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Sunshine in Korea

The South Korean Debate over Policies Toward North Korea

This RAND report examines the public South Korean debate over dealings with North Korea focusing on the period since February 1998 when Kim Dae Jung became president of South Korea. The debate in South Korea over the government's engagement policy toward North Korea (the so-called "sunshine" policy) is more a product of internal differences among South Koreans than the need for engagement with North Korea over their secret nuclear weapons program.

Key factors include:

- President Kim's minority status and lack of consensus for his sunshine policies;
- the lack of reciprocity from North Korea for the South Korea largesse;
- alienation of the middle political spectrum by a closed policymaking process;
- war with the press.

In the short term, even if the nuclear issue is resolved quickly, advances in North-South relations will be put on ice in the short term due to lack of national consensus and South Korean politics will remain polarized, personalized, and raw.

In the long term, the South Korean debate over the North offers both a challenge and opportunity for the U.S. The major challenge for the U.S. will be to avoid being seen as an obstacle to peace between the Koreans, while resolving the weapons of mass destruction issue and pursuing its larger strategic interests. The opportunity exists for the U.S. to foster consensus within South Korea on an appropriate post-sunshine toward the North and greater harmony in U.S. and South Korean approaches.