



Policy Forum 01-02A: Inauguration of President Bush and alliance between China and North Korea



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Inauguration of President Bush and alliance between China and North Korea

By Cheong Wooksik

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I. Introduction

This essay is by Cheong Wooksik of the Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea ([CNPK](#)) and was translated by You Sanghee, also of the CNPK. This is the first in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush.

Cheong examines the role of DPRK leader Kim Jong-il's visit to the PRC, US policy on the DPRK and the PRC, the US-proposed National Missile Defense, and other issues in relations among the PRC, DPRK, ROK, Japan, and the US. Cheong concludes that ROK President Kim Dae-jung is a natural mediator for US-DPRK talks.

II. Essay by Cheong Wooksik

"Inauguration of President Bush and alliance between China and North Korea"

By Cheong Wooksik

North Korea's reclusive leader Kim Jong-il's surprise visit to China, in the very first month of 2001, has provoked keen interest of the international community. The fact that the visit took place only days before the inauguration of President Bush allows for a possibility of the two leaders, Mr. Kim and his old ally Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin, examining the comprehensive structure of dynamics on the Korean peninsula as well as in the Northeast Asian region. On the surface, Mr. Kim's visit to China strongly hints at his intentions toward China-style opening and reform. In fact, North Korea currently has almost no choice at all to revive its 20-year recession economy other than to open up and introduce reforms through improving ties with the outside world. In addition, the communist regime finds enough merit in the Chinese system, where socialist political regime coexists with capitalist economy, resulting in a huge economic success.

However, there is something more to the visit than what it seems. The two leaders are expected to devise a joint strategy toward the US, which still regards China as its "strategic rival" and North Korea as "a rogue state". At the present point, it is rather difficult to imagine what kind of strategy they will be pursuing.

For North Korea, normalizing relations with the South, the US, and Japan is essential for economic reforms and opening. Indeed, the US has both legal and institutional keys to the lifting off of sanctions against the "rogue state" and to advancing into the international market. As for Japan, it is the only country that can provide the financial assistance North Korea desperately needs for economic revival - whether in the form of compensation for the colonial brutality, or of economic development fund. North Korea is now facing a serious dilemma between economic needs and its security reality. The Bush administration appears to be moving towards a hard-line stance against Pyongyang, and there are also signs of growing militarism in Japan. These two countries, it seems, will forge a stronger military alliance in the future.

What is certain for North Korea is that it will not give up on the mid-range missile development program, the most controversial issue so far with the US and Japan, unless security threats from the US and Japan are completely eased. In fact, Theater Missile Defense (TMD) and National Missile Defense (NMD), which symbolize strong military ambitions of the US and Japan, are enough to make North Korea feel threatened. Worse yet, the Bush administration is expected to urge Pyongyang to give up its development and export of missiles without adequate compensation, exposing North Korea to severe security threats, regardless of its giving up of the missile programs.

As William Perry, former US Defense Secretary and writer of guidelines toward North Korea under the Clinton administration, admitted, North Korea's missiles are more of a means to deter the US and Japan, rather than to provoke war. In other words, for North Korea to give up on missile development without a full guarantee of security would be to lose all means of war deterrence.

However, it does not mean that boosting missile development would save North Korea from its current dilemma. If TMD, scheduled to be starting 2003, deactivates North Korea's missiles, the US would be able to attack the communist regime under the cause of stopping the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. As for Japan, it may join hands with the US in attacking North Korea if Pyongyang resumes development of missiles or nuclear weapons.

In retrospect, a considerable part of normalization of relations between the US and North Korea

should have taken place after the signing of the Agreed Framework in 1994. However, the US has not kept its part of the bargain, and this is basically why North Korea finds it difficult to feel secure about the "positive prospect", where it stops missile development in return for full political security and normalized relations with the US and Japan.

North Korea is not alone in its dilemma. China is in similar situation, with the inauguration of the Bush administration. For China, NMD may debilitate its nuclear deterrence against the US. If the US proceeds to deploy 100 interjector missiles by 2006 as planned, all of 15 or so nuclear war heads in China will be debilitated, each of which by 3-4 interjector missiles. In this regard, China can never downplay the impact of TMD. With Japan's militarism growing in the 90s, and with its own air force and marine capability weakness compared with Japan's military power, deployment of TMD seriously threatens the strategic advantage that China has maintained so far. Worse yet, if Taiwan is included in the US East-Asian missile defense network, further in the US security umbrella, China's dream of unification with Taiwan may forever be shattered.

