

## **Continuity or Change? The New U.S. Policy Toward North Korea**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

**I**n speech delivered to the U.S. Defense University on May 1, 2001, U.S. President Bush officially declared his administration's Missile Defense (MD) plan to the world. Soon after, on May 9, a State Department delegation led by Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage visited South Korea to officially explain the new U.S. administration's missile defense scheme to the South Korean government. Armitage said that the United States actively supports the North Korea policy of the South Korean government and that the Bush administration's review of North Korea policy was reaching its final stage. He also added that U.S.-North Korea talks would resume "in the near future." It is evident that the finalization of U.S. policy on North Korea will be based on the review of the effectiveness of past policies, as they have been implemented thus far. Still, attention is being paid to possible ramifications of a new U.S. North Korea policy on inter-Korean relations, and specifically on the peace and stability of the Asia Pacific region.

In this vein, this article will analyze future U.S. policy toward

North Korea based on past developments in U.S.-North Korea relations. The questions are: What kinds of policies have been pursued by the United States and North Korea for the past decade and what were the outcomes? How can the bilateral relations between the United States and North Korea be characterized? How different will the Bush administration's North Korea policy be from that of the Clinton administration? In the context of America's Asia strategy, what would be the strategic calculations of the Bush administration in formulating North Korea policy? What aspects should the Bush administration focus on in the process of wrapping up its North Korea policy review? Before reviewing and answering those subjects, the article will briefly examine the choices that the Pyongyang regime made for its survival after the collapse of the socialist bloc in order to understand the reclusive regime's recent behavior.

#### **NORTH KOREA'S CHANGE IN POLICY: TWO CRITICAL CHOICES**

North Korea made two critical choices in the last decade in order to ensure the viability of its regime and its socialist system: the first choice was made in the early 1990s just after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Eastern-Central European socialist states; the second, in the year 2000.

In the early 1990s, North Korea decided to expand contacts and seek economic and political cooperation with the West—particularly, the United States and Japan, and South Korea. Between the 1991 and 1993, North Korea took a number of critical measures that would put it on the road toward “reform and opening” in the international economic and political areas, although it never used those terms: a special free economic and trade zone in Rajin-Sonbong; various legal and institutional arrangements to promote foreign capital and technology investment, and a new trade system; a high-level meeting with the U.S. in 1992; normalization talks with Japan; declaration of a

nuclear-free Korean peninsula; membership in the United Nations with South Korea, abandoning its long-held “One Korea policy”; and finally, the Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchange and Cooperation with South Korea.

Unfortunately, however, North Korea’s siege mentality continued, and it was extremely cautious in carrying out critical changes. Two events further complicated the situation: North Korea’s nuclear weapons development program and the sudden death of Kim Il-sung in 1994. The North simply could not get help from the outside world due to these events, and Kim Jong-il decided to temporarily cease implementing the choices that North Korea had made in the early 1990s, fearing what reform and opening would do to the vulnerable regime. He instead elected to maintain the *status quo* by applying the “rule by will” of his deceased father while consolidating his own power base within the military and the party.

By early 1997, Kim Jong-il had succeeded in solidifying his power base in the military and the party and stabilizing the domestic situation, and from around 1998, he cautiously began to implement the critical choices that North Korea had made in the early 1990s. However, by this time, Pyongyang apparently realized that outside help was predicated on two elements: improving relations with Seoul and solving problems of long-range missile development. As a goodwill gesture in its effort to improve relations with Washington, North Korea put a moratorium on the test-firing of long-range missiles in September 1999.

In 2000, North Korea made a other critical choices that would help it to emerge from political and economic isolation and join the world community full-scale. First, it improved relations with South Korea and second, it not to only promoted a cooperative relationship with the U.S., it also broadened, diplomatic efforts with the international community. These choices led to the historic South-North Korean summit in June 2000; the exchange visits of Cho Myong-rok and Madeleine Albright, resulting in the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué of October 12, 2000; and diplomatic normalization with European Union

states, among others.

It should be emphasized that North Korea has shown consistency in its policy choices to expand contacts and improve relations with the U.S., South Korea, and other nations over the past decade and that neither recent North Korean policy, nor its behavior have popped up all of a sudden. In other words, the first choice was the basis for the second.

