



Policy Forum 08-045: Koreas Not Eye-to-Eye on Vision 3000



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Koreas Not Eye-to-Eye on Vision 3000

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By Andrei Lankov

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I. Introduction

Andrei Lankov, an Associate Professor at Kookmin University, Seoul, and Adjunct Research Fellow at the Research School of Pacifica and Asian Studies, Australian National University, writes, "sooner or later Lee Myung-bak and his advisers will have to reconsider the "Northern question" and come out with a strategy that has a chance to work... Quite likely, their answer will be some kind of engagement policy, in other words, a re-worked and re-branded version of the Sunshine Policy."

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II. Article by Andrei Lankov

- "Koreas Not Eye-to-Eye on Vision 3000"

By Andrei Lankov

In February, the Blue House, the residence of South Korean presidents, got a new tenant. The December 2007 elections ended in the landslide victory of the local right, led by Lee Myung-bak (better known as "MB"), a no-nonsense businessman and former mayor of Seoul who has positioned himself as a pragmatist.

For Western media, the Koreas usually become newsworthy when the militant North does something dramatic. Because of this, most visitors to Seoul are surprised to see how marginal a role is played by North Korean issues in South Korean politics. Nonetheless, Lee as a presidential candidate had to have a position on North Korea. During the campaign he criticized the Sunshine Policy of the previous administrations which showered the North with unconditional aid and gifts without asking for as much as the right to monitor aid distribution.

"Sunshine" came from the assumption that North Korean leaders would eventually see the light and start emulating Chinese reforms that in due time would help to narrow the yawning gap between two Korean economies and lay foundations for relatively painless integration and unification. Perhaps the practitioners of the Sunshine Policy also quietly hoped to prevent the violent collapse of the North Korean regime, which might lead to manifold dangers, including the threat of German-style "unification by absorption", a very expensive scenario nobody in the South feels happy about.

Lee has said that unconditional aid has spoiled the North, helped the Pyongyang rulers to stay in power and brought about a serious crisis in relations between Seoul and Washington. The US did not approve of the cordial support extended to the nuclear-armed rogue state.

As a candidate, Lee made it clear that his policy would be different - sort of. He repeats that he does not want to stop ongoing projects, including the controversial Kaesong Industrial Park, but he also says that further increases in aid would be impossible without serious concessions from the North.

Such positions led to outbursts of verbal abuse from the North, as well as to some demonstrative gestures, such as the expulsion of South officials from Kaesong Industrial Park, missile launches and fighter jet flights near the border. There were also hints that the North would not recognize the disputed maritime border between two countries in the Yellow Sea.

As an exercise in carrot-and-stick diplomacy, the presidential advisers worked out the plan known as "Vision 3000, Denuclearization, Openness". Vision 3000 describes what will become possible if North Korea surrenders its nuclear weapons. In such a case, the South promises, the North will see a flood of aid on hitherto unthinkable scale. Within merely a decade, the South Korean aid will help to increase the average per capita annual income to the level of US\$3,000, some three times above the current level (which, by the way, would be achievable only with annual growth exceeding the 20% mark).

Economists may argue whether such tempo is feasible, but the answer is likely to remain purely academic. The Vision 3000 plan has not the slightest chance of being accepted by the North.

To start with, even the wording used in the plan's official title is enough to raise blood pressures of

the North Korean apparatchiks. Its title includes the word "openness" or *kaebang* - the term the North Korean ideologues have repeatedly described as a cunning imperialist trick aimed at destroying the North's socialist system. The North Korean ruling elite understands that the only way to survive is to keep their society closed and tightly controlled. If North Korean populace learns too much about foreign prosperity (especially South Korean prosperity), the masses might become restive and unmanageable, and the entire system might collapse overnight, East German (or even Romanian) style. This is what the North Korean leadership is afraid of, and this fear can hardly be discarded as mere paranoia.

The second word used in the title of the Vision 3000 plan is equally problematic. This is *pihaek*, or de-nuclearization. The North has neither intention nor reason to surrender its nuclear weapons. If it does so, it will lose a powerful deterrent against foreign attack as well as a powerful tool to squeeze more money and aid from the international community. It will also face some domestic difficulties since the allegedly successful nuclear weapons project has been the only visible achievement of Kim Jong il's regime, and giving it away will be difficult to explain. Even a large lump-sum payment is unlikely to be an adequate compensation for the risks and lost opportunities.

