



Dove Disengagement

by Allan Y. Song

Instead of generating silence of embarrassment, the unexpected - although hardly surprising - admission by North Korea that it has been pursuing the development of nuclear weapons all this time has prompted a chorus of apologia and "explanation" from those who had been urging engagement and dialogue with the North Koreans. My personal favorite is South Korean Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun, who seems to think his portfolio includes public relations on behalf of North Korea, as he is actually offering "clarifications" of North Korea's position, and going so far as to admonish the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly for "misunderstanding" what was said to him in Pyongyang. This kind of reaction is by no means confined to the Kim Dae-jung administration officials, as there are plenty of analysts in this country who are offering "insight" into the Dear Leader's recent actions, which range from outlandish economic "reforms" to admitting to have abducted foreign citizens.

In the absence of adequate information, those who still believe that engagement with North Korea is the best course of action are free to offer their interpretation of Kim Jong-il's latest policy initiatives. What is striking - indeed, disturbing - about all the clamor emanating from the engagement camp in the aftermath of Pyongyang's nuclear confession is that they seem incapable of understanding the implications of what they are saying.

The central argument of the engagement proponents is that Kim Jong-il's recent policy initiatives - from the economic "reforms" to the diplomatic confessions - are all an indication of North Korea's desire to change. Pyongyang's admission of its abduction of Japanese citizens as well as its secret nuclear weapons development program, according to this line of analysis, indicate that North Korea is finally ready to break with its rogue past and to come in from the cold, so to speak. As bizarre and twisted as these actions are, the engagement proponents assert, Kim Jong-il's recent actions are his "cry for help." Further - and this is the key to the engagement camp's analysis - what has prompted Kim to plunge into this new policy direction is his realization that this is the only way to avoid North Korea's economic collapse. Put simply, economic hardship is moderating North Korea.

In asserting that economic hardship is motivating Kim Jong-il to move toward more openness and moderation, these engagement proponents can't hear the loud contradiction inherent in their argument. If economic hardship is the cause of Kim's shift, then doesn't it follow that what has been obstructing that development is none other than the engagement policy, most specifically the "Sunshine Policy" pursued so stubbornly by the Kim Dae-jung administration and the attendant aid policy carried out by the West? Furthermore, pushing that logic a step further, doesn't the engagement camp's argument suggest that the best -

indeed, the only logical - policy that should be pursued vis-à-vis North Korea now is not engagement but isolation?

"Oh, no, no," the engagement proponents retort. "We must not and cannot strangle North Korea because" - and here feel free to pick any combination of arguments - "if North Korea feels that it's being strangled, it will lash out... say what you will of North Korea, it is a fiercely proud country and offending its pride by forcing it to beg will only be counterproductive... squeezing North Korea will only hurt the innocent North Koreans, already suffering enough," etc., etc.

It has never been clear to me how engagement proponents could know the difference between the "good" kind of economic hardship - the kind that induces moderation and openness in North Korea - and the "bad" kind of economic hardship - the kind that leads to unwanted implosion and a suicidal first strike by North Korea. As far as I can tell, the only way we could distinguish the two is to rely on what the North Koreans tell us.

As for North Korea's famous "pride," I am baffled how a country that could with such ease overlook its pride when it comes to, say, abducting foreign citizens and engaging in counterfeiting, drug trafficking, and a cornucopia of other illicit activities, could suddenly have its pride hurt so sharply.

Of all the arguments brandished by the engagement proponents, the one I personally find the most ludicrous - indeed, offensive - is the argument about helping the North Korean people; namely, even if we find the Kim Jong-il regime abominable, we must not let that stop us from helping the North Korean populace. Apart from the fact that this argument is logically inconsistent - if economic hardship is what is inducing Kim Jong-il to ease up on his tyrannical ways, then by definition any alleviation of that economic hardship will harden his tyrannical grip - it flies against all empirical evidence. If there ever is evidence that the billions of dollars in cash and material assistance that South Korea and the West have been pouring into North Korea have been diverted by Kim Jong-il's ruling clique for its use rather than for the betterment of the North Korean population's everyday living condition, it is Pyongyang's recent admission of its covert nuclear weapons program. Is it such a fantastic leap of logic to conclude that the West and South Korea have been subsidizing North Korea's nuclear program?

If the engagement proponents are wrong and North Korea's latest diplomatic initiatives turn out to be yet another ruse to buy time and squeeze money from the all too gullible outside world, then we should disengage. But, even if the engagement proponents are right, we should still disengage given the logic of their analysis.

I presume the engagement proponents' ultimate goal in North Korea is to induce gradual opening so that "soft landing" could at some point be engineered. By their own logic, then, the most

effective way to accomplish that goal is to disengage. Now is not the time to resume, and certainly not to expand, engagement; it is time to disengage. Call back the tankers carrying the heavy fuel oil destined for North Korea. Suspend all assistance to North Korea via the United Nations and its agencies. Persuade our Japanese friends not to lose their nerve, to firmly stay the course in their normalization talks with North Korea, and definitely not to resume any aid. Convincing President Kim Dae-jung to reverse his policy course may be near impossible since he appears almost obsessed with committing South Korea to his Sunshine Policy as much as he possibly can before leaving office. Thus, we should do our best to persuade our South Korean friends to limit their interaction with North Korea to strictly humanitarian areas.

Disengagement should not be viewed as the policy option only or even primarily for "Hawks." In fact, given their goal of a peaceful resolution of the North Korean problem, the engagement proponents, much more so than Hawks, should embrace disengagement.

Isn't it time for Dove Disengagement?

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