



Building trust or giving it away? The Roh administration's engagement of the North

by Leif-Eric Easley

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun's engagement policy faces serious challenges. North Korea's provocative missile tests July 4 met with unanimous condemnation by the United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1695 requires sanctions on missile-related transfers to North Korea and demands Pyongyang suspend its ballistic missile activities. One month earlier, President Roh's Uri Party was trounced in South Korean elections by the opposition Grand National Party, which favors a tougher line on North Korea. These developments put Roh's engagement policy under international and domestic pressure, renewing debate over how Seoul manages relations with Pyongyang.

Since coming to office in 2003, President Roh's approach has been characterized as either appeasement or a bold effort to build inter-Korean trust. The logic of appeasement says rather than confront Pyongyang militarily (very costly) or diplomatically hold it accountable for its behavior (potentially costly in the event of a North Korean collapse), better to bribe North Korea and avoid it becoming even more of a problem. This strategy would be rational, weighing expected costs and benefits, except that appeasement has historically proven to simply delay conflict. Most of President Roh's critics object to his North Korea policy as charting this path toward failure.

Roh's supporters argue that trust building is essential for North-South reconciliation and eventual reunification. A "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" policy works much better than an "axis of evil" policy because it helps establish effective working relations based on trust. At some stage mutual trust will require a shared concept of Korean identity and comparable visions of what a unified Korean Peninsula will look like. But for now, building trust between North and South means getting to a point where the two can depend on each other to make good on their commitments, regardless of what third countries (especially the United States and China) say or do. This is the kind of trust the Roh administration has tried to establish, and costly signaling via unconditional engagement is arguably a good way of doing it.

But is the policy working? Have years of "sunshine" built trust with the North, and if so, at what cost? North-South contacts and exchanges have markedly increased, and while often delayed by Pyongyang, historical patterns of postponement and fiery rhetoric have been tempered. South Korean aid to the North has grown unabated but is often not confirmed to reach intended recipients. The Kaesong Industrial Zone brought inter-Korean trade to unprecedented levels, despite the North's demand for concessions while backtracking on commitments. South Korean tourism to the North and separated family meetings expanded, although

Pyongyang has shown little cooperation regarding South Korean POWs and abductees. There were high hopes for a visit to the North by former President Kim Dae-jung on rail links severed since the Korean War, but these remained blocked by the North Korean army and the trip was postponed. Military confidence building between North and South made little progress and the Six-Party Talks addressing North Korea's nuclear programs have been stalled for nearly a year.

So, while the results of the Roh administration's policy toward North Korea are unclear, it has clearly damaged trust within the South Korea-U.S. alliance. Systematic efforts by the Roh administration to downplay the North Korean threat reduce U.S. confidence in the ROK and undermine public perceptions of the alliance in South Korea. Statements made by Roh administration officials suggesting the U.S. is as much the problem as North Korea in the nuclear standoff raise eyebrows in Washington. All this interacts poorly with U.S. global force restructuring and strategic flexibility doctrine, which in turn erodes South Korean trust in the alliance.

The Roh administration's pursuit of a policy with uncertain benefits and obvious costs implies a wager: that in the long-term, trust with North Korea is more important than trust with the U.S., and improving one naturally comes at the expense of the other. Such a wager is understandable if one's passion is for an independent unified Korea. But what if ROK relations with North Korea and the U.S. need not be managed in zero-sum terms? Does building North-South trust really require Seoul to distance itself from Washington? A South Korean policy that holds Pyongyang more accountable for its actions and restores South Korea-U.S. confidence might make engagement more effective because North Korean reciprocity is necessary for mutual trust on the Korean Peninsula.

After years of nearly unconditional engagement, Seoul has gained a great deal of leverage with the North. The Roh administration is now considering putting this leverage to use. During inter-Korean economic cooperation talks one week after the South Korean elections, Seoul departed from previous negotiations by stipulating a precondition: South Korea would provide additional aid to the North only after the cross-border railway tests cancelled by Pyongyang are rescheduled. In North-South ministerial talks after the missile tests, South Korea warned against further provocations and declined all North Korean requests for economic assistance. The North responded by walking out of the meetings and subsequently suspending the separated family reunions. This situation calls for a recalibration of Seoul's engagement policy.

While South Korea can exercise leverage over the North, care is needed to avoid squandering this leverage and increasing mistrust. Seoul must balance the desire to keep channels of communication open with Pyongyang while demanding greater reciprocity. One way to do this is by

continuing rice and fertilizer aid and economic cooperation at the Kaesong Industrial Zone while making some assistance, such as grants and loans for North Korean light industries, contingent on Pyongyang's actions. Seoul can also make clear the further economic cooperation that is possible once North Korea returns to the Six-Party Talks.

To help maintain trust with other nations, Seoul can restart the South Korea-Japan-U.S. policy consultation meetings known as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG). Disputes over history in ROK-Japan relations have caused this important consultative mechanism to lie dormant for three years. Meanwhile, Washington and Tokyo continue to coordinate policy without Seoul. Better for South Korea to take every opportunity to have its interests represented in policies concerning North Korea.

Enhanced coordination among South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. can bring North Korea back to the table. But if Pyongyang refuses to rejoin the Six-Party Talks, five-way talks could be held for the purpose of drawing up "red lines" for North Korean behavior – such as performing a nuclear test or firing missiles over another country – and how these would be met with concerted action by the five parties.

Unconditional engagement of North Korea has yielded uncertain benefits and clear costs, and appears out of step with international diplomacy as well as South Korean public opinion. It's time for the Roh administration to recalibrate its engagement policy to build trust without giving it away.

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