The current preoccupation of the North Korean leadership is economic recovery and development. From the beginning of this year, Kim Jong-il has emphasized the importance of exhibiting “new thinking” and “technological renovation.” During a visit to the Pudong District of Shanghai, the foremost showcase of China’s high-tech and financial industry built through government-guided reform and opening, he showed enthusiasm for learning from the Chinese experience.

It must be emphasized that North Korea’s changed stance is neither transitory nor reversible. Not only is such change based on consistent policy choices, it also has serious implications for the legitimacy and future of the Kim Jong-il regime at home and abroad.

#### **U.S.-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS IN THE 1990S**

Staggering under the weight of dire internal conditions, the North had to find a way to ensure the survival of the regime. As explained above, it made a decision to expand contacts and improve relations with the United States, Japan and South Korea in the early 1990s, and between 1999-2000. By the same token, since 1990 the United States has been seriously concerned about North Korea’s nuclear development program and its implications. It realized the need for dialogue and negotiations with North Korea, a country that it had consistently isolated since the Cold War era.

As the two countries recognized the need for bilateral dialogue and negotiations, they held talks in New York in January 1992 between the North Korean Workers’ Party Secretary, Kim Yong-soon

responsible for external affairs, and U.S. Undersecretary of State Arnold Kanter—the highest-level meeting between the two countries since the Korean War. During the meeting, North Korea indicated that it might recognize the need for the presence of American troops in South Korea.

Since the bilateral talks, the two sides have consistently pursued shared policy objectives, despite numerous ups and downs: the North's nuclear and missile program, the U.S. economic sanctions against North Korea, construction of light water reactors, etc.

After the dissolution of the Cold War structure, global order underwent sweeping changes. Faced with this changed reality, Pyongyang pursued normalization of political and economic ties with the United States, even willing to give up on its ambition to develop nuclear weapons and missiles, a critical strategic bargaining chip. The obvious purpose was to restore its devastated economy and ensure stability of its regime through improving relations with the United States.

In the 1990s when North Korea gained the capability to produce weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems, Washington realized the limitations inherent in its long-held containment policy toward Pyongyang. Based on this realization, the U.S. administration pursued a policy objective to engage North Korea and to help it join the international community, while at the same time, continuing to contain North Korean threats. By doing so, the U.S. hoped to secure peace and stability in Northeast Asia by persuading North Korea to abandon its ambition to proliferate WMD.

There have been converging points of agreement between these policy objectives of the two sides, as evidenced by the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework. Ahead of the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the U.S. had proposed measures to block North Korea's nuclear weapons development, while North Korea had chosen not to give up, but to freeze its nuclear program as long as the U.S. fulfilled its promises. As shown by this, the two countries succeeded in reaching a “mutually defensive,” and “mutually

compromising" agreement to resolve the nuclear issue for their national interests, even in the absence of mutual trust.

Less than three weeks after the Agreed Framework was signed, however, came the Republican-led Congress, which made it difficult for Washington to implement the agreement. As the United States had already achieved its goal to freeze the North's nuclear program through the Agreed Framework and was expecting an imminent collapse of the North Korean regime, it was relatively nonchalant about easing economic sanctions against North Korea, an issue that the North was strongly pushing. Since the crisis in North Korea was economic, it has persistently demanded the easing of economic sanctions, arguing that easing or lifting the sanctions would be a symbol of a thaw in U.S.-North Korea relations.

In the meantime, the Republican-led Congress concentrated in 1995 and 1996 on passing a defense bill which included establishment of the National Missile Defense (NMD) system. President Clinton vetoed the bill, however, leading to a lengthy tug-of-war between Congress and the administration. The U.S. Congress led by the Republican Party, mounted an all-out offensive against Clinton's veto by establishing the Rumsfeld Committee, whose stated purpose was examining ballistic missile threats against the United States by North Korea and Iraq. Between January and June 1998, the Committee studied the issue and on July 15, it submitted a report to Congress which greatly exaggerated missile threats by North Korea.

