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Sunshine in Korea

The South Korean Debate over Policies Toward North Korea

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The debate in South Korea over the government's engagement policy toward North Korea (the so-called "sunshine" policy) did not start with Pyongyang's recent admission that it has been secretly pursuing a nuclear weapons program in violation of multiple international commitments. But the evolution of the debate will be an important determinant of how the South Korean and broader international response to this latest North Korean challenge ultimately ends. This report provides a framework for viewing South Korean responses to this challenge. It examines the South Korean debate over policies toward the North, analyzes the sources of controversy, and assesses the debate's implications for South Korea and the United States.

The report finds that much of the public debate is a product of differences among South Koreans over the changes Kim Dae Jung made in South Korea's long existing policy after becoming president in 1998, rather than over the need for some kind of engagement with North Korea per se. While partisan politics are a component of the debate, at its core are some big questions:

- What should be the aim of any effort to achieve greater association with North Korea—"reconciliation" on the basis of Korea being "one people" or "unification" by extending South Korea's democratic, free-market system to the North?
- What role should reciprocity play in this effort?
- What should be the nature and scale of South Korean assistance to North Korea?

- How should political efforts to engage North Korea be balanced against South Korea's security and other important interests?
- How should the effectiveness of the government's policies be evaluated?

What has made the debate so intense is the way in which it has re-opened deeper, long-standing fissures within South Korean society. These fissures divide South Koreans sharply along political, regional, and ideological lines. The latter in particular have contributed to polarizing the debate and undermining public consensus behind the government's policies. In the process, they have made the sunshine policy the core issue in a larger political and ideological struggle.

Although actions by North Korea, and in certain ways the United States, have had important effects, the course of the debate has been heavily shaped by South Korea's own *internal* dynamics. Key factors include the following:

- *The government's minority status:* Rather than try to broaden his base of support in an effort to build greater consensus behind his policies, President Kim generally used his sunshine policy to improve his personal political position and party's electoral prospects. While neither unique for a politician nor unreasonable given the president's particular situation, this tendency helped rile the political opposition, politicize what had generally been considered a nonpartisan issue, and exacerbate the task of gaining legislative approval for government policies.
- *The role of reciprocity:* Support for government policies in any democratic society hinges ultimately on a public view that such policies are effective in advancing important national interests. Absent clear manifestations of North Korean reciprocity, and in the context of continued North Korean military provocations, the "payback" for South Korea's largesse became increasingly hard to demonstrate. Among other effects was an administration tendency to oversell its policy successes, which over time corroded its credibility.
- *The approach to domestic critics:* The president's confidence and conviction were valuable in providing a compass that kept policy focused despite many challenges. The downside was a certain

hardheadedness that closed the policymaking process to all but the closest of the president's aids and blinded the administration to the dangers of mounting domestic opposition. Harsh criticism of those South Koreans who expressed doubts about the government's policy alienated many more in the middle of the political spectrum and narrowed the potential base for national consensus, while it validated long-standing suspicions among South Korean conservatives about the president's ideological propensities and intentions.

- *The war with the press:* Whatever its intentions, the administration's attack on the media under the rubric of "reforming" the press alienated the mainstream media and stimulated a de facto alliance between them and the opposition parties to prevent the government from achieving its objectives. It also exacerbated the administration's difficulty in mobilizing public support for the steps it wanted to take with North Korea, since it could enlist only the leftist media in efforts to rally support for its policies.
- *The lack of trust and willingness to compromise:* These cultural characteristics historically bedeviling Korean politics contributed among other things to political rigidity and a "winner takes all" orientation. This affected the political dynamics at virtually all levels.

Other internal factors contributing to the evolution of events include the extreme personalization of policy, the reluctance to acknowledge the underlying continuity in South Korean policies, and the refusal to convey the actual state of the North-South relationship to the public. The administration's emphasis on "trusting" the North in the absence of a widely apparent basis for this trust, and its periodic efforts to palliate the North through policy and personnel changes, also played a role by creating an impression of governmental naiveté and weakness.

