



North Korea's Options after Sept. 11

by L. Gordon Flake

While world attention following the horrific events of Sept. 11 has focused upon Osama bin Laden, Afghanistan, and the first phase of the war on terrorism, other nations listed on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, including North Korea, have had ample cause to lie low and keep their heads down.

Even prior to the events of Sept. 11, North Korea found itself facing an increasingly constricted foreign policy environment. The heady - if somewhat unrealistic - expectations born of the frenetic pace of diplomatic activity in the waning days of the Clinton administration quickly faded in the early days of the Bush administration. While the differences between the Bush and Clinton policies were far greater in perception than in reality, the change in administration and the resulting review of U.S. policy toward North Korea clearly served to slow the pace of U.S.-DPRK relations. The prospects for a missile deal and a visit by President Clinton to Pyongyang were not nearly as certain as the public may have been led to believe. At the same time, the Bush administration was clearly not prepared to or interested in hitting the ground running at the pace set by its predecessor. Unfortunately, far too much attention has been placed upon the new U.S. policy to the exclusion of the more important politics and policies in both Pyongyang and Seoul. The Bush administration became a convenient scapegoat for the slowdown in inter-Korean ties. This is despite the fact that inter-Korean talks had already halted prior to the U.S. election and despite an apparent paralysis in Pyongyang, matched with growing domestic political challenges in Seoul to Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy." While U.S. policy toward the North is undeniably a factor in inter-Korean relations, it is only one factor among many. Questions of pace and capacity - how far and how fast both Pyongyang and Seoul are prepared to and capable of moving - are arguably far more important.

The past three years on the Korean Peninsula have been relatively quiet and free from major crisis. While crisis provocation has long been one of the primary tools of North Korean negotiating behavior, in the years since the 1999 Perry Report prepared by former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry and, perhaps more important, since the election of President Kim Dae-jung, North Korea has essentially put its major cards into play. This is not to say that North Korea has bargained away its nuclear program, its missile program, or even its conventional military threat. However, it can no longer provoke a crisis in any of these areas without paying a price. Any movement on the nuclear front would jeopardize the construction of light-water nuclear reactors by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). A resumption of missile tests would threaten North Korea's new diplomatic relations with the European Union and other nations, and, as it did in 1998, risk the loss of critical Japanese support for KEDO. Even incidents along the DMZ are no longer without cost as they would certainly affect

the North-South dialogue and, more important, resource flows from the South. In short, North Korea's traditional tactics are more constricted than ever before.

To complicate matters further, the Bush administration, while hardly hostile, has been relatively indifferent to North Korea. While the most senior Bush administration officials have repeatedly stated the U.S. willingness to meet with North Korea "anytime, anywhere, and without preconditions," North Korea has petulantly demanded that the U.S. return to a negotiating position "identical" to that held by the Clinton administration. North Korea has become used to being courted and cajoled into attending meetings and participating in negotiations. However, absent an imminent threat, and with other pressing issues demanding attention, neither the U.S. nor Japan appears to be in any hurry to resume a dialogue with North Korea.

Herein lies the conundrum for North Korea: how to induce the U.S. to the negotiating table when the U.S. is no longer courting meetings in earnest when traditional means of attracting attention are likely to be counter to North Korean interests.

The challenge faced by North Korea before Sept. 11 has been greatly compounded by the horrible events of that day. If North Korean provocations were likely to harm North Korea's interests before 9-11, then, in a world where countries have been asked to choose sides in a war on terrorism, any incident or provocation would entail a far greater risk of retaliation and escalation. In short, it is not a good time for a country to be on the terrorism list. Now is not a time for North Korea to continue its traditional practice of bluster, threaten, and demand. North Korea, however, has never been inclined to slip quietly into the night. If the past decade is any indication, what North Korea fears most is to be ignored and left to wallow in its own problems. Its continuing economic crisis, coupled with an ongoing and possibly worsening food shortage, means that North Korea is more dependent than ever before not only upon the largess of the international community, but specifically upon aid and assistance from the U.S., Japan, China, and South Korea.

Ostensibly, there is much that North Korea could have done to avoid its current predicament. The many rounds of negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea on the removal of North Korea from the list of states that sponsor terrorism must seem like missed opportunities. Though North Korea quickly relayed a condolence note through the Swedish Embassy in Pyongyang shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks, the formal government statement did not come until two days later and only then in the form of a KCNA spokesman answering a question on the matter by reiterating the same statement that the DPRK released following the African embassy bombings several years before. Once again, North Korea has done the absolute minimum required, but failed to take advantage of an opportunity to advance its relationship with the United States. At a minimum, given the scale of the Sept. 11 attacks and the predicament that

North Korea finds itself in, one might have expected a more forceful denunciation of terrorism coming from the mouth of either the titular head of state Kim Yong-nam or even Kim Jong-il himself.

While the U.S. is clearly no longer in a "courting" mode toward the North, it has made it amply clear that it would welcome a resumption of dialogue. In an Oct. 17 interview with an editor from the Yomiuri Shimbun, President Bush warned North Korea not to mistake U.S. engagement in Afghanistan for an "opportunity to threaten" South Korea. At the same time, however, he reiterated the administration's offer to meet. Last month at a news conference with President Kim Dae-jung at the APEC meetings in China, Bush went one step further and clearly stated, "My administration wishes to begin a dialogue with the government of Kim Jong-il." Such offers aside, it is apparent that the Bush administration is not inclined to chase after North Korea. In the Yomiuri interview, Bush challenged Kim Jong-il to stop "being so suspicious, so secretive," and to "lead his people into the modern era."

The Bush administration offer should not be dismissed as mere rhetoric. It is arguable that this administration offers the best prospects for progress in U.S.-DPRK relations. Should North Korea decide to accept the administration's offer of dialogue, the Bush team is likely to be prepared to move forward with some rapidity, unfettered by many of the domestic political obstacles that constrained the Clinton administration.

The real loser in all of this appears to be Kim Dae-jung. With just over a year remaining in his presidency, his administration is clearly the party in the region most interested in a "breakthrough" in inter-Korean relations. In a different political world, President Kim would abandon his now apparently quixotic attempts to lure Kim Jong-il to Seoul. He would justifiably declare the Sunshine Policy a success (tensions on the Peninsula have been dramatically reduced) and work with the opposition in South Korea to build a firm political foundation for long-term support of a policy of engagement with North Korea. By its very nature, a policy of engagement with the North is long-term. The ultimate goal of affecting change in North Korea cannot be ignored. The difficulties for President Kim emerged when his political opponents began to demand short-term results from what is inherently a long-term policy. Reconciliation and integration of the two Koreas is a process. At present it is unrealistic to expect real societal, cultural, political, or even economic integration because the systems remain fundamentally incompatible.

In the post-Sept. 11 international environment, the ball is more clearly in North Korea's court than ever before. As long as North Korea remains relatively quiet, and absent an imminent crisis, the U.S., Japan, and China are all more than pleased to focus on their own domestic economic challenges as well as the emerging war on terrorism.

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