosperity Policy. Roh sought to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue peacefully through dialogue, asserting that the South could never condone the North's development of nuclear weapons and calling on North Korea to relinquish its pursuit. He also pledged to "seek active international cooperation on the premise that South and North Korea are the two main actors in inter-Korean relations."¹

In the months following Roh's inauguration, the core priorities under his Peace and Prosperity Policy gradually became clear. Although Roh inherited many of Kim's aspirations and benefited from the momentum that followed the inter-Korean Joint Declaration in June 2000, Roh's policy has been distinct from that of his predecessor in its implementation. The major goal of Kim's presidency was to achieve inter-Korean reconciliation, but Roh's fundamental preoccupation has been with domestic political reform. Roh has been focused on introducing greater transparency and accountability to the political system and fighting the entrenched power of South Korea's traditional elite class. Promoting reconciliation with North Korea has in practice become a second-tier issue, often been viewed through the lens of domestic politics rather than as a priority in and of itself. The Peace and Prosperity Policy's implementation has been paralyzed and overshadowed by the nuclear issue and politicized by South Korean domestic debates on the future of the U.S. alliance.

Two contradictory imperatives have shaped implementation of the Peace and Prosperity Policy under the Roh administration. The Ministry of National Unification has continued to pursue the same efforts at inter-Korean reconciliation through economic and people-to-people exchanges that it initiated under Kim's direction following the June 2000 summit. At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) has emerged as a more active player on the North Korean nuclear issue, managing and coordinating policy for the six-party talks begun in August 2003. The Roh administration and its National Security Council have by default pursued a bifurcated policy toward North Korea, attempting to maintain inter-Korean exchanges through the Ministry of National Unification while supporting MOFAT efforts to coordinate and consult through the U.S. alliance and with other partners in the six-party dialogue to promote a negotiated settlement of the crisis.

Practical Limitations to Peace and Prosperity

The negative environment created by the nuclear crisis has certainly affected the Roh administration's approach to the North, but several other factors have also limited the development of the inter-Korean relationship in recent years. First, Roh decided early in his administration to allow the

investigation of cash payments allegedly made or authorized by Kim administration senior officials to North Korea in connection with the inter-Korean summit. The investigation revealed publicly that \$100 million in cash had passed directly to the DPRK on the occasion of the summit (with up to \$500 million in related payments via Hyundai and other channels), leading to the imprisonment of several senior South Korean officials.² Roh's decision to conduct this public investigation increased the transparency of the inter-Korean relationship and constrained the possibility of continued (or future) under-the-table payments to North Korea, yet it did so at the expense of alienating Pyongyang and cooling its interest in continuing inter-Korean dialogue.

Second, the North Korean regime has until recently firmly rebuffed all South Korean efforts to raise the nuclear issue through inter-Korean dialogue channels, reiterating that it will only address the issue bilaterally with the United States.³ North Korea's rejection represented a setback for the Roh administration, which was under public pressure to demonstrate its capacity as an actor to achieve South Korean interests in peace and reconciliation and underscored Pyongyang's continued policy of marginalizing Seoul in its pursuit of a direct relationship with Washington. It also implicitly rebuffed one of the rationales for continued South Korean economic engagement with North Korea, as many South Korean analysts believed that it was the lack of inter-Korean dialogue channels that marginalized South Korea during U.S.-DPRK bilateral negotiations in 1994. Until newly appointed Unification Minister Chung Dong-young's mid-June meeting with Kim Jong-il, the North's unwillingness to take up the nuclear issue with South Korea suggested that Seoul's economic interaction with the North had not helped to enhance South Korea's influence on security issues critical to its interests.

Third, the Roh government blocked South Korean civic groups from participating in July 2004 ceremonies commemorating the tenth anniversary of the death of former North Korean leader Kim Il-sung and, weeks later, South Korea allowed charter flights of more than 467 North Korean refugees from Vietnam to Seoul. These moves raised suspicions among North Korean counterparts over the direction of South Korean policy and led to a suspension of the inter-Korean dialogue between June 2004 and May 2005. The North Korean side went out of its way to express its frustration with Chung during December 2004 ceremonies to mark the opening of the Kaesong industrial zone, through which South Korean companies were invited to establish new plants

The hope and progress that initially surrounded the Sunshine Policy have cooled.

that would take advantage of low-cost North Korean labor, intentionally sending a low-level representative who walked out during Chung's presentation.⁴

Fourth, in light of the ongoing nuclear crisis and lack of inter-Korean dialogue, South Korean officials rejected many North Korean requests for expanded humanitarian assistance and economic exchanges, withholding aid as a source of leverage to bring North Korea back to the dialogue table. The Roh administration did, however, resolve to continue exchanges that had been initiated prior to the onset of the nuclear crisis, including continuation of the Mount Kumgang tourist project and support for deliberate but limited progress in developing the Kaesong industrial zone. Inter-Korean trade and aid figures show a steady increase in economic assistance to the North, but in the spring of 2005, South Korea refused to increase its government donation of fertilizer from 200,000 tons to 500,000 tons, despite North Korean requests for expanded support, until the North agreed to resume inter-Korean ministerial dialogue in June.⁵ Additionally, Roh's relative disinterest in inter-Korean affairs compared to his predecessor appears to have granted South Korean authorities more leeway to say no to North Korean "fishing expeditions" seeking high-technology inputs through the establishment of higher-end technology firms at Kaesong. South Korean officials deflected both of these persistent requests by citing limits on the pace of expansion as long as the nuclear issue remains a sticking point in North Korea's relations with the outside world.

Trapped in a Box

South Korea's policy options for influencing the current crisis are shaped primarily by its security alliance with the United States and the zero-sum nature of the U.S.–North Korean relationship, increasing South Korea's sense that it is marginalized and has no viable choices that will not strain the alliance or alienate the North Koreans. During the Cold War, South Korea and the United States coordinated policy toward the North in lockstep and resisted policies designed to drive a wedge between the two allies. In the mid-1990s, however, the first North Korean nuclear crisis revealed the beginnings of a post–Cold War divergence in the allies' priorities, as the U.S. focus shifted to global stability and counterproliferation while South Korean interests centered around maintaining regional stability and avoiding military conflict. At the height of the first crisis, even South Korean conservatives warned the United States against "fighting to the last Korean for the principle of nonproliferation."⁶ Seoul's primary fear was that the United States might abandon South Korean interests through independent, direct negotiations with North Korea. South Korea's hard-line president during

this time, Kim Young-sam, although noticeably concerned that the United States would compromise his country's interests, reluctantly acquiesced to the terms of the Agreed Framework as a *fait accompli* but regretted that the framework appeared to legitimize and prop up North Korea at a time when Kim Young-sam thought that the regime was vulnerable and unification through absorption was within reach.

During the second North Korean nuclear crisis, the roles have reversed. Today, the United States under President George W. Bush's administration is the bad cop, and the ROK is the good cop, continuing to pursue a policy of economic engagement toward North Korea despite mounting tensions. The fear among the South Korean public and many in the government is no longer U.S. abandonment of its interests in pursuit of a separate deal with North Korea, but entrapment in a military conflict precipitated at least in part by U.S. unwillingness to pursue a more flexible policy toward Pyongyang. It was perhaps hoped that a hard-line U.S. position might cause North Korea to look to the South for support or to use enhanced inter-Korean relations as a buffer, restraining in principle U.S. options. Instead, North Korea's unwillingness to respond to South Korean overtures until Kim Jong-il's June meeting with Chung has become yet another disappointing reminder of Seoul's dependency on the United States and a source of frustration that many South Koreans attribute to the U.S. hard-line policy toward Pyongyang.

Seoul has been forced to cede its role as the primary driver in the inter-Korean relationship.

The nature of South Korean domestic politics, which has deeply politicized the U.S.-ROK alliance and relations with North Korea as zero-sum in nature, reinforces the constraints on South Korea's policy choices. The perception is widespread that any action in favor of North Korea automatically diminishes the U.S.-ROK relationship, while any action in favor of the alliance will inevitably alienate North Korea. DPRK responses tend to reinforce this perception in an attempt to further marginalize South Korea as an independent policy actor in peninsular security affairs. As tensions in the U.S.-North Korean relationship escalate, it becomes even more difficult for South Korea to avoid choosing between the two sides, limiting South Korean options and reinforcing a sense of dependency on external factors beyond its control.

South Korea's perceptions of its available options are also influenced by the South Korean public's increasing demand and expectation that its government be a constructive player in resolving or ameliorating the crisis. In recent times, this public sentiment has pushed South Korea toward greater independence from the United States; at other times, such sentiment has

pushed the South Korean government to advocate policy options more actively within the alliance. For instance, the U.S. proposal that was tabled in the third round of six-party talks in June 2004 was derived from ideas originally mooted by the South Koreans in bilateral consultations. Seoul has also made persistent public and private efforts to encourage the United States to adopt a more flexible negotiating position as well as to convince it to come

Roh's fundamental preoccupation has been with domestic political reform.

back to the table after talks collapsed in June 2004. In the context of the six-party talks, this means that South Korea has felt the need to walk the fine line between simultaneously convincing the United States to show more flexibility and continuing to oppose North Korea's nuclear weapons development.⁷

Throughout the North Korean nuclear crisis, South Korean officials have pursued active working-level policy planning consultations focused on how to respond to North Korea. Even prior to the establishment of the six-party talks dialogue, the United States consulted with South Korean officials closely about whether to attend a meeting with the North Koreans hosted by China in April 2003, a precursor to the establishment of the six-party talks in August of that year. It was only after the Roh administration endorsed the meeting, despite the fact that North Korea had rejected South Korea as a participant in that initial consultation, that the Bush administration proceeded to meet with the North Koreans and Chinese in Beijing.

With the establishment of the six-party talks, the intensity of working-level policy consultations was heightened as South Korea, the United States, and Japan utilized regular trilateral coordination meetings originally established to promote policy coordination toward North Korea in the late 1990s, to coordinate their respective policy positions effectively. Despite numerous opportunities to coax the United States toward greater flexibility in its stance toward North Korea, South Korean officials have privately expressed frustration with the rigidity of the U.S. position while publicly maintaining a unified stance. Nonetheless, to the extent that the United States has shown flexibility in its approach to the six-party dialogue, it shows the marks of South Korea's quiet influence.

Identifying South Korean Options

What are South Korea's potential sources of leverage and the implications, benefits, and constraints on their potential use? As a secondary player in what remains primarily a U.S.–North Korean game, South Korea has varying degrees of

Table 1: South Korean Options for Influencing North Korea

	Carrots	Sticks
Bilateral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expanded economic aid • Regime survival guarantees (nonabsorption pledge) • Cultural exchanges • National cooperation (<i>minjok kongjo</i>) • Inter-Korean summit • Advocacy in favor of DPRK interests/balancing versus U.S. interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdraw economic cooperation • Active intent to destabilize North Korea • Resume legitimacy competition • Lobby against North Korea internationally • Overtly criticize North Korean governance/oppression of human rights
Multilateral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek “regional solution” through enhanced cooperation with China • Encourage lifting sanctions • Promote international investment (via Kaesong) • Coordinate “Marshall Plan” for DPRK, including North Korean access to international foreign investment • Acquiesce to “a sovereign, nuclear-capable” North Korea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforce U.S.-ROK alliance solidarity • Support UN Security Council measure on sanctions/quarantine • Support Proliferation Security Initiative • Coordinate aid reductions • Promote financial controls on North Korean assets abroad • Support UN human rights resolution on North Korea

leverage in two realms: economics—using either cooperation or sanctions toward North Korea in a bilateral or multilateral context—and politics—using either cooperation or containment to influence the quality of inter-Korean political relations. Table 1 outlines specific inducements and sanctions that South Korea might consider in a bilateral or multilateral context.

ECONOMICS: COOPERATION OR SANCTIONS

Seoul has used the threat of withholding or the promise of additional economic benefits as either stick or carrot at various times since the summit in 2000. In addition to the previously mentioned spring 2005 delay in responding to North Korean requests for fertilizer in the absence of inter-Korean dialogue, South Korea withheld economic assistance following a West Sea skirmish that cost the lives of several South Korean sailors in the summer of 2002 until the North Koreans expressed their regrets and resumed inter-Korean cooperation. Seoul has also limited expansion of the Kaesong industrial project in response to the atmosphere caused by the North Korean nuclear standoff.