Ultimately, however, the story of how consensus evaporated so quickly is less about particular governmental "mistakes" than about the broader interactions among politicians, press, and public opinion, with civic groups on both sides of an increasingly polarized citizenry serving as flag bearers in a larger political and ideological struggle. This struggle reflects both the continued hold of old, unre-

solved issues and the impact of South Korea's new process of democratization.

The bad news for government supporters is that the sunshine policy has been dealt a seemingly fatal blow. Even before the revelations concerning North Korea's clandestine uranium enrichment effort, the policy was wrapped up in ideological, regional, and partisan bickering, and the obstacles to unwrapping the policy were substantial. North Korea's startling admission strengthened these obstacles in three ways: It stimulated widespread confusion about North Korean motives; it strengthened those who had long argued that the regime cannot be trusted; and it further undermined public confidence in the administration's handling of North-South relations. As a practical political matter, moreover, the admission preempted all other issues on the policy agenda, while shattering what little was left of Pyongyang's credibility as a negotiating partner. Until and unless the nuclear issue is resolved, the sun is not likely to shine again on North Korea.

Even in the unlikely event that the nuclear issue were resolved quickly, it would be very difficult for the administration to move far forward in inter-Korean relations. Indeed, it would be hard for any government to pursue an effective engagement policy today. Any such policy requires a strong national consensus. Achieving such a consensus, in turn, requires many things: a favorable international environment, a responsive North Korean partner, a perceived balance between South Korean initiatives and North Korean reciprocity, a supportive economy, and public trust. None of these exist today.

In the short term, therefore, advances in North-South relations will be put on ice. The administration will try to maintain the basic framework of its policies—emphasizing continued humanitarian assistance and direct North-South contact—while the nuclear issue is adjudicated. It also will try to preserve the 1994 U.S.–North Korean “Agreed Framework,” which froze Pyongyang's overt nuclear program, and as many of the existing North-South agreements as possible. But the task of building a new approach toward inter-Korean relations will fall to President Kim's successor. Overt efforts by North Korea to influence the outcome of the presidential election in December would have an explosive effect inside South Korea.

Apart from the nuclear issue, the internal dynamics of the debate over the sunshine policy suggest several short-term implications:

1. South Korea will continue to be weighed down by history. The intensity of feelings toward President Kim alone will keep the country mired in the past, as will recriminations and debate over his legacy. This could impede timely South Korean responses to international terrorism and other “new era” issues.
2. The political situation is likely to get worse before it gets better. Because of the high stakes, nearly everything the administration does in its remaining months will be geared to winning the election, while the political opposition will do everything it can to besmirch the government’s image. Since historically the key to winning elections in South Korea has been to find ways to split the opposition, politics are likely to be nasty.
3. The tendency some South Koreans have to blame the United States for particular problems will likely persist, if not increase further. This is particularly true of Kim Dae Jung’s political supporters, whose close personal identification with President Kim almost necessitates a search for scapegoats in the event of policy disappointments. A major downturn in North-South relations will likely be added to the laundry list of issues these groups hold against the United States—a development North Korea may have anticipated in openly acknowledging its clandestine nuclear weapons program but, in any event, one it is certain to actively exploit to inflame tensions inside South Korea and drive a wedge between South Korea and the United States.

Over the long term, the implications of the South Korean public debate are more encouraging. Put simply, democratization is working. Civilian government is permanently in place. The military has been returned to the barracks. And influential institutions—the press, the National Assembly, academia, church and civic organizations—have taken root to inform public policy and check the arbitrary use of executive power. While the position of president continues to weigh heavily in South Korean politics and policy, the highly educated, middle-class electorate has become a real factor affecting his or her prospects for success. As a result, public opinion now matters. The public debate over policy toward the North in this sense is healthy. It

brings long-suppressed issues out into the open and allows the sharply divergent views and approaches of South Korean citizens to be aired and adjudicated. Greater consensus—and a broader, steadier center—will undoubtedly emerge over time. The long-term prospect, therefore, is for South Korea to become a more stable and secure democracy.

