

Policy Forum 02-02A: North Korea - the Case for Micro Level Engagement

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North Korea - the Case for Micro Level Engagement

By Bryan Port

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I. Introduction

The following article was contributed by Bryan Port who is presently a graduate student at Georgetown University and an analyst with SAIC supporting a military client. Port asserts that the present Sunshine Policy is incapable of dealing with a politically deteriorating North Korea and ineffective in terms of threat reduction and reunification. Consequently, Port argues that micro-projects must be put in place to prepare for the inevitable collapse of North Korea. Port offers pragmatic examples of micro-engagement such as North-South joint reforestation programs, information technology, infrastructure improvement, and municipal management.

The views expressed are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of Georgetown University, SAIC, the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.

II. Essay by Bryan Port

"North Korea - the Case for Micro Level Engagement"
Bryan Port

INTRODUCTION

The sun is beginning to shine in North Korea. At least this is the impression one gets from the Kim Dae Jung Administration and until recently from much of the South Korean (hereafter ROK) media. President Kim Dae-Jung (DJ) claims that an approach towards the DPRK that separates politics from economics will lead to peace and reconciliation between the two Koreas. Extrapolating, we can infer that DJ and supporters of the "Sunshine Policy" feel that eventual unification must be predicated on an incremental approach where political questions are left to be handled in the final increment. All of this sounds practical, reasonable and is certainly preferable to armed conflict. It would be an understatement to say that it would be unwise to pursue a policy intentionally designed to push the DPRK over the precipice into a collapsed failed state. However, it is worth stressing that nothing with regard to the DPRK can be separated from politics and ideology. At best one can hope to minimize the impact of politics and ideology, perhaps shaping the context of a given situation.

An enlightened sense of reciprocity that guides the Sunshine Policy is imperative. The Kim Il-Sung/Kim Chong-Il Dynasty's days are numbered, and a practical approach to engagement is vital to stem and mitigate an impending military, political, economic and/or humanitarian crisis. Ideology in the DPRK is paramount. Politics permeates everything. The prospects for the types of significant and massive reform necessary to save the DPRK are slim. Combining the impact and import of ideology and politics with the desire of the power elite in the DPRK to maintain power and privilege largely negates the possibility of meaningful reform.

We are confronted with a dynasty that at its head has a leader who is approaching his 60th birthday. Kim Chong-Il's succession process began more than 20 years before the death of his father. All in all, it took 25 years for Kim Chong-Il to consolidate his power to the extent that we see today. It will be even more difficult for Kim Chong-Il to install his son as the next leader of the DPRK. Only recently has Kim Chong-Il started advocating his son as his successor. Indications are that the military and even the populace will not accept a continuation of the Dynasty. Kim Chong-Il's legitimacy is based on his father's legacy, not the merits of his leadership or ability.

The country is suffering. Something must and will give. At a maximum, if we optimistically assume

that Kim Chong-Il can hang on until he becomes infirm or dies, the Kim Regime will last perhaps 20 more years. More likely, sometime before Kim's passing from the scene, the situation will come to a head. Regardless, at some point we are looking at a crisis and would best prepare to deal with that crisis. The Sunshine Policy as presently exercised does little if anything to prepare for the coming demise of North Korea, to say nothing of alleviating the massive suffering of the North Korean people.

All assertions to the contrary, reciprocity has not been well defined. Consequently, lacking a clear concept as to what reciprocity means, reciprocity has not been practiced or enforced. Domestic politics in the ROK has driven the Sunshine Policy more than pragmatism. The DPRK has a history of successfully manipulating the United States and the ROK. A clear idea of what the U.S. and the ROK want reciprocated would go far in rectifying the imbalance in the present situation. Reciprocity should be focused on the mid to long-term. We should be insisting on actions in the North that will alleviate suffering, to say nothing of preparing to deal with the aftermath of an explosion or implosion. In considering how to engage the DPRK we must understand the constraints placed on the DPRK by virtue of its social construction. It is likely that any major and/or significant change is likely to be born through crisis. The Sunshine Policy should focus on creating assets that can be used after the immediate stages of a crisis subside and the task of nation building begins.

