



Bush's "Comprehensive Approach" to Dialogue with Pyongyang

by Ralph A. Cossa

It was with some trepidation that Koreans on both sides of the DMZ watched the Bush administration come to power, given the more "hard line" position many Republican Congress members had taken over the years regarding North Korea. However, the outcome of the administration's finally completed Korea policy is, on the whole, quite balanced and not significantly different in terms of overall objectives from those pursued by the Clinton administration.

The new policy was announced by President Bush in early June, just prior to the Washington visit of ROK Foreign Minister Han Seung-soo and further spelled out by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly in congressional testimony later that month. However, even before the policy review was completed, comments by senior administration officials, including the president himself, strongly suggested that we would see more continuity than change in Washington's dealings on Peninsula issues (including U.S. humanitarian assistance to the North, which continued even during the review process).

The U.S. policy review, in many respects, merely confirmed what President Bush had told President Kim at their Washington summit three months earlier; namely that Washington will continue to support the Sunshine Policy, the Agreed Framework, and the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) process with Seoul and Tokyo. Bush also indicated his willingness to resume Washington's dialogue with Pyongyang on a broad range of issues, including missiles.

The main difference in approach seems to be a U.S. desire for a more comprehensive dialogue. As Secretary Kelly spelled out during his House testimony, "the president has directed us to undertake serious discussions with North Korea on a broad agenda, including improved implementation of the Agreed Framework, a verifiable end to the DPRK's missile production and export programs, and a less threatening conventional military posture." Unlike the past administration, which favored a "step by step approach," Washington now plans to take a "comprehensive approach," to address the many elements that comprise Peninsula and regional security and will try to make progress simultaneously on as many issues as possible ... provided, of course, that Pyongyang is willing to cooperate.

This broad approach is quite understandable, given that one of the primary complaints logged against the Clinton administration in its dealings with Pyongyang (by many South Koreans and Americans regardless of political affiliation) was that it seemed to approach the Peninsula as a non-proliferation problem rather than as a regional security problem with an

important proliferation dimension. Halting proliferation is not an end in itself, but a means toward the broader goal of creating a peaceful, more stable Peninsula where, prior to unification (which all seem to agree is a long way off), the North and South can peacefully coexist.

The Bush administration has indicated that it will try to persuade the North to reduce its massive conventional forces and otherwise engage in military confidence building measures (CBMs) to achieve "a less threatening conventional military posture." This was a goal of the Clinton administration as well - it was to be a topic in the Four-Party Talks, but Pyongyang has refused, since August 1999, to resume this dialogue. It appears equally unlikely that Pyongyang will put its conventional forces on the table during future discussions with the U.S., at least in the initial stages, but it is fully appropriate for the U.S. (and South Korea) to focus on this issue. Of note, the need for mutual force reductions and Peninsula CBMs was acknowledged during former President Jimmy Carter's 1994 dialogue with then North Korean leader Kim Il-sung. More important, Peninsula CBMs were at the heart of the 1991/92 North-South Korea Basic Agreement, so this is hardly a new issue.

The press has also been full of speculation about American desires to change the terms of the Agreed Framework. But the Bush administration is firmly on record supporting the current agreement as long as Pyongyang also honors its commitments (which it is thus far done). However, the real moment of truth for Pyongyang and for the Agreed Framework in general is the requirement for the North to come into full compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) prior to the delivery of any sensitive components of the promised light water reactors (LWRs). This requires detailed inspection to determine past accountability, a process which some speculate could take two to four years. Thus far, Pyongyang has not allowed the IAEA to begin this task - the IAEA's most recent attempt, in May, was once again rejected by the DPRK. Thus, North Korea has only itself to blame if additional delays occur in the completion of this project.

In the meantime, the U.S. and the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) are honoring their part of the bargain. Construction activity continues on the LWR site (even though striking North Korean workers had to be replaced with Uzbek laborers) and KEDO continues to provide North Korea with 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil annually as compensation for shutting down its Yongbyon reactor. These deliveries are scheduled to continue until the first LWR becomes operational, making North Korea's demands for compensation if the project is delayed doubly inappropriate: first because it is already being compensated through the heavy fuel oil deliveries and second because it has been at least as much at fault for delays experienced thus far.

Meanwhile, high-level North-South talks, suspended by Pyongyang in March, have yet to be reinstated. Many speculated at the time that the North's decision was in response to the Bush administration's "time out" - Kim Jong-il is reported to have said in May that he was waiting for the Bush administration to complete its Korean Peninsula policy review before setting a date for his visit to Seoul. However, the U.S. willingness to resume dialogue has not been met with DPRK willingness finally to set a date for Kim Jong-il's long-overdue return visit. Neither has Pyongyang resumed its high-level dialogue with Seoul, raising questions as to whether Bush's policy review was the reason or merely a convenient excuse behind the lull in North-South dialogue.

In the final analysis, it will be North Korea's actions, and in particular Pyongyang's willingness (or lack thereof) to continue its dialogue with Seoul, that will be the principle determinant of U.S. policy on the Peninsula.

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