



THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL  
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## THE KOREA-UNITED STATES RELATIONSHIP UNDER KIM AND BUSH: A COMMON APPROACH TO NORTH KOREA

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*This paper is adapted from remarks by Assemblyman Kim Keun Tae at the Atlantic Council seminar on January 18, 2001: "Different Interpretations of Reciprocity in Negotiations with North Korea."*

*Assemblyman Kim believes that in recent years the Korea-United States relationship reached an unprecedented level of trust and coordination. This is partly the result of Korea's democratization, symbolized by the orderly transfer of power to the opposition party in 1997. It is partly due to the leadership and energetic regional and global diplomacy exhibited by President Kim Dae Jung over the past three years. It is also the result of the steady commitment of U.S. administrations of both parties to work with South Korea in using diplomacy, backed by clearly credible deterrence, to draw North Korea from its self-destructive domestic and foreign policies.*

*Kim, a vice president in the ruling Millennium Democratic Party, notes the history of conflicting emotions among democratic activists toward the United States over the past four decades, and declares that the democratic movement ultimately appreciated the value of the U.S. alliance. He traces the roots of the current Korean administration's "sunshine" policy toward North Korea, and argues that its principles are in the common tradition of both countries.*

*Writing in anticipation of the March 7 South Korea-United States summit, Kim encouraged the new Bush administration to see its interests advanced by an increased engagement with North Korea. He argues that North Korea's dire condition, coupled with the unusual Republican control of the Congress and White House in the United States, provide the ingredients for a pro-active, coordinated U.S.-ROK-Japanese diplomacy that could achieve historic successes in reducing the North Korean threat and hastening reunification of the Koreans.*

### THE UNITED STATES-ROK RELATIONSHIP

I would first like to address the present state of relations between South Korea and the United States. The Clinton administration, in its final months, was able to deal effectively with several critical issues affecting the relationship. President Clinton's heartfelt regret regarding the No Gun Ri incident and the resolution of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiations greatly heightened

the level of trust Korean people have of the United States. These developments represent the goodwill of the American people and the determination of the U.S. government and the Kim Dae Jung administration to avoid serious disagreements.

I also think this movement in bilateral relations is directly related to America's appreciation of the advancement of democracy in Korea, and I believe that it can increase the potential for cooperation

between the United States and Korea in influencing events on the Korean peninsula and in East Asia generally.

One manifestation of globalization's impact on Korea is the fading of some of the deep-seated reasons for anti-American sentiment among the Korean people. The economic crisis of 1997-1998 has given the Korean public a new feeling of global interconnectedness, so that negative aspects of national pride are replaced by an increasing interest in the rest of the world. The resolution of the issues related to SOFA is particularly helpful in assuring the success of U.S.-ROK relations, given that criticism of the U.S. military presence on the peninsula had been mounting while negotiations were underway.

I myself was very active in the pro-democracy movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then I was very anti-American, since it seemed as though every time democracy gained a foothold in South Korea, the United States tried to deter its development. The irony is that the interests of those Koreans who were pro-American at the time were actually diverging from those of the United States. People like myself, meanwhile, have come to understand the United States a lot better over the years, and today the majority of South Koreans accept the presence of U.S. forces in Korea (USFK) as a strategic necessity. I predict that the protests against USFK will become less significant now that the SOFA and No Gun Ri agreements are behind us.

### **THE CONDITION OF NORTH KOREA**

North Korea's bleak situation is obvious. The country is experiencing a food shortage so extreme that many of its people are starving. The economy remains in a dire condition. An over-militarized nation tightly controlled by Chairman Kim Jong-Il, North Korea invites international consternation related to its missile and weapons of mass destruction development and ambiguous nuclear capability.

It seems that Chairman Kim wants to base a solution to North Korea's disastrous economic

situation on reparations from Japan and economic cooperation with South Korea, while leveraging diplomatic overtures from the United States to secure his power base. However, his support within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) could become unstable under different scenarios, so it is likely that Chairman Kim will have to devote significant attention to maintaining internal stability during domestic or foreign policy changes.

Earlier this winter, Chairman Kim Jong-Il visited China. He visited the Pudong district of Shanghai, the financial center of China, which is undergoing rapid industrialization. As many South Koreans who have visited North Korea are aware, Chairman Kim Jong-Il is deeply interested in the former South Korean president Park Chung-Hee and his model of "developmental dictatorship." Also, North Korea's official news channels have reported that Chairman Kim Jong-Il said in his New Year's address, "Let us break through the economic obstacles with a new thinking about the new age."