Taking into account the current dilemma facing both North Korea and China, the main purpose of the meeting between Mr. Kim and Premier Jiang would likely be to seek a joint strategy against US hegemony in the region. However, since the US is both a potential threat and source of assistance for the two countries, it is all the more difficult to predict how they would respond to the superpower in the future. What is rather certain here is that the two leaders must have shared concerns over, and seek joint strategy against, NMD and TMD, which are sure to be deployed under the new Bush administration. In addition, they could have exchanged ideas on solutions to Pyongyang's mid and long-range missile development, which is an alleged cause, as well as a target, of the proposed NMD.

What is interesting is that the two leaders met again on January 20, two day after the senate confirmation hearing of Colin Powell, appointed as Secretary of State. In the hearing, Powell disclosed his East Asian strategy, in which he emphasized an overall review of the existing North Korean policy, strengthened alliance among the US, South Korea, and Japan, forward stationed military forces, and deployment of missile defence. The East Asian policy of the Bush administration indeed sounds like a story right out of the Cold War era. Then how will Mr. Kim and Premier Jiang respond to these new circumstances? Will they partly restore a socialist system? Or will they pursue a "peace" strategy so as to "warm up" the "cold" stance of the Bush administration?

From a short-term perspective, this dilemma surrounding China and North Korea will be firstly resolved by how the US and North Korea settle the so-called "Star Wars project" (deployment of NMD/TMD) and missile development programs. President George W. Bush, following the steps of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton, has repeatedly expressed his commitment to the "Star Wars project".

Such strong intentions of the new president fans global concerns that the international community will be mired in yet another Cold War, and that the hard-won thawing mood on the Korean peninsula will be disrupted. The North Korean regime is likely to interpret the deployment of NMD as a lack of willingness on the US part to resolve nuclear and missile issues through dialogue. The US is likely to focus more on strengthening its deterrence and attack capability, through NMD and TMD, than on negotiations with Pyongyang. Republicans believe that 1994 Geneva Accord and 1999 Berlin Agreement, regarded as the most outstanding accomplishment of former President Clinton, had been nothing more than compensation for vice. In this regard, the Bush administration will be rather reluctant to provide compensation to North Korea in return for giving up its missile development programs. This will naturally lead to another long deadlock over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile issues, raising a possibility of yet another war on the peninsula.

For China, it will have fewer reasons to dissuade North Korea from developing missiles if the US

continues to develop and deploy NMD and TMD. It would then be obvious to China that the US is in fact targeting China on the pretext of deterring North Korea. Russia, for its part, would be in no different position than China.

Many experts predict that the US would not give up its "Star Wars project" even if Pyongyang renounces its missile programs. They believe the ultimate reason behind the development of NMD/TMD is not deterring North Korea, but China. However, if North Korea gives up its mid/long range missile ambitions, the US would have less convincing rationales for developing NMD/TMD, because the superpower has always argued that its project is aimed at deterring the rogue states, including North Korea.

In this case, the US would have to find itself another convincing rationale for NMD development - which will not be so easy. "Threats from Iran or Iraq" are not convincing enough, since their missile capability does not even equal North Korea. However, the US cannot directly mention China or Russia, because it would be admitting its past deceptions, therefore imposing on itself a huge political burden. The US media may not leave the administration in peace in those circumstances.

In this regard, it is convincing enough to argue that the Bush administration would not resolve the North Korean missile issues through negotiations - indeed, for the US, resolving the North Korean issue would mean losing a good rationale for NMD/TMD development. Due to deep-rooted mistrust and conflicting strategic interests, it would be difficult for the US, China, and North Korea to resolve the issues by themselves. In current circumstances, a good idea would be mediation by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. President Kim Dae-jung, though not from all, has earned a considerable support from many leaders across the world. He probably is the least hostile person at the present point. In addition, as a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, President Kim obtained the minimum authority needed to mediate between North Korea and the US, whose conflict will indeed determine the much delicate security circumstances surrounding the Korean peninsula.

In this regard, it is important to note that President Kim said, in an interview with International Herald Tribune on January 6, that he intended to ask the North to stop the production of long-range missiles. He declined to comment directly on the development of NMD and TMD. President Kim's remark is important, because he seems to have recognized the possibility that the hard-won security on the Korean peninsula could be wrecked by the political instability caused by NMD and TMD. The South Korean President also seems willing to mediate between North Korea and the US in resolving the hottest issue- Pyongyang's missile development.

Although exact date is not set, leaders of the countries involved will be making state visits to and from one another during the next three months: North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's visit to Seoul and Russia, President Kim Dae-jung's visit to Washington, Russian President Putin's visit to Seoul, etc. The series of state visits, the main agenda of which will be security on the Korean peninsula and NMD/TMD development, will make a favorable environment for President Kim to act as a mediator between the US and North Korea.

In this regard, North Korean National Defense Commissioner Kim Jong-il's visit to Seoul would be an important milestone in determining stability on the Korean peninsula. Whether the two Korean leaders will decide to coordinate their policies in the face of new security threats remains to be seen.

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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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