TOWARD RECIPROCAL ENGAGEMENT

The ROK, and all others interested in engagement, should shift focus from a macro to a micro perspective. To the extent possible, aid and engagement should be kept apolitical in that it is not predicated on political changes in the DPRK. The present regime is beyond reformation. The goal should be creating assets that help North Koreans to help themselves, crafted carefully so as to not bolster North Korean military readiness. On a more cynical, but realistic note, engagement programs should put in place assets that can be drawn upon in the event of a regime implosion.

Forestry

One example of an effective micro program centers on the environment, and forestry in particular. Reckless deforestation has near and long-term consequences, not only for the DPRK but also for the ROK. Domestic resources only supply ten percent of the ROK's current demand for timber products.

While not micro in the strictest sense of the term, cooperation in forest preservation and rehabilitation is not a 'broad sword' approach to engagement or aid. Cooperation in forestry approximates reciprocity. The ROK benefits from a healthier environment in the North. In the long term this could prove quite substantial. One only needs to consider the environmental/ecological problems faced by other former communist countries to realize the enormous expense of wholesale environmental degradation. Further, joint forestry programs do not increase the threat to the ROK's security, nor do such initiatives bolster the DPRK's military. Trees, at least between the ROK and DPRK, are not political in nature. North Korea has recently taken practical measures to implement its forestry law. Additionally, the DPRK is attempting to introduce 'advanced technology' and modern forest management techniques into the rehabilitation of its natural habitat. It is worth recalling that South Korea's own reforestation program, though conducted without the benefit of today's technology and hindsight, is considered to have been miraculously successful. The ROK is preparing to get involved in a number of practical "where the rubber meets the road" types of initiatives including soil erosion control and assistance in restoration and tree disease control. In areas such as the soil erosion and tree disease control, Juche can be effectively circumvented. Forestry is basically

an apolitical activity that the DPRK leadership can reconcile with Kim Il-Sungism. Reforms in forestry are unlikely to create any cognitive dissonance among ordinary North Koreans, or even the elite. Programs such as forestry cooperation can serve as a model for more extensive valuable programs. That is not to say that forestry is not valuable. Restoring the environment in North Korea is necessary regardless of who is in charge. Reforestation is an important element of environmental preservation.

Information Technology

It is a near certainty that any country wishing to be economically strong in the 21st century, and beyond, must have a solid, robust information infrastructure. The Kim Chong-Il regime, realizing this, has prioritized the development of a domestic software industry. This provides an excellent opportunity for engagement, and has been capitalized upon to some extent. From 1994 to 1996 North Korea, along with South Korea and China, participated in the International Conference on Computer Processing for Korean Language. The delegates reached a joint agreement covering information processing terminology, keyboard arrangement, Korean character ordering and a coding system for Korean characters. The achievements were minor, but there was substantive interaction between North and South Korean computer scientists.

Such conferences should be continued and expanded. Software is one of the few areas where North Korea shows promise, in spite of Juche. Park Chan-Mo of the Pohang University of Science and Technology states "...applications software development for PCs, such as word processors, is rapidly catching up with the efforts in the South." Using application software as a launching point, the ROK should initiate joint ventures in applications software and work with China, Japan and the United States to set up conferences that will draw in North Korea computer scientists. This effort might expand into donations of computers (relatively unsophisticated personal computers) specifically for use in say municipal management, or in the medical field. Reciprocity would come through verification. The North, in order to receive the computers and training, would semi-annually have to prove that the computers were in place and used for the agreed upon purposes. In spite of the relative 'success' of North Korean software development a huge disparity remains between the North and South in terms of information technology. Reunification will eventually require the rectification of this situation. Prudence dictates that efforts begin now, and precedence suggests that this is one area where progress will come with comparative ease.

Two Possibilities for Future Engagement

Keeping in mind that regardless of how the two Koreas reunify, North Korea will require major reform and advancement in the areas of municipal management and infrastructure. Further recognizing that such endeavors, if undertaken in the southern provinces of North Korea, could facilitate North Korean military adventurism, it is prudent to focus assistance efforts in such areas on the northern provinces. There are reasons and benefits to doing so that extend beyond security.

