



A Chance to Rein In North Korea

By Nicholas Eberstadt

With a newly elected South Korean president willing to join the United States in standing up to North Korea, the Bush administration now has a unique opportunity to put pressure on Kim Jong Il to abandon his country's nuclear program and desist from its human rights abuses. In this article, AEI's Nicholas Eberstadt asks whether the administration will seize the opportunity.

The December 19, 2007, presidential election in South Korea presages a sea change in that key U.S. ally's policies toward North Korea. The resounding defeat of the candidates who favored more of Seoul's all-carrot, no-stick approach to Kim Jong Il presents Washington with a horizon of new possibilities for reining in Asia's most troublesome dictator. The question now is whether the Bush foreign policy team will be adept enough to seize this opportunity.

The landslide vote, to be sure, was in large measure a rebuke of President Roh Moo-hyun's inept handling of the economy and polarizing domestic policies. Yet, taken together, the candidates who opposed the "Peace and Prosperity" policy (originally dubbed "Sunshine") toward North Korea in last Wednesday's election received more than 63 percent of the vote—compared with 35 percent for all those who approved of it. Why the widespread discontent with "sunshine"? Because what had started as a policy of reconciliation with the North had degenerated in practice into almost reflexive appeasement of the "Dear Leader," Kim Jong Il. Unsurprisingly, many ordinary Koreans found that kind of "sunshine" too distasteful, too embarrassing, and just a bit too dangerous.

Nicholas Eberstadt is the Henry Wendt Scholar in Political Economy at AEI. A version of this article appeared in the *Washington Post* on December 26, 2007.

South Koreans winced as their government repeatedly abstained from United Nations votes criticizing North Korea for human rights abuses. They grumbled as they saw their tax-funded "economic cooperation" projects with the North devolve into an economic lifeline for a still-hostile government in Pyongyang. And they worried as the undisguised rift with Washington over the North Korean threat created unmistakable strains in the vital U.S.–South Korean alliance.

South Korea, in short, is ready for a new and more critical approach to engagement with North Korea—and this is just what president-elect Lee Myung-bak has promised. Lee is no Cold Warrior: he styles himself as a pragmatist who judges by results. Since his election, he has signaled that restoring the health of the U.S.–South Korean alliance and achieving a genuine denuclearization of the North Korean regime are to be top foreign policy priorities. He has also served notice to Pyongyang that it can no longer count on Seoul for a "see-no-evil" spin on events in the North—much less unconditional handouts.

There seems to be great promise in this new attitude toward "engagement with the North"—to say nothing of new vistas for genuine cooperation between the United States and South Korea on the multifaceted North Korea problem.

With Seoul finally willing to criticize Kim Jong Il's gulag "paradise," for example, an effective worldwide human rights campaign in the name of

the North Korean people comes much closer to reality. With a South Korean government that no longer insists on sitting on the sidelines, the Proliferation Security Initiative to interdict illicit North Korean revenue (from drug-running, counterfeiting, weapons sales, and the like) stands to be much more effective—and that much more

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costly to Kim Jong Il. No longer a “runaway ally,” South Korea could at last join with the United States and Japan in a common policy to bring real pressure on North Korea for real denuclearization—and to impose real penalties for noncompliance.

Today, China can depict its support for the North as joining a South Korean bandwagon. Without the cover of a seemingly all-forgiving South Korean government, China would finally be forced to make hard choices about the Kim Jong Il regime—within the confines of the six-party talks and beyond. But is the Bush foreign policy team ready to make use of this long-desired diplomatic windfall from South Korea?

For a variety of reasons (among them the Republicans’ loss of Congress in 2006 and the situation in Iraq), the Bush team all but abandoned its previous posture toward North Korea at the end of last year. These days, the administration appears intent on producing only “good

news” on the North Korean front. “Good news” about North Korea, for its part, seems to have been defined down to meaning a nuclear deal with Kim Jong Il—irrespective of the fine print. If this sounds implausible, consider the actual record of U.S. diplomacy with North Korea over the past twelve months.

Early this year, the U.S. government quietly agreed to help “unfreeze” more than \$24 million in suspect North Korean funds from bank accounts in Macau. Why? Because North Korean nuclear negotiators threatened not to return to the table until their Dear Leader got his money back.

After returning to the six-party talks, the North Korean side then inked an “action plan” in February that promised to provide an accounting of its previous nuclear activities within two months. Here we are at the end of the year with no accounting—and, so far as one can tell, no worries from the White House either.

In September, word emerged that Israeli jets had leveled a facility in Syria that, from the air, looked a lot like the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. The Syrian site was reputedly being developed with North Korean assistance. Yet under Washington’s new rules of engagement with Pyongyang, the Bush team has scarcely whispered a word about this mysterious—and potentially grave—international incident.

And by the way: Have you heard from President Bush’s special envoy for human rights in North Korea over the past year? Neither has anybody else.

The election in South Korea should serve as a wake-up call to the Bush administration. With willing new partners in the wings in Seoul, President Bush still has the chance to register some real gains for his legacy on North Korea—and, more important, for the security of the free world.