Conversely, both Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun have held out the promise of substantially increased economic cooperation in energy, trade, and investment, not only from South Korea but also from the international community, as an inducement for peaceful coexistence with North Korea, for Pyongyang to return to the inter-Korean dialogue, and for North Korea to participate in various forms of inter-Korean exchange and cooperation. Many South Korean government officials and analysts apparently view cur-

South Korea's boldest option would be to combine its leverage and influence with China.

rent economic ties as an insurance policy that can lower or defer the political risks and economic costs to South Korea of heightened tensions or North Korea's sudden collapse or destabilization. To the extent that North Korea receives significant economic benefits from the South, engaging in hostile relations would be counterproductive. The South Korean government sees North Korea's regional integration and the normalization of economic relationships in the region as one of

the biggest payoffs that would accompany North Korea's regime survival and the diminution of regional tensions. South Korea sees the Kaesong Industrial Zone primarily as a beachhead for the advancement of South Korean economic interests in the North, but it also has promoted the zone as a possible starting point for expanded international investment in North Korea. Former president Kim has also publicly lobbied for international investment and loans to North Korea as well as normalization of U.S.–North Korean relations.⁸ South Korean officials have gone so far as to advocate a “mini-Marshall Plan” for North Korea.⁹

South Korean and U.S. analysts diverge over the extent to which inter-Korean economic engagement is sustainable while North Korea continues to develop its nuclear program. Many U.S. analysts question whether South Korea should be extending an economic lifeline that might serve indirectly to sustain the North Korean regime and its persistence as a military threat. These analysts wish to see the Roh administration reduce economic assistance as a tool to pressure and isolate the North further. Yet, any consideration of reducing South Korean economic assistance to the North has been inhibited by the South Korean public's continued support for economic engagement with North Korea, fears that the withdrawal of economic benefits from North Korea would eliminate prospects for further inter-Korean dialogue, and humanitarian concerns that innocent North Korean people would be the primary victims of sanctions that would heighten North Korea's isolation. In addition, South Korean analysts view economic assistance as a kind of pacifier, asserting that North Korea can be most danger-

ous, destabilizing, and irresponsible when it has nothing to lose. South Koreans are also concerned that reductions in inter-Korean economic assistance would serve only to increase China's political influence and that inordinate Chinese influence over North Korea may serve to thwart South Korea's goals of reconciliation and eventual reunification with North Korea. Despite the temptations of enhanced coordination with China, given the complementary nature of their respective preferred policy approaches toward the United States, the fear of further weakening or breaking the alliance with the United States and strategic distrust of China's ultimate intentions toward the Korean peninsula underscore the risks of any approach that aligns South Korean policy too closely with that of China.

POLITICS: COOPERATION OR CONTAINMENT

As successor to the Sunshine Policy, the Roh administration's Peace and Prosperity Policy already offers the incentive of political recognition and the promise of peaceful coexistence between North and South Korea. The intent of this policy has been to promote inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation through enhanced exchanges and cooperation. Yet, whether North Korea fully trusts the Roh administration's intentions is not clear. The DPRK has been reluctant to accord Roh the same treatment that was provided to Kim Dae-jung. The minister of national unification became the first senior Roh administration official to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in June 2005, more than two years after the Roh administration came into office.

Seoul sees risks in any approach that aligns South Korean policy with China.

Despite North Korean calls for national cooperation (*minjok kongjo*) to blunt U.S. influence on the stalemate and periodic calls among progressive South Koreans for Roh to pursue an inter-Korean summit or to send a special envoy to the North in an attempt to settle the crisis, the Roh administration has been reticent to pursue such tactics. It has been either unable or unwilling to meet the North Korean financial demands that would likely accompany such a meeting and/or has doubted that the North Korean leadership would be prepared to deliver sufficient cooperation to justify their effort. South Korea's National Security Strategy, issued in February 2004, did not present new or more progressive ideas for advancing inter-Korean reconciliation, instead embracing the eventual implementation of institutionalized exchanges, cooperation, and confidence building through both the June 2000 Joint Declaration and the 1992 Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Exchanges, and Cooperation frameworks. The latter agreement is

widely regarded as a foundational document for pursuing the institutionalization of practical reconciliation measures, including the establishment of military confidence-building and arms reduction measures on a reciprocal basis as part of a process designed to achieve peaceful coexistence.¹⁰ North Korea has been conspicuously silent on the Basic Agreement and may envisage a different form of eventual settlement, either through its long-standing

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proposals for a confederal arrangement between the two Koreas or perhaps through some other as-yet-undefined formula for managing inter-Korean relations.