We may construe from these reports that Chairman Kim Jong-Il is conveying a message not only to those in North Korea but to outsiders as well. First, at least rhetorically, he is conveying a firm intention to promote reform and open-door policies. Second, because Chairman Kim Jong-Il seems somewhat uneasy about the emergence of the George W. Bush administration in the United States, it is reasonable to conclude that his efforts to strengthen North Korea's relationship with China are intended as a counterweight to the cooler stance he expects America to adopt.

The summit between the two Koreas and the joint declaration of June 2000 in Pyongyang should be considered an important step for peace in the Korean peninsula and stability in East Asia. The subsequent visit by U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright to North Korea last October reinforced this positive development. This progress was made possible by the twin engagement policies of America's "Perry process" and the Kim Dae Jung administration's "sunshine" policy.

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### WHY PURSUE THE “SUNSHINE” POLICY?

In a fundamental sense, the sunshine policy is an effort to apply to the reality of the Korean peninsula some of the wisdom of German Chancellor Willy Brandt's “Eastern Policy,” which was instrumental in reuniting East Germany with West Germany and Europe. Among other considerations, we are guided by the following points in conceptualizing the sunshine policy:

First, the war in the Korean peninsula in the 1950s was a horrible tragedy. Yet fifty years later, peace has not yet taken root. We plan to achieve a peaceful reunification at some point in the future. This is a matter of humanitarian concern; but it is also a right to which the Korean people are entitled. I do not mean to promote nationalism, but without any movement toward peace on the Korean peninsula, there will be no stability in East Asia.

Second, the competition for world domination on a global scale has ended and, as a result, the Cold War structure has collapsed. With respect to Korea, one might also say that the competition between the North and the South was concluded long ago. This becomes obvious when one compares the two countries across economic dimensions, the establishment of democratic institutions, and the conduct of foreign relations. South Korea's superiority in these categories is overwhelming. What this means is that the relationship between North and South Korea is an asymmetrical one. The superior power can change the situation for the better by crafting flexible responses while adhering to firm principles.

Third, the increased strength of the U.S.-ROK deterrent, in its many aspects, is a fundamental dimension of the sunshine policy. We have increased the efficiency, capability, modernization, interoperability and mutual trust by our combined forces during the past three years. The fact that this strengthened deterrent has been part of the sunshine policy during the past three years has escaped many observers in South Korea and the United States, though probably not in North Korea.

To this enhanced deterrent capability we should add the unprecedented emphasis on close coordination among the United States, South Korea and Japan that resulted from William Perry's effort.

### COMPLICATIONS IN NEGOTIATING WITH NORTH KOREA

There are several factors that complicate the situation, and first among them are the twin fundamental questions of whether or not we can trust North Korea, and of the extent to which the North Korean leadership truly desires change. Kim Jong-Il's trip to Shanghai is an encouraging sign. Most encouraging of all, though, would be the fruition of Kim Jong-Il's reciprocal visit to Seoul sometime later this year. This gesture would go a long way in reassuring South Koreans that Pyongyang is sincerely committed to different behavior. In fact, this visit is a logical necessity for Kim Jong-Il if he is to continue with his new foreign policy. His statements and behavior since the summit imply this return visit, and both the South Korean public and the international community expect it.

Second, a close corollary to these concerns asks whether or not North and South Korea will increase the frequency (and, in the case of family visitations, the volume) of their meetings and exchanges. If not, will the momentum established thus far be lost?

Third, given the uncertainty caused by the restructuring of South Korea's economy, the people of South Korea are increasingly preoccupied with the economic conditions of the future. These worries, which are further exacerbated by the likely possibility of a downturn in the economies of the United States and Japan, tend to make an increased level of exchanges with North Korea appear financially burdensome. It is important to observe in this regard that the actual taxpayer costs to South Koreans have been greatly exaggerated by some critics of engagement. These costs are in the area of \$400 to \$500 million so far. Even in the most positive of circumstances, large cash transfers from the ROK, the United States or Japan are

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either politically indefensible or simply unavailable. The government's cost of engagement is by any measure small, particularly when compared to the cost of renewed confrontation.

Fourth, we should also be mindful of the lessons learned from the Taepodong missile crisis of August 1998. This crisis underscored the importance of sharing priorities among the three allies, so that the security and political needs of each member are pursued together. If this is not done, it will be possible for North Korean actions to halt or undermine the South's united front in negotiations with them.