In August, the U.S. media reported that the North's Kumchang-ri underground facilities were suspected to be nuclear facilities. In response, the North strongly criticized the U.S. movements and test-fired its long-range missile Taepodong on August 31, 1998, in an attempt to bring Washington to the negotiating table.

During that time, "the Korean peninsula crisis" theory swept across the United States because of numerous media reports on North Korea's underground facilities in Kumchang-ri and the Taepodong missile launch. The debate on the North Korea policy heated up, and in the fall of 1998, debates became ever fiercer on whether or not to

continue with the Clinton administration's engagement policy.

From September 1998, Washington and Pyongyang began full-fledged negotiations and in January 1999 Defense Secretary William Cohen asked for a budget to implement the NMD, showing a departure from the administration's previous position. On March 17, the two countries officially agreed on the dispatch of a team of experts to "visit (inspect)" the Kumchang-ri underground facilities. And on March 29, the U.S.-North Korea missile talks were resumed. At the same time, a 66 billion-dollar budget plan for the NMD was passed by both the Senate and House. The correlation between the U.S. engagement policy and NMD plan needs further studies, however, those developments indicate that behind the fierce debate on North Korea policy, there exist persistent Republican-led Congress' efforts to secure a budget for the NMD.

The "crisis" scenario on the Korean peninsula came to an end in May 1998 with the inspection on the Kumchang-ri facilities and Washington's North Korea policy-coordinator William Perry's visit to Pyongyang. Again, the United States and North Korea entered into a phase of improved relations. The inspection team found that the underground facilities in Kumchang-ri were not nuclear-related.

William Perry suggested that the ultimate goal of the United States would be to stop North Korea's missile exports and put the country under the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). As the first step toward this goal, he advised that Washington should ask Pyongyang to suspend test-firing its long-range missiles in exchange for easing of U.S. sanctions on the regime.

In July 1999, the U.S. Council of Foreign Relations (CFR) issued various recommendations on North Korea. Among them was the "selective engagement" scenario, which advocated first lifting the U.S. embargo on North Korea. In September 1999, the two countries at last cut a deal in Berlin. Under the agreement, the United States would ease sanctions on North Korea while North Korea would impose a moratorium on the test-launching of its long-range missiles. The agreement laid the foundation for the resolution of North Korea's

long-range missile issues. Soon after the agreement, the Perry Report, proposing a “comprehensive and integrated approach” was completed.

The year 2000 marked dramatic progress in relations between North Korea and South Korea, however, regarding U.S. relations, the North dragged its heels for more than a year, delaying the return visit to Washington following Mr. Perry’s visit to North Korea. A breakthrough came when North Korea’s special envoy Cho Myong-rok, first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and the *de facto* No.2 man in the North Korean leadership hierarchy, visited the United States. During that visit, the two countries announced the U.S.-North Korea Joint Communiqué, ushering in a new era in bilateral relations.

Special envoy Cho’s visit to Washington was followed by then State Secretary Albright’s visit to Pyongyang. During that visit, the two sides discussed missile issues and then President Clinton’s visit to North Korea. The United States and North Korea also had missile talks in Kuala Lumpur but failed to produce tangible results. The delegates from the United States and North Korea had in-depth and constructive talks on such issues as suspension of North Korea’s missile exports/development and U.S. launch of satellites for North Korea. However, when the U.S. took issue with North Korea’s mid-range Rodong missiles that had already been produced and deployed, the talks broke down. On top of that, President Clinton’s visit to Pyongyang was not realized before his term of office ended.

#### **U.S.-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS: THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION**

The Bush administration’s review process of U.S. policy towards North Korea has been carried out on the basis of the Clinton administration’s North Korea policy. U.S.-North Korea relations were dramatically enhanced as a result of the Agreed Framework and the

Perry Process. How should bilateral relations between the United States and North Korea during the Clinton administration be evaluated? Before answering the question, it would be worth examining the characteristics and implications of the Clinton administration's relations with Pyongyang.

First, as revealed in the Agreed Framework, the United States and North Korea tried to resolve pending issues not through military methods, but through diplomatic negotiations. This attitude became a fundamental pattern of behavior on the part of both Washington and Pyongyang in their dealings with each other.

