



Policy Forum 07-055: Ain't No Sunshine When He's Gone? The Future of Engagement after the ROK Presidential Election



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By Scott Bruce and Timothy Savage

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I. Introduction

Scott Bruce, Program Officer at the San Francisco Office of the Nautilus Institute, and Timothy Savage, Deputy Director of the Seoul Office of the Nautilus Institute, write, "If the experience of the last six years teaches anything, it is that the United States cannot carry out an effective policy toward the DPRK without the active participation of the ROK. Future American policymakers thus would be well advised to take note; the ship of engagement has already set sail, and it would be best to ride alongside, rather than be caught in the wake."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Article by Scott Bruce and Timothy Savage

- "Ain't No Sunshine When He's Gone? The Future of Engagement after the ROK Presidential Election"

By Scott Bruce and Timothy Savage

The upcoming South Korea elections will place a new captain at the helm of the ship of state but it remains to be seen how much the election of a new president will alter the course of the ROK's North Korea policy.

The last time that the ROK chose a president, in 2002, many observers expected that the occasion would mark the end of the "Sunshine Policy" of engagement toward North Korea introduced by former President Kim Dae-jung. The victory of Roh Moo-hyun, however, meant that the sunshine policy continued with only minor changes. This seems to have caught the Bush administration by surprise; their inattention to the Korea policy in their first year in office seems to have reflected an assurance that opposition candidate Lee Hoi-chang would win the ROK election and join Washington in a more hardline approach toward Pyongyang.

This misplaced hope on the part of the Bush administration not only reflected a failure in prognostication but also a misreading of the general mood within the ROK. While Lee advocated a more measured engagement with the DPRK, he was not in favor of returning to a posture of confrontation.[i] The misunderstanding in Washington did not end there. Hardline American critics mistook Roh's low approval ratings - resulting from concerns over the economy and the generational clash known as the "South-South conflict" - for dissatisfaction with engagement. In fact, however, a broad consensus had emerged in the ROK over the need for engaging North Korea, even while much disagreement persisted over the details.[ii]

The ruling Woori Party is expected to continue engagement more or less intact if its candidate wins the election. But the consensus on engagement can also be seen in the approaches to the DPRK of the candidates of the leading opposition Grand National Party. If we look at the approaches that the candidates proposed at the party's June 19th debate, it is clear that despite their criticism of the Roh Moo-hyun administration's policy, their alternative tactics will not stop inter-Korean engagement, only shift the emphasis.

Former Mayor of Seoul Lee Myung-bak, who once called the Sunshine Policy "an unprincipled and unilateral policy of appeasement," supports an approach that focuses on economic assistance rather than unlimited humanitarian aid.[iii] His proposed North Korean strategy involves sponsoring the economic development of North Korea to bring its per capita GDP up to US\$3000 over the next ten years, and he has backed a second inter-Korean industrial park to become an 'open square of unification' between the two Koreas. [iv]

Park Geun-hye, the more hawkish of the ROK candidates, favors a "reciprocal approach based on principle" with regard to the North.[v] Vocal in her opposition to the Roh Moo-hyun administration's North Korea policy as "aimless" and a "failure" her approach is not to break off ties with the North but to focus in more detail on resolving the DPRK's nuclear program as a primary concern.[vi] So with both of the main GNP candidates, the South Korean engagement policy with North Korea will continue. Lee Myung-bak will focus on building the economic infrastructure in the DPRK through joint economic projects and Park Geun-hye will use engagement as a carrot to drive the process of denuclearization forward but neither, despite their criticism of the Sunshine Policy, sees an alternative to economic engagement with the DPRK.

