

# Policy Forum 09-014: How Far Will the Seoul-Pyongyang Aggravation Go?



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# How Far Will the Seoul-Pyongyang Aggravation Go?

Policy Forum Online 09-014A: February 19th, 2009

By Alexander Vorontsov

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## I. Introduction

Alexander Vorontsov, Head of the Korea and Mongolia Department at the Institute of Oriental Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences, writes, "there are grounds to believe that Seoul has opted for a DPRK strategy that in a number of basic features repeats the 'regime change' policy

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towards North Korea that was pursued in the first six years of George W. Bush administration."

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 Alexander Vorontsov**

- "How Far Will the Seoul-Pyongyang Aggravation Go?"

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Criticism of South Korea's activities by Pyongyang became harsher during 2008 and, early this year, turned into dramatic demarches. On January 17, a spokesman of the Chief of Staff of the Korean People's Army said that his country's armed forces were "forced to transit to a state of full standoff to undermine the course of confrontation." Several days later, on January 30th North Korea's Committee on the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland said that the "Lee Myuon-bak's group" had rejected the path of peace-making and cooperation and had "brought the Korean situation to the brink of war". The Democratic People's Republic of Korea annulled all the agreements ending the military and political confrontation between the North and the South, including the 1992 Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-Aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation, refusing also to honour the military demarcation line in the Yellow Sea (also known as the Northern Limitation Line).

But a short while ago warmer winds blew over the troubled peninsula. The decisions of the October 2007 Second Inter-Korean Summit contained an impressive programme of economic integration including increased ties between the Seoul economic district and the adjacent North Korean province of southern Hwanghae.

However, in 2008 relations between South and North Korea transformed from productive cooperation in to a new Cold War.

The changes were based on a new approach to its northern neighbour by the current South Korean administration. It rejected as "failing" the policies of "engagement" pursued by the previous two presidents and instead claimed that it needed to pursue a "pragmatic course" aimed at reinforcing interstate relations where mutually advantageous with a "give-and-take" nature. Seoul officials declared that attempts to reinforce this pragmatic policy would not negate its attempts to continue full-fledged dialogue and cooperation with Pyongyang. The concept "Vision 3000: Denuclearization and Openness" demonstrated this approach. Essentially, it promised that if North Korea lived up to its promises of nuclear disarmament and openness, Seoul would be prepared to give the DPRK large-scale economic assistance aimed at raising the average per capita income to \$3,000 in the coming ten years. The most significant factor of this new approach was the failure to fulfill the decisions of the two inter-Korean summits in 2000 and 2007.

At the same time Seoul attempted to strengthen the US-South Korean alliance which had weakened over the previous decade. Seoul attempted to rapidly restore US-ROK ties including the trilateral coordination mechanism between the USA, Japan, and South Korea.

These measures provoked a negative response from the DPRK. Keeping silent for a month after the inauguration of Lee Myuon-bak in the hope of preserving the channels of interaction with the new administration, Pyongyang then launched into a large-scale campaign of criticism of South Korean authorities referring to them as "national traitors."

Seoul's official position on the current crisis in inter-Korean relations can be boiled down to the

following: never give up the principle of tying cooperation with the DPRK to progress in denuclearizing North Korea's nuclear arms and pursuing policies of openness. The ROK also has refused to respond to the North Korean reduction of contact with the South, regarding this as another attempt of Pyongyang to put pressure on the government of the Republic of Korea. The underlying assumption in this policy is that, having seen Seoul's tough position, Pyongyang will soon return to normal diplomacy and agree to Seoul's new rules of the game. Special emphasis is put on declaring Seoul's commitment to the idea of a wide interaction with the North, preservation of good will for the sake of the dialogue, and the wish to save relations that are being destroyed.

Some analysts have stressed that the new crisis in inter-Korean relations has been the result of the inadequacy of the Lee Myuon-g-bak team that is responsible for relations with North Korea. This team had no experience or personal contact with North Korea and miscalculated Pyongyang's response to Seoul's new policy. But they also expect that Southerners, having realised their own miscalculations, would re-adapt their approach.