Second, the United States succeeded in persuading the North to comply with U.S.-set rules during the process of reducing threats posed by North Korea's weapons of mass destruction. Thus, the United States attained the advantage in resolving pending issues in the way it wanted. On North Korea's part, it succeeded in extracting concessions needed for its survival in the international community, laying the foundation for economic recovery, opening and reforms aimed at maintaining its regime.

Third, North Korea came to recognize that it could not survive and prosper without first improving in its relations with the United States. Furthermore, during the negotiation process, it gained confidence by achieving diplomatic success in dealing with the world's sole superpower, and overcoming the turmoil that erupted during the transformation process of other socialist countries.

Fourth, the experiences gained in dealing with each other and the pragmatic attitude shared by both the United States and North Korea cleared the way for East Asian countries to formulate a "new regional order" for the 21st century, through peaceful means.

Fifth, the key role played by South Korea in addressing the Korean peninsula issue had a profound impact on U.S.-North Korea relations, leading the United States and North Korea to appreciate South Korea's influence. The historic inter-Korean summit was realized by the South's initiative, opening a new chapter of reconciliation and cooperation on the Korean peninsula, and these changes in inter-

Korean relations affected U.S.-North Korea relations. This marks a significant development considering that in the past, South Korea never took the initiative on Korean peninsula issues and the actions of the United States and North Korea had greater ramifications than those of South Korea.

Despite these positive aspects, the Clinton administration could not solve fundamental cleavages between the two countries. First, even though Washington and Pyongyang gained a better understanding of the intentions of the other side's leader and each other's policy goals, they were unable to reach to the level of mutual trust. By launching the Perry process, the Clinton administration pursued its national interest while at the same time dealing with North Korea "just as it was." Such U.S. attitudes could have contributed significantly to mutual trust, but the Clinton administration stepped down before the two countries could forge a trust strong enough to develop a bilateral relationship.

Second, the legacy of confrontation that had existed since the Cold War, plus North Korea's possession of weapons of mass destruction such as biochemical weapons and missiles as delivery systems, posed an obstacle to reconciliation between the countries. North Korea's missile program emerged as the most pressing issue in the late 1990s while the most contentious issue in the early 1990s was its nuclear program. Neither has been clearly resolved.

Third, the United States showed a lukewarm attitude towards North Korea's demands except on military and security issues, especially the U.S. response to North Korea's calls for the easing or repealing of U.S. sanctions.

#### **THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION'S NORTH KOREA POLICY: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE**

The Bush administration has emphasized security threats posed by North Korea and, unlike the Clinton administration, which

accepted Pyongyang's *status quo*, the new administration believes that the threat from the regime will continue unless the regime is fundamentally changed. The new U.S. administration, seeking ways to earn support from the U.S. Congress, believes that they can win support by doing so. In this context, it has maintained a hard-line attitude toward North Korea since the presidential campaign.

First, is the issue of the North's nuclear program and the 1994 Agreed Framework. They claim that the Agreed Framework is a symbol of the U.S. appeasement policy toward North Korea in which the Democrat-led U.S. administration "bought" the deal to freeze the Stalinist regime's nuclear program. And, despite the Agreement, concerns about the North's nuclear development have not been completely cleared up. Although the Agreed Framework has been complied with, more transparency over the regime's nuclear development and the freezing of the program is needed. Moreover, instead of providing light-water reactors, they favor other ways to provide energy to North Korea, for instance, construction of thermal power plants.

Second, they believe that the thorniest pending issue in U.S.-North Korea relations, and one that requires prompt resolution, is North Korea's missile development program. All agreements on nuclear and missile programs of the North should be verified. Finally, in order to properly respond to the threats of ballistic missiles from North Korea and other countries, the Missile Defense should be established.

Third, there is the issue of North Korea's conventional weapons concentrated in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) of the Korean peninsula and threats posed by the country's conventional forces, both of which must be reduced. Considering that U.S. forces in Korea are under threat from North Korea's conventional arms, backward redeployment of North Korean forces concentrated along the border and reduction of military tension are important issues for the U.S. administration

However, the principles and the basic direction of the Clinton administration's North Korea policy are expected to continue under

the Bush administration. The reasons for this are as follows:

First, the engagement policy of the Clinton administration has already produced many significant outcomes. For instance, it resolved Pyongyang's nuclear program and paved the way to deal with the communist state's long-range missile program.

