



North Korea's Misunderstanding of Bush Administration Policy

by Donald G. Gross

Is the immediate prospect for peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula slipping away? That question comes to mind as one watches North Korea's resistance to the resumption of talks with the United States on a variety of security issues.

No doubt North Korea's leaders consider themselves hardened "realists" whose foremost objective is assuring their regime's survival. But in reading their public statements and measuring their actions in the last six months, it appears that North Korea has abandoned "realism" and adopted a silly kind of "nostalgia" when dealing with Washington.

Rather than recognizing that the Bush administration continues the core Clinton policy of diplomatically resolving security issues with North Korea, Pyongyang seems to yearn for a fictitious Clinton administration policy at a time when the Clinton presidency is a fading memory. The consequence of this "romantic" attachment to a self-created illusion is that North Korea is failing to seize an unparalleled opportunity to address its own security concerns and to pave the way for development of its economy. Even worse, North Korea's inaction and diplomatic timidity may cause the security situation to deteriorate through a lack of diplomatic contacts with the United States.

The foundation of North Korea's current policy of aloofness toward the U.S. is its mistaken view that Bush administration officials are simply "hardliners" bent on coercing North Korea - while the Clinton administration sought to deal gently with Pyongyang through "engagement." The truth is that the Bush administration cares just as deeply about a diplomatic resolution of security issues with North Korea as the Clinton administration. That was made clear in the June 2001 announcement of Bush policy toward North Korea - and in statements by President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell since that time.

Moreover, the Bush administration now has broad support in the Congress to reach a series of agreements with North Korea on security and economic issues - something that eluded the Clinton administration for its entire term in office.

What has likely clouded the diplomatic perceptions of North Korea's leadership are some of the statements President Bush has made expressing skepticism about Kim Jong-il and his intentions. But Kim Jong-il fails to recognize that President Bush's style and outlook on life - perhaps due to his Texas upbringing and career - lead him to express his views frankly and occasionally without measuring their diplomatic impact. In that sense, North Korea may be right when it recently accused President Bush of lacking diplomatic "courtesy" in one of his recent public statements.

But again, the truth is that President Clinton and Clinton administration officials had just as much skepticism about the intentions the North Korean regime as President Bush. It was the Clinton administration's longer years in office that enabled it to express its diplomatic positions more gingerly - and with greater sensitivity for the feelings of North Korea's leader.

If North Korea found it valuable to conduct negotiations with the Clinton administration - even while Pyongyang believed that the United States remained a potential threat to its existence - then there is no reason why it should not pursue the same policy toward the U.S., now that the Bush administration is firmly seeking a diplomatic resolution of security issues.

When North Korea attacked the U.S. and its leaders with harsh words, U.S. officials brushed off or ignored Pyongyang's obnoxious language - precisely because the U.S. focused on reconciling U.S. and North Korean interests and not on the hurt "feelings" of its officials.

So North Korea should look past some unpleasant words enunciated by President Bush and recognize the reality of U.S. policy. The reality is that the Bush administration has continued the broad diplomatic approach toward North Korea, developed by former Defense Secretary Perry during the latter part of the Clinton administration.

If anything, the minor differences in Bush policy should make it easier for Pyongyang to reach agreement with Washington on North Korea's core security concerns. Unlike the Clinton administration, President Bush is willing to address conventional force issues with North Korea - presumably including the question of how U.S. forces are deployed in South Korea.

During the early 1990s and earlier, North Korea often called for force reductions, arms control negotiations, and pull-backs of forces from the DMZ. Now the historical opportunity exists to put some of these innovative ideas into practice - to reduce tension and the risk of surprise attack in both North and South Korea.

Lost opportunities for peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula are nothing new, of course. They have often occurred in the past and unfortunately prolonged the existence of the Cold War in one last corner of the earth. What would be truly tragic this time, is that the lost opportunity could arise through a fundamentally mistaken understanding of U.S. policy by North Korea - at the very moment when the U.S. seems ready to reach a full resolution of security and economic issues with Pyongyang.

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