If tensions over the North Korean nuclear issue continue to rise and if the prolonged stalemate in inter-Korean dialogue continues, it is possible to imagine a more active debate within South Korea over the wisdom and practicality of the strategy of peaceful coexist-

ence. Early criticisms of the Sunshine Policy focused on reciprocity and criticized North Korea for its relative lack of a response to South Korean generosity as well as for lack of progress in addressing outstanding security issues that are necessary to achieve peaceful coexistence in practical terms. Although current South Korean public opinion polls show strong support for continued engagement with North Korea,¹¹ their support could wear thin if no progress results. If prospects for inter-Korean cooperation erode and North Korea comes to be seen as a direct threat, for example, in the wake of a nuclear test or in the context of heightened North Korean extortion or bullying tactics, South Korea could revert to a containment policy, directly criticize the Kim Jong-il regime, and renew international lobbying against North Korea. Absent a dramatic, defining event, however, such a scenario seems quite unlikely. The Roh administration would likely be highly reluctant to utilize leverage against North Korea to the extent of abandoning a reconciliation-focused policy.

In this respect, the initiation of the Sunshine Policy and the inter-Korean summit have had profound effects on a South Korean public that yearns to end inter-Korean confrontation and no longer sees North Korea's threat as deriving from its military strength, even strength derived from the threat of its nuclear weapons development. Instead, South Koreans see the North's threat deriving from its weakness and thus fear the economic costs and consequences of North Korea's economic destabilization and possible collapse far more than the risk of renewed conflict with North Korea. The other effect of the inter-Korean summit was to expand inter-Korean exchanges and to enhance feelings of identification and brotherhood with the suffering of the North Korean people.

Carving Out a South Korean Role

South Korea's greatest opportunities to enhance its leverage depend on the extent to which its counterparts in the United States and North Korea perceive that South Korea is cooperating with one country at the expense of the other. The specific policy pursued is likely to be less important than whether it serves to enhance coordination under the U.S.-ROK alliance or occurs outside of that context. South Korean economic and political tools to influence North Korea are ultimately affected as much by how they are perceived in Pyongyang and Washington as by the substance and effectiveness of the tools themselves. One of the greatest sources of frustration within South Korea, especially when tensions escalate, is the relative lack of independent options or leverage available. The South Korean public's desire to see tensions between the United States and North Korea resolved and the perception that the Bush administration has been excessively and needlessly provocative in its hard line toward North Korea, which could entrap South Korea in a potential conflict rather than enhance its stability, exacerbate this problem.

Any effort by South Korea to ease strategic tensions independent of the U.S.-ROK alliance requires North Korea's cooperation. South Korea has at least two options for "defection" from this alliance framework that might temporarily enhance South Korean leverage. Both entail considerable strategic risks. The first would be to pursue another inter-Korean summit and attempt to make a deal with Kim Jong-il without prior coordination with the United States. This approach would most likely have severe ramifications for the future of the alliance and seems highly unlikely to produce a solution that the United States would be willing to accept.

A second option that South Korea might consider would be to enhance cooperation with China to pursue a truly regional solution—a settlement of the nuclear issue between North Korea and its neighbors independent of the United States. Despite highly complementary Chinese and South Korean views on the North Korean nuclear crisis, North Korea's focus on bilateral talks with the United States make such an approach unlikely to succeed. North Korea's consistent approach for the past decade has been to link willingness to abandon its nuclear development efforts to normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States, something that only the United States can provide. Sino-South Korean coordination to balance against the United States would promote a settlement at the expense of the U.S.-ROK alliance and appears to be a relatively risky strategy for South Korea at this stage.

In the absence of anything more than tactical reciprocity by the North in an attempt to draw South Korea away from cooperation in the U.S.-ROK alliance, the choices for Seoul are limited. Although South Korean options for

independent action appear to become more limited as the situation escalates, how South Korea plays its role at each stage, including how it deals with the temptations of defection and whether the United States and South Korea will be able to maintain their alliance despite North Korea's efforts to take advantage of their differences, will be critical to determining the outcome.

Notes

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