The proximity to the Chinese border will be a tremendous asset. With relatively positive relations between China and North Korea and a comparatively "open border," the northern provinces are better positioned to expand on any engagement efforts undertaken. China could be used as a staging area for assistance programs. It is in China's interest that engagement programs along its border be successful - probably stemming the flow of North Koreans illegally entering China. The Kim Chong-Il regime would be more likely to accept China, rather than South Korea, as the 'source' of engagement and assistance efforts. This would lead to smoother implementation and continuation of

programs. In larger geopolitical terms, using China as a conduit for engagement/assistance efforts will help to sooth regional tensions.

Irrespective of the focus of such programs, or where they are staged from, they must be carried out in as apolitical manner as possible. It would also help if these programs were portrayed as "training" opportunities for the foreigners who enter North Korea, or perhaps as some sort of exchange program. Again the objective shouldn't be to effect political change, but to put in place assets (human and other) that can be drawn upon in the event of state failure. It will be readily apparent who is doing the instructing and who is doing the learning. So, whatever fodder is provided to the opponents of engagement can be offset by public relations efforts by engagement proponents. The key is to take a long-term perspective, and emphasize the goal of effecting practical change rather than political revolution.

Municipal management in North Korea, other than monument building and operation, is abysmal. Hand in glove with the problem of municipal management is the degraded state of North Korean infrastructure. Assistance programs aimed at addressing the aforementioned problems at a minimum could bring North Koreans into contact with foreigners, and expose them to ideas that even if not implemented can lay the seeds for future action.

Infrastructure improvement opens up a wealth of opportunities. First, any efforts are sure to result in some improvement, whether road construction, telecommunications networks, hospital building, waste treatment/management or other areas. There is a dearth of construction and maintenance equipment. A part of infrastructure improvement assistance can come in the form of equipment donations. Verification/reciprocity can come in the form of the equipment being used only in certain geographical areas for specified purposes. Earth moving equipment, for example, would have to remain in the northern provinces and be used for road building and not tunneling. Failure to comply will halt such programs. Sooner or later, the onus of rebuilding North Korea will fall upon South Korea, and to a lesser extent the United States, China, Japan and perhaps Russia. It may as well be sooner so as to avoid the shock that accompanies being confronted with a monumental task that lacks a clear cut point from which to start efforts at rectification.

CONCLUSION

Software, municipal management, infrastructure in the northern provinces and pollution control might not prove to be the key to peaceful reunification, or the panacea of threat reduction. However, it is obvious that the present paradigm of engagement is not significantly reducing the North Korean military menace. At best, in its present form the Sunshine Policy is only mitigating the North Korean humanitarian disaster, while at the same time sustaining the North Korean military threat. Shifting to a micro focused form of engagement does not preclude large-scale aid projects to stave off a complete system collapse. Micro engagement might; however, put in place resources that can be drawn upon should the North Korean state collapse. In the meantime it can be focused so as to not enhance the DPRK's military capability.

The point of this paper is not to argue specifically for the programs/initiatives cited as examples. The current paradigm of engagement - the Sunshine Policy - is not sufficient in and of itself. Broad foreign aid programs, charity really, will not prompt the Kim regime to open up or change its ways. To do so would require drastic modification or the outright dismissal of the Juche ideology and Kim Il-Sungism. This is simply not going to happen. Recently, ominous signs have appeared. Two of the primary figures associated with North Korean reform and opening - Kim Yong-Sun and Cho Myong-Rok appear to have fallen out of favor.¹ In addition to the sun shining in North Korea the ground

must be fertilized. More is required for an array of reasons. Chief amongst these reasons is the need to put in place resources that can be drawn upon in the event of a North Korean collapse. Hence the advocacy for micro project that provide skills, or at least expose North Koreans to different ways of 'doing business.' Prudence dictates that the U.S., ROK and other concerned countries prepare for the inevitable - North Korean collapse.

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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