Underdog candidate Hong Joon-pyo seems to think that the most likely eventually for the DPRK is that the regime will collapse, and favors positioning the ROK to keep the PR China from exercising any claim to the DPRK in such an event. And while he criticizes the Sunshine Policy noting that "unconditional aid to the North only resulted in (the explosion of) the atomic bomb" he nonetheless supports "peaceful resolution" of the nuclear crisis assuming that the government has "concrete measures" to make it happen.[vii] Other conservative candidates like Won Hee-ryong and Go Jin-hwa have been attacked within their own parties for advocating less conservative positions than most in the GNP, including direct engagement with North Korea.[viii]

The new GNP platform has been termed a "Peace Vision for the Korean Peninsula" and represents a significant shift from the traditional conservative approach of focusing on security issues first to now offering rice and fertilizer with no political strings attached, opening the South Korean airwaves to DPRK broadcasting and news content, and furthering inter-Korean economic cooperation through industrial training of North Koreans and a free trade agreement with North Korea. Not surprisingly this strategy has been called "a second-class imitation of sunshine" by the ROK media. [ix]

These policies reflect how the landscape in ROK politics has inexorably shifted over the 20 years since South Korea became a democratic state. The proximity of the two Koreas, together with the economic and political strides made by Seoul, makes open conflict almost unthinkable to anyone in the South. While unification remains the ultimate goal, most people in South Korea favor a gradual approach to lessen the gaps between the two Koreas and reduce the high cost that a sudden, German-style unification would entail. And many South Koreans also fear Beijing's growing influence in Pyongyang, and hope to counter it by making the DPRK economically dependant on Seoul.

All of the current presidential candidates feel that economic cooperation between North and South can be beneficial for both countries, and most see such cooperation as a step towards eventual reunification of the peninsula. While they may criticize the Roh Moo-hyun government's approach as "give and give" rather than "give and take", the political discussion leading up to the December election centers on the most effective means of approaching the North and what realistic expectations for a DPRK response are, not if such cooperation is a good idea. Indeed, for many South Koreans reunification is not a dream for the future but a process that is already underway, albeit in slow motion, through the increased interactions between the two Koreas.

In contrast to the general consensus in South Korea, U.S. presidential candidates have a wide range of potential North Korea strategies. These policy proposals vary from John McCain and Tom Tancredo's assessment that the best way to deal with North Korea was to outsource the issue to the PRC, to Rudy Giuliani's pledge to stay the course and continue the Bush administration's North Korea policy if elected, to Hilary Clinton's demand for increased U.N. sanctions on the DPRK to accompany direct talks with the country, to Ron Paul's unique suggestion that North Korea could be a good destination for American farm products.[x] The strategies vary dramatically from hardline economic pressure on the DPRK to direct talks with North Korea. Yet none of them reflect an understanding of the situation in the ROK.

If the experience of the last six years teaches anything, it is that the United States cannot carry out an effective policy toward the DPRK without the active participation of the ROK. Future American policymakers thus would be well advised to take note; the ship of engagement has already set sail, and it would be best to ride alongside, rather than be caught in the wake.

NOTES

- [i] Mark E. Manyin, "South Korean Politics and Rising 'Anti-Americanism': Implications for U.S. Policy Toward North Korea", Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2003.
<https://nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/southkorea/CRS-RL31906ROKAntiAmericanism.pdf>
- [ii] For a comprehensive discussion of this emerging consensus, see the International Crisis Group, "Korea Backgrounder: How South Korea Views Its Brother from Another Planet," December 14, 2005, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3173&l=1>
- [iii] "Former Seoul Mayor Says Change Needed on N. Korean Policy," Voice of America News, February 6, 2007
- [iv] SKorea Opposition Presidential Runner Backs Second Inter-Korean Industrial Park," British Broadcasting Corporation, June 18, 2007.
- [v] "ROK Candidates on Defense and Diplomacy," ROK Weekly Report, The Nautilus Institute, July, 6, 2007. <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/dr/2007/jul/ndr06jul07.html#item3>
- [vi] "Opposition Presidential Candidate Demands N.K.'s Full Nuclear Abandonment" Yonhap News, February 15, 2007
- [vii] "GNP Rivals Wrangle over N.K., U.S. In Debate," Korea Herald, June 20, 2007; "S. Korea: N. Korea Not a Nuclear State," The Associated Press, Feb. 15, 2005
- [viii] "GNP," Korea Herald
- [ix] "GNP's Softened Stance toward North Korea Draws Heated Debate", Yonhap News, July 10, 2007.
- [x] "The Candidates on North Korea Policy," Council on Foreign Relations, June 11, 2007.
<http://www.cfr.org/publication/13569/>

III. Nautilus invites your responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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