No doubt the North is willing to negotiate, and perhaps it even can agree to dismantle some nuclear facilities. After all, it does not need its old rusty reactors any more. Yongbyon, the North Korean nuclear center, cannot possibly outproduce Los Alamos, so it does not make much sense to increase the North Korean nuclear arsenal. The Yongbyon laboratories have already produced enough plutonium for a few nuclear devices, and this is more than sufficient for the dual political purposes of deterrence and blackmail. So, the facilities have served their mission and thus can be dismantled if the fee is right, but there is no chance that Pyongyang would give up the nukes and plutonium, the hard-won results of 40 years of expensive research.

In other words, any plan that is conditioned upon Pyongyang's willingness to de-nuclearize itself does not belong to the realm of practical politics. It might be a good diplomatic gesture, to be sure, but hardly a workable program for the future. The attempt to use "openness", a usual scapegoat of the North Korean propaganda, as a reward decreases the chance of success even further.

Pyongyang has already made its attitude on Vision 3000 clear. Starting in late March, the North Korean media began to run exceptionally vitriolic articles about the South Korean leaders and their policies. These texts demonstrate a level of hysteria that is well above the remarkably high North Korean norm and was not applied to the South for years. Of course, Vision 3000 was mentioned specifically.

On April 1, Nodong Sinmun, mouthpiece of the Pyongyang dictatorship, ran a lengthy article typical of the lofty style of the North Korean high-brow media (English translation by the Korean Central News Agency):

The Lee Myung Bak regime of the Grand National Party that emerged in South Korea recently is becoming undisguised in its sycophancy towards the US and confrontation with the DPRK. Lee and his gentries are letting loose such spate of sophism as "priority to the south Korea-US relations", "complete settlement of the north's nuclear issue" and "pragmatism". ... Lee Myung Bak, in particular, is getting vocal in the nuclear racket, making no scruple of talking such nonsense as "it is impossible to head for reunification and hard to improve the south-north relations unless nukes are dismantled." ... As far as Lee Myung Bak is concerned, he is a conservative political charlatan ... No wonder, he revealed his true colors as a sycophant towards the US and anti-north confrontation advocator as soon as he came to power.

The anti-North confrontational nature of Lee and the ruling conservative forces was brought to light when they advocated the so-called "no-nukes, opening and bringing the per capita income to 3,000 dollars" as their "policy towards the north." The above-said piffle is nothing but a very absurd and ridiculous jargon as they cried out for the north's "complete nuclear abandonment" and "opening" as preconditions for the improvement of the North-South relations. This is little short of an anti-reunification declaration as it is aimed at sacrificing the interests of the Korean nation to serve outside forces, pursuing confrontation and war and driving the north-south relations to a collapse.

It is difficult to comprehend why exactly the Vision 3000 is an "anti-reunification declaration aimed at sacrificing the interests of the Korean nation", but logic has never been a strong point of the Pyongyang official media. Nonetheless, the reaction of the North was clear and predictable.

This does not necessarily mean that the Vision 3000 was a bad idea. Perhaps, it was a timely gesture. After all, this is exactly what Washington, uneasy about the recent trends in Seoul, wants to hear, and in the general scheme of things better relations with Washington might be worth a few months of listening to Pyongyang's tired vitriol.

It was also clearly a time to make a stand in dealing with Pyongyang. The past decade was a period of unilateral concessions, which often went too far, and the North Korean leaders got used to getting from Seoul what they wanted and on conditions they wanted. This habit should not be encouraged, so the tough stance of the present government is welcome. It will be a great mistake to yield now, as the North Koreans try to build up pressure and combine the media antics with diplomatic gestures and even mild military provocations.

This leaves us with a question: if Vision 3000 is completely unacceptable, how then should policy towards the North be conducted? It seems that on that stage the new South Korean administration does not have a clear-cut answer to this important question. For a while it will be possible to behave as if the Vision 3000 has some pragmatic value, but sooner or later Lee Myung-bak and his advisers will have to reconsider the "Northern question" and come out with a strategy that has a chance to work.

Quiet likely, their answer will be some kind of engagement policy, in other words, a re-worked and re-branded version of the Sunshine Policy. For all practical purposes, this is happening now, and in spite of all the tough statements and carefully staged hysterics, the major "Sunshine" projects continue with business as usual. The workshops of the Kaesong Industrial Park are producing what they should, South Korean tourist buses are cruising the downtown of Kaesong, and crowds of visitors are arriving at the Kamgang mountain resorts just north of the DMZ.

With hope the new version of the Sunshine Policy will retain some good features of the old policy but will have fewer shortcomings. At any rate, it'll be quite some time before this policy starts taking shape.

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development

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