In spite of all these, however, I think the sunshine policy—or “comprehensive engagement”—makes compelling strategic sense. As far as the issue of reciprocity is concerned, we abide by the principle of comprehensiveness. We might call it a policy of “change through contacts” or “comprehensive reciprocity.” I think it would be useful to engage in a discussion on a sound and effective basis among all the parties agreeing on the principle of comprehensiveness. The opposition party in South Korea is in agreement with the administration on the principle of comprehensive engagement. But the party has shown ambivalence toward working with the government in order to advance North Korea policy. Mechanisms in the National Assembly and elsewhere are available for the opposition to use in assuming a full role in policy-making and to share any credit as engagement continues. Ironically, it is the government's determination to drain the North Korea issues of their domestic political utility that has allowed us to establish unprecedented consistency of policy direction in recent years.

I am inclined to view much of North Korean behavior as analogous to “bad behavior by a weaker sibling,” and South Korea has to deal with it as such. As the relationship between the two Koreas moves forward, it stands to reason that the ROK will demand more reciprocity from North Korea. Domestic support for the sunshine policy—which now stands at over 80 percent—will depend upon it. Part of increased reciprocity will need to include military confidence-building

measures. But North Korea cannot yet deliver on the full range of conditions that some people would like to see, and we therefore have to balance our demands with “strategic patience.” Later this year we will work to re-connect the railroad between North Korea and South Korea. That North Korea is working on this project with us at all is by itself a significant achievement.

## **COORDINATING ENGAGEMENT WITH THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION**

The United States opened a dialogue with North Korea in the late 1980s under the first President Bush's administration. The relationship between the two countries developed further when North Korea and South Korea signed a Basic Agreement in 1992. That same year, as many perhaps remember, U.S. Under-Secretary of State for Political Affairs Arnold Kanter met with the North Korean Workers Party Secretary for International Affairs Kim Yong Sun at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations in the first ever high-level meeting between officials from Washington and Pyongyang.

We think that the Agreed Framework of 1994, between the United States and North Korea, was a good solution, if perhaps not the best one. In spite of its problems, I think this system should be preserved so as to maintain the level of trust that has already accrued between the two parties. The Agreed Framework serves several different purposes for the different actors involved; it is not just an energy program. If changes to it are considered, we must be extremely careful, because we could lose our advantages while North Korea could introduce obstacles to its early resolution of nuclear material questions.

The outstanding issues in the last negotiations between North Korea and the Clinton administration concerned verification of any concessions made on Taepodong missiles and the freezing and dismantling of Nodong missiles, which can strike Japan and the U.S. military bases in the Far East. These are important issues to South Korea as well. We hope that these issues

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can be resolved through dialogue, negotiation, and mutual compromise. After the Bush administration organizes its Korea policy team it will be important to reconnect soon with North Korea, regardless of the specifics of change or continuity from the Clinton administration, to make sure that positions are clear, tensions are minimized, and movement is possible.

We hope that the Bush administration studies the situation carefully and takes new initiatives. The new administration's combination of Asian regional expertise and extensive management capability is combined with the rare control by one party of both houses of Congress and the White House. There could hardly be a better time for a

renewed commitment to engagement. We believe that Chairman Kim Jong-Il's visit to Seoul later this year will help propel a genuine negotiation between the two Koreas, perhaps even leading to a genuine peace treaty formally ending the Korean War.

We are asking for the leadership of the United States to provide a stabilizing force during this process. By agreeing to the principle of strategic engagement, adhering to a policy of flexible responses, and making sure we grasp the deals that are in our interest and within our reach, we believe that peace on the Korean peninsula can be achieved and stability in East Asia greatly enhanced.

*Mr. Kim Keun Tae entered politics in 1995 as a vice president of the opposition Democratic Party. He was elected a member of the National Assembly of Korea, and joined the newly established opposition party, the National Congress for a New Politics (NCNP), as a vice president in 1996. He served on the National Unification & Foreign Affairs Committees, and is presently serving on the Finance and Economy Committee in the National Assembly. He is a member of the Korean-U.S. Parliamentarian Council. In 2000, he was elected a member of the Supreme Council of the Millennium Democratic Party, which is both the newest incarnation of the democratic party and the current ruling party. Prior to his election to the National Assembly, Mr. Kim was one of the nation's most prominent pro-democracy leaders. As a result of his work in this capacity, he was imprisoned in 1985 and again in 1990—for a total of more than 5 years—and wanted by the secret police for a cumulative 7 years throughout several intervals in the 1970s and 1980s.*

The author's views presented herein do not necessarily represent those of the Atlantic Council.

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