However other political analysts argue that the Lee Myuon-g-bak's administration is not just attempting to correct the "appeasement" policies of its predecessors, as is officially stated, but conscientiously and consistently pursuing a principally different course. These analysts argue that the refusal to follow the line of "engagement" is an attempt to transition to a policy of "regime change."

This would account for Seoul's stubborn adherence to its new policies regardless of their catastrophic consequences for relations with the DPRK and its unshaken immunity to the harsh criticism of it at home and abroad. The quintessence of this strategy is that "waiting is also policy".

At the same time an unprejudiced analysis of Seoul's "Vision 3000" exposes the vulnerability of the policy and demonstrates that Pyongyang is totally inadmissible to almost all of its components.

Vision 3000 represents a departure from the principle of cooperating on an equal level and moves toward the concept of a "Big Brother-Little Brother" relationship whereby the successful South is set to lend a hand to the poor North if the latter "follows the path of wisdom", agreeing in essence to accept Seoul's preconditions for denuclearization, openness, and human rights. It is clear right from the start that North Koreans who value their national pride and dignity and who treasure the right to "live and die in their own way" would immediately reject this approach.

It is also clear that including the demand for denuclearization as an issue in bilateral Korean relations is not an effective strategy as the resolution of that issue depends to a large degree on the role of Washington. The attempts to push the DPRK to make radical reforms and implement large-scale cooperation on the issue of human rights would be taken by Pyongyang as the trite elements of a policy aimed at regime change. This wariness was reinforced by the massive dissemination of anti-North Korean leaflets (with banknotes attached) across the demilitarized zone in the past several months by a number of South Korean NGOs, rumours spread in Seoul about Kim Jong Il's health, and plans to use the instability in the North to unify the peninsula on South Korea's terms.

Northerners do not believe the South Korean claims that it could not prevent the flow of the leaflets (given the respect for democratic rights of NGOs), because they still remember the harsh persecution of the organizers of the mass protests against imports of US beef in the summer of 2008 based on the outdated anti-Communist law on national security.

Seoul's new ideologues and those that have constructed the new North Korean policy realized from the start that their course was fundamentally different from the policies pursued by the two previous center-leftist administrations. They also knew that their actions would provoke a sharply negative

reaction from the North. In other words, the current deep disruption in inter-Korean relations has been designed to last a long time (quite possibly for the entire presidential term of Lee Myung-bak). Its devisers were attempting to provoke a dramatic crisis. This mindset reflects general low level of importance of relations with the DPRK in the foreign policy priorities of the new Seoul administration.

Some South Korean critics of the current administration assume that the crisis in relations with the DPRK was also planned to switch the public attention to an external factor during the profound and painful economic crisis.

Thus there are grounds to believe that Seoul has opted for a DPRK strategy that in a number of basic features repeats the "regime change" policy towards North Korea that was pursued in the first six years of George W. Bush administration.

At the same time South Korean leaders have made serious and not unsuccessful attempts to build an image of a party that is open to dialogue in the eyes of broad public, the side that is sincerely interested in continuing inter-Korean cooperation, portraying Pyongyang as the culprit of the current crisis for its alleged inability to cooperate with the reasonable and "pragmatic" proposals of the South.

True to its tradition of responding "to dialogue by dialogue" and to "rigidity with super rigidity" Pyongyang's response was belligerent and aggressive. This has resulted in the tangible growth of tensions on the Korean Peninsula with no visible end. While this "war of nerves" is not likely to become a real war the threat of non-provoked conflict is growing.

The development of events along this scenario complicates the international situation in North-East Asia and does not improve the atmosphere for the six-party talks on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

However, there the international situation will also impact inter-Korean relations. The new US administration will have a noticeable impact on ties between the ROK and DPRK. The Obama Administration is willing to engage Pyongyang in direct dialogue. This means that there is hope that the current stalemate can be overcome. It is no secret that the election of a Democrat to the White House provoked concerns among "the new right" in South Korea, increasing demands from the ruling party to Lee Myung-bak administration to adopt a pro-Washington line and work to improve its relationship with North Korea.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

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