

Policy Forum 01-02M: North Korea's change in policy and U.S. policy toward North Korea: Recommendations for the Bush Administration



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Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: Recommendations for the Bush Administration

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Recommendations for the Bush Administration

By Haksoon Paik

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I. Introduction

The following is the latest in a series of essays on the Korean Peninsula policy of the administration of US President George W. Bush. This article was contributed by Haksoon Paik, Ph.D., a specialist on

the DPRK at the Sejong Institute, an independent think tank in the ROK.

Paik argues that the DPRK's recent opening-up to the outside world is not a sudden phenomenon, but a continuation of policies that began in the early 1990s. He suggests that the US should conclude its review of DPRK policy quickly and positively engage the DPRK, while keeping in mind both the impact of politics within the DPRK and the views of the ROK.

II. Essay by Haksoon Paik

"North Korea's change in policy and U.S. policy toward North Korea: Recommendations for the Bush Administration"

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1. Introduction

Recently, a series of questions have been raised concerning U.S. policy toward North Korea and its impact on inter-Korean relations and the peace and stability of the Asia-Pacific. The U.S. is currently in a special period in which the new administration is trying to expand its "political base" both at home and abroad as much as possible at the outset for the policies it wants to pursue and carry out for the years to come. The NMD is the case in point, and the Bush Administration appears not to be interested in resuming missile negotiations with North Korea, at least for the present, as the North Korean missile threat serves as one of the good excuses for pursuing a National Missile Defense (NMD).

I want to argue that it will be of much benefit for the national interests of the U.S. and its ally South Korea over the long run, if the U.S. better understands North Korea's change in policy, listens to South Korea's advice in dealing with North Korea, understands South Korea's predicament on the NMD issue, and quickly finalizes its North Korea policy; while it positively reassesses the achievements in the U.S.-DPRK relations, resumes negotiations with North Korea on the missile issue, and pays serious attention to the domestic political game in North Korea in order to be able to respond to it in a more appropriate way.

2. North Korea's Change in Policy: Two Critical Choices

North Korea made two critical choices in the last decade in order to ensure the survivability of the regime and its socialist system: the first choice was made in the early 1990s just after the collapse of the former Soviet Union and Eastern-Central European socialist states; the second, in the year 2000.

In the early 1990s, North Korea decided to expand contact and seek economic and political cooperation with the West--particularly, the United States and Japan, then South Korea. During the 1991-93 period, North Korea took a number of critical measures that helped it go down the road toward "reform and opening" in the international economic and political areas, even though North Korea itself never used these terms: a special free economic and trade zone in Rajin-Sonbong, various legal and institutional arrangements to promote foreign capital and technology investment, and a new trade system; a high-level meeting with the U.S. in 1992, normalization talks with Japan; declaration of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, membership in the United Nations with South Korea abandoning its long-held "One Korea policy," and the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchange and Cooperation with South Korea.

Unfortunately, however, North Korea was suffering from a "siege" mentality, and was extremely cautious in carrying out critical changes. Two events made this situation more complex: North Korea's nuclear weapons development program and the sudden death of Kim Il Sung in 1994. North Korea simply could not get help from the outside world due to these events, and Kim Jong Il decided temporarily to cease implementing the choices that North Korea had made in the early 1990s for fear of the nemesis of reform and opening in the disastrous economic situation. What he elected to do was to maintain the status quo by applying the "rule by will" of his deceased father while consolidating his own power base within the military and the party.

By early 1997, Kim Jong Il succeeded in solidifying his power base in the military and the party and stabilizing the domestic situation, and, roughly from 1998, he began to "resume" implementing the critical choices that North Korea had made in the 1990s. However, by this time, North Korea apparently realized that outside help was predicated on two things: improving relations with South Korea and solving its outstanding long-range missile development problem. As a good-will gesture in its effort to improve relations with the U.S., North Korea put a moratorium on the test-firing of its long-range missiles in September 1999.

In 2000, North Korea made a second critical choice that would help North Korea come out of political and economic isolation and join the world community full-scale. North Korea first improved relations with South Korea and second promoted a cooperative relationship with the U.S. and widened its diplomatic efforts with the international community: the historic North-South Korean summit in June 2000; the visits of Cho Myong-rok and Madeleine Albright to each other's capital and the U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué of October 12, 2000; and diplomatic normalization with European Union states and others.

Here I want to emphasize that North Korea has shown consistency in its policy choices to expand contacts and improve relations with the U.S., South Korea, and others over the past decade and that recent North Korean policy and behavior are not something that popped up this or last year all of a sudden. The second critical choice was made on the basis of the first and was an extension of it.

What the North Korean leadership is currently preoccupied with is economic recovery and development--building up an "economically strong and prosperous state" with the help of "science and technology." From the first day of this year, Kim Jong Il has been emphasizing the importance of exhibiting "new thinking" and "technological renovation." Kim Jong Il visited the Pudong District of Shanghai, the foremost showcase of China's high-tech and financial industry built through government-guided reform and opening, and showed interest in learning from the Chinese experience.

Here I want to argue that North Korea's changed stance is neither transitory nor reversible. Not only is such change based on consistent policy choices, but it has bearing on the legitimacy and future of the Kim Jong Il regime at home and abroad in a serious way. There is no misunderstanding that Kim Jong Il fears losing the momentum that he has recently gained after the famine and economic disaster in the mid-1990s.

3. U.S. Policy toward North Korea: Recommendations for the Bush Administration

North Korea's change in policy having been explained, what should be taken into consideration by the U.S. in formulating its policy toward North Korea? Here are some of my recommendations for the Bush Administration.

First, listen to the advice of South Korea--a dependable ally that brought about inter-Korean reconciliation and tension reduction in East Asia--in dealing with North Korea. President Kim Dae-jung's advice on seizing the opportunity for peace by helping North Korea to continue on the path of change should be taken seriously: "For North Korea, change is not a matter of choice but of survival," and Kim Jong Il "is in a position where he has to open up and change for survival."

North Korea may be a "failing" system, and "once it's opened, it may well collapse anyway," as characterized by U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell. But it is not a good policy if outside world "forces" North Korea to change from within or to democratize, as [Georgi Toloraya](#) argued. I agree with Toloraya that "engagement is good as long as it does not threaten the North Korean regime" and that such approach is "not a 'dove' approach," but rather "the only pragmatic, de-ideologized one" at this stage.

Second, reassess what has been achieved in U.S.-DPRK relations in a more positive, realistic, and objective way. The U.S. has succeeded in inducing North Korea into the world where the U.S.-set rules of the game prevail. The experience of give-and-take and compromise through diplomatic negotiations in solving conflicts has already set the principle for behavior in the relationship between the two countries and laid the foundation upon which a new regional order in the Asia-Pacific will be built through a peaceful process, not through revolutionary upheavals, for the 21st century.

Third, begin dialogue and negotiations first, if the U.S. wishes to put a strict monitoring and verification on the agreements with North Korea. No negotiations, no agreements. No agreements including those on verification. I think the advice of Madeleine Albright and Wendy Sherman is logically correct: "Transparency and verification ... have to begin with the negotiