

Policy Forum 03-32A: A Letter to President Bush: Come Up With Mutually Acceptable Solution to NK Issue



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PFO 03-32: May 12, 2003 A Letter to President Bush: Come Up With Mutually Acceptable Solution to NK Issue

By Moon Chung-in

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I. Introduction

Moon Chung-in is professor of political science at Yonsei University in Seoul. In his open letter to United States President George W. Bush, Moon refutes the notion that South Koreans are willing to tolerate a nuclear North Korea. However, Moon urges that the most effective way of transforming the North is not through invoking ultimatums, but by recognizing and engaging it. Unless earnest negotiations are first attempted, South Korea cannot support punitive measures against North Korea for its failure to comply with inspections and dismantling.

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II. Essay by Moon Chung-in

"A Letter to President Bush: Come Up With Mutually Acceptable Solution to NK Issue"

By Moon Chung-in

Yonsei University

Dear President Bush:

It is my great honor and privilege to write this open letter to you on the occasion of President Roh Moo-hyuns visit to the United States. The strengthening of the South Korea-U.S. alliance and the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear standoff are vital to South Koreas survival and prosperity. Some even argue that our destiny will be determined by the outcome of the forthcoming summit. This may be an exaggeration, but only just.

A successful summit is imperative for us all and the key to that is mutual respect and understanding. As a South Korean citizen, I would like to take this moment to tell you our side of story. At this weeks meeting, the North Korean nuclear problem will undoubtedly top the agenda. The situation has deteriorated from bad to worse as the North continues to resort to brinkmanship. It was truly shocking to learn that a North Korean delegate admitted to not only possessing two nuclear bombs, but also reprocessing spent fuel rods for the production of fissile materials.

There have been claims that South Koreans are willing to tolerate a nuclear North Korea for fear of its implosion and an escalation of conflict on the Korean peninsula. The accusation is dead wrong. Not only does a nuclear North Korea pose formidable threat to the South, but it would also fundamentally alter the inter-Korean military balance. A subsequent nuclear arms race between the two Koreas bears nightmarish implications for regional security by precipitating a nuclear domino effect in the region.

Although we pursue the same goal of a non-nuclear North Korea, I see a major divergence in our strategies. While you emphasize a diplomatic solution, you have not ruled out the use of military force or a strategy of malign neglect based on isolation, containment and transformation of North Korea. However, we are extremely concerned about both these options.

Given the structure of the military confrontation along the Demilitarized Zone and the massive anticipated collateral damage to the South, any military option would pose a tremendous risk. Judging by the nature of the North Korean regime, it may seem impossible to resolve the nuclear problem without transforming the regime. However, an isolating strategy would not yield the intended outcome. It would only harden Pyongyang's hard-line posture by consolidating both domestic cohesiveness and the strategic position of the military, as North Koreans are no strangers to hardship. The most effective way of transforming the North is not through invoking ultimatums, but by recognizing and engaging it.

South Koreans want neither a nuclear North Korea nor war on the Korean peninsula. But North Korea has gone too far. The situation demands your immediate attention. I strongly urge you to use your post-Iraq power to do a deal with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il now to stabilize the situation. Next week, next month, certainly next year, will be too late. If North Korea fails to comply with verifiable inspections and dismantling, which should be part of your deal, we will support your efforts to punish it. But it will be extremely difficult for President Roh to persuade South Koreans to join any American punitive action without first attempting to negotiate in earnest.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the South Korea-U.S. alliance. It is no exaggeration that the security and prosperity of South Korea today would never have materialized were it not for the blood of American soldiers and the alliance. While that alliance and the presence of U.S. troops have ensured South Korea's security by acting as a deterrent to North Korea, American economic assistance and cooperation has proven one of the most vital factors in shaping our economic growth. These merit our deepest appreciation.

But the alliance is in jeopardy. The joy and celebration of a golden jubilee is instead turning to suspicion and anger. The rise of anti-American sentiment in South Korea has in turn caused anti-Korean feeling in the U.S., and a sense of mutual abandonment undermines the relationship. The emerging discord between Seoul and Washington on the nuclear standoff has also strained the bilateral alliance.

Positive changes are taking place, however. Since his inauguration, President Roh has shown a remarkable change in his attitude toward the U.S. He now understands the vital contribution of American forces in South Korea in assuring the strategic balance of the region and is keenly aware that the North Korean nuclear issue cannot be resolved without close cooperation with the U.S. He has also proved a loyal ally by supporting the U.S.-led war in Iraq, dispatching Korean troops despite enormous domestic opposition. President Roh is truly committed to sustaining the alliance, but his political predicament should be appreciated. Anti-American sentiment has been visibly declining in recent days, while there have been growing efforts among South Koreans to understand and appreciate the U.S.

Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, American domestic politics has undergone a profound transformation. I understand why you have been so resolute in dealing with North Korea. South Korea's political landscape has also radically changed. President Roh was elected under a mandate of peace. Peace building on the Korean peninsula through engagement with the North has become his major policy agenda, causing divergent policy attitudes on North Korea. While it is a reality that neither can afford to ignore, it is also one to take into consideration.

True allies should not hide their differences. They should admit those differences and bridge them through mutual understanding and trust. I believe you and President Roh will reaffirm the strengthening of our alliance and come up with a mutually acceptable solution to the North Korean problem at the summit. I hope both of you will bring a ray of hope for peace on the Korean peninsula.

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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