Second, it would not be easy for the new Republican-led U.S. administration to propose new alternatives for its North Korea policy other than engagement. A Republican report released by the North Korea Advisory Group in November 1999 in response to the Perry Report, failed to present policy alternatives. Instead, the Republicans presented a lame excuse: They had not been instructed to propose policy alternatives by the Speaker of the House, and therefore had no policy initiative to offer.

Third, it is realistically impossible for the new U.S. administration to pursue a confrontational policy toward North Korea, as this would not be in accordance with the North Korea policies of its allies—South Korea and Japan, or China. In particular, it would not be easy for the United States to push for a policy which runs counter to the North Korea policy of the South Korean government, which is not only an ally, but a prime player on the Korean peninsula. South Korea's policy of reconciliation, cooperation and co-existence toward North Korea has scored great success and brought tension reduction, not only on the Korean peninsula but also Northeast Asia as a whole, thereby greatly contributing to the advancement of the national interests of the United States, Japan and China.

Finally, the Republican administration's North Korea policy would also be influenced by North Korea's U.S. policy. From a historical perspective, October 2000 was the turning point, when Pyongyang's U.S. policy shifted toward reconciliation and cooperation.

There has been ample evidence that the Bush administration is unlikely to change the existing North Korea policy. In an interview with *The New York Times* on January 14, 2001, then President-elect Bush expressed his intention to accept the Clinton administration's missile

negotiation initiative with North Korea, as long as if it included language requiring the North's implementation of the agreements. During a meeting between U.S. State Secretary Powell and his South Korean counterpart Lee Joung-binn held in Washington in February 2001, the U.S. administration confirmed its continued support for the South Korean government's reconciliation and cooperation effort toward the North. The same position was maintained during the summit between President Bush and President Kim Dae-jung in March 2001.

In a letter written by the task force on the Korean peninsula and sent to President Bush on March 22, the Council on Foreign Relations pointed out that the U.S. administration needed to support South Korea's reconciliation and cooperation effort. This position was also expressed in a press conference given by State Secretary Colin Powell on March 23. Recently, in a conference on North Korea held by the George Bush School of Government and Public Service at the Texas A&M University in mid-April, former U.S. President George Bush also endorsed the stance. Meanwhile, Assistant State Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly also confirmed the position at the Senate confirmation hearing. Most importantly, in a letter delivered by Deputy State Secretary Armitage to President Kim Dae-jung on May 9, President Bush promised his full support for South Korea's sunshine policy and for continued compliance with the Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea.

#### **THE FUTURE U.S. NORTH KOREA POLICY: SOME RECOMMENDATIONS**

As mentioned above, according to the letter delivered by the U.S. delegation, President George W. Bush strongly supported Seoul's policy of engaging North Korea. He also expressed continued support for the Agreed Framework and added that the U.S. would restart missile negotiations with the North "in the near future." At the same

time, however, Bush officially declared that the United States would proceed with the missile defense plan, and several times expressed a negative view of the North Korean regime. Korea experts assess that those contradictory positions will jeopardize the achievements that all surrounding countries that have devoted their time and resources to the settlement of peace on the Korean peninsula. The United State appears to be focused on completing its North Korea policy review as soon as possible, so as to remove the North's missile threat by resuming the missile talks. Moreover, it wants to support reconciliation and cooperation between the two Koreas, to induce the North to emerge from self-imposed isolation, to possibly loosen the connection between North Korea and China in Northeast Asia, and to pursue peace and stability in Northeast Asia based on the elimination of the North Korean threat. Then, what should the U.S. consider in formulating its policy toward North Korea? Here are some recommendations for the Bush Administration.

First, listen to the advice of South Korea—a dependable ally that brought about inter-Korean reconciliation and tension reduction in East Asia—in dealing with North Korea. President Kim Dae-jung's advice to seize the opportunity for peace by helping North Korea to follow a course of change should be taken seriously: For North Korea, change is not a matter of choice but of survival, and Kim Jong-il's position must be to open up and change for the country's survival.

North Korea may be a "failing" system, and "once it's opened, it may well collapse anyway," as characterized by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. But it is not wise for the outside world to force North Korea to change from within or to democratize, as Georgi Toloraya argued. Toloraya is correct in stating that "engagement is good as long as it does not threaten the North Korean regime" and that such approach is "not a 'dove' approach," but rather "the only pragmatic, de-ideologized choice" at this stage.

Second, reassess what has been achieved in U.S.-North Korea relations in a more positive, realistic, and objective way. The U.S. has succeeded in inducing North Korea into the world where the U.S.-set

rules of the game prevail. The experience of give-and-take and compromise through diplomatic negotiations in solving conflicts has already set the principle for behavior in the relationship between the two countries and laid the foundation upon which a new regional order in the Asia-Pacific will be built through a peaceful process, not through revolutionary upheavals.

Third, begin dialogue and negotiations first, if the U.S. wishes to put a strict monitoring and verification on the agreements with North Korea. No negotiations, no agreements. And “no agreements” would include those on verification. The advice of Madeleine Albright and Wendy Sherman is logically correct: “Transparency and verification . . . have to begin with the negotiation process,” and the U.S. “does not need to make a false choice between negotiating a missile agreement with North Korea and pursuing President Bush’s already-stated intentions to build a NMD” and it “can move forward on both strategies without foreclosing any option” at this point.

Fourth, acknowledge that the political game is played in North Korea as well, and pay serious attention to it in order to be able to respond in a more appropriate way. As Daniel A. Pinkston aptly pointed out, for instance, the U.S. should pay close attention to “Kim Jong-il’s political constraints in Pyongyang, which will be framed by a coalition based upon the military and defense industry.” The U.S. should support Kim’s reform effort, Pinkston argued, if U.S. security objectives are to be achieved: When Kim dismantles the nuclear and missile programs, “alternative employment” for his supporters in the military and defense industries “can only be provided through economic reforms, market opening and foreign investment.”

Fifth, consider the predicament of South Korea, a trusted U.S. ally, on the NMD issue. South Korea is in a treacherous situation where it can neither support nor oppose U.S. pursuit of the NMD since the four major powers surrounding the Korean peninsula are deeply divided in this highly contentious matter. If South Koreans were living in the Cold War era, they would not hesitate to take sides even in an arms race. But Koreans are living in a post-Cold War era where not only

Koreans, but also other peoples, are trying to build new relationships with their neighbors in accordance with post-Cold War *Geist* and *modus vivendi*. South Korea's seemingly independent behavior on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in the ROK-Russian Joint Communiqué of February 27, 2001 should not be interpreted as opposition to U.S. policy *per se*, as Aidan Foster-Carter pointed out, but rather as a reflection of South Korea's predicament in which it had to entertain Russia in its own diplomatic way.

Sixth, don't be reluctant to admit that the Asia-Pacific could be a problematic region for the U.S. in the future—more difficult than it thinks, as was already shown in the recent collision of U.S. surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter near Hainan Island. It should try to avoid situations in which China and North Korea are closely united against the U.S. in each and every policy issue.

In this context, do not lose time in winding up a review of the North Korea policy and in resuming missile negotiations with North Korea. An earlier finalization of U.S. policy on North Korea will be of great benefit to U.S. interests. North Korea has continued to demand a security guarantee from, and normalization of relations with the U.S., and it is ready to cooperate if the U.S. is ready to help. As was reported in *Rodong Sinmun* on March 19, 2001, "no country in the world poses a threat to the U.S. . . . and what we wish to do is resolve our tensions with the U.S. and improve relations with them."

Finally, consider a visit by President Bush to North Korea, if a missile deal is complete and ready for signing, as many have already suggested. Since George Bush, Sr. was the U.S. President when the Cold War ended on a global scale in the early 1990s, it would be significant for George W. Bush, Jr. as U.S. President, to witness the true end of the Cold War in East Asia, ushering in peace and stability in the region that doesn't seriously challenge U.S. interests.