Getting from here to there, however, will itself take time. Whatever the outcome of the elections in December 2002, the next period will constitute a transition from the era of “the three Kims” (Kim Dae Jung, Kim Young Sam, and Kim Jong-pil) to a new era in South Korean politics. In any such transition period, the fundamental fault lines in society—especially ideological divisions rooted in long-standing, unresolved historical issues—cannot be expected to end overnight. South Korea is no exception. Even a sweeping opposition party (GNP) victory will not end these underlying divisions. This means that for some time to come South Korean politics will remain polarized, personalized, and raw.

The likely effects of the election on policies toward the North are more uncertain. Contrary to the conventional wisdom suggesting that basic South Korean policies will continue no matter who wins the election, the last decade demonstrates that leadership makes a difference. If the GNP wins the election, it is likely that South Korea will adopt a significantly tougher stance toward North Korea. This would entail greater emphasis on reciprocity, verifiable threat reduction, and South Korea’s alliance with the United States. It also would involve renewed stress on South Korea’s traditional approach toward unification. This would focus more on “peaceful coexistence” than on “reconciliation” as the operative goal of South Korea’s policy and give higher priority to strengthening South Korean military and economic capability as the means for achieving its long-term goal of unification on South Korean terms. A GNP government would probably seek to maintain some kind of engagement with North Korea, but it is likely to give greater emphasis to South Korea’s security interests as it pursues resolution of the nuclear issue and any resumed North-South dialogue.

If the ruling party (MDP) or some successor party wins, the government would likely maintain the essence of the sunshine policy. Although some effort may be made to distance the new president per-

sonally from his predecessor, an MDP government would probably continue to seek inter-Korean “reconciliation.” It would also try to protect North-South political interactions by emphasizing the need to resolve the nuclear issue “peacefully through dialogue.” An MDP government led by its current leader Roh Moo Hyun might even try to facilitate resolution of the nuclear issue by offering North Korea increased economic assistance or other inducements. Such efforts could increase strains between South Korea and the United States, particularly in the new administration’s early, “learning curve” period. Even a Roh Moo Hyun government, however, would have to adapt its stance to the new reality caused by North Korea’s defiant acknowledgment of continuing efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Implementation of the North-South denuclearization agreements and North Korea’s other international nonnuclear commitments would likely remain a key South Korean demand and impediment to expanded North-South relations.

Whatever the outcome of the elections, the South Korean debate over policies toward the North will present the United States with both a challenge and opportunity. On the one hand, few South Koreans are ready to trade engagement for confrontation. Even fewer want war. This fear of war transcends both party affiliation and ideological predisposition. While critics of the sunshine policy want to see significant changes in South Korea’s approach toward the North, most also want to see continued progress toward tension reduction and peaceful coexistence. Avoiding the danger of being seen as an obstacle to peaceful coexistence between the two Koreas, while resolving the WMD issue and pursuing its larger strategic interests, will be a major challenge for U.S. policy.

On the other hand, most South Koreans have lost patience with North Korea. While they tend to see North Korea’s actions primarily as defensive measures to ensure its own survival, they recognize such actions as genuine threats to South Korean security. Many also share the view that such continuing bad behavior should not be rewarded. North Korea’s admission of an ongoing WMD program exposed its mendacity and malevolence and reinforced the arguments of sunshine policy opponents that all agreements with Pyongyang must be verifiable and reciprocal. This admission also gave greater credence to the long-standing distrust expressed by U.S. officials. As the United States pursues resolution of the nuclear and other outstand-

ing issues with North Korea, it has the opportunity to help establish a basis for greater consensus within South Korea on an appropriate “post-sunshine” policy toward North Korea and greater harmony in U.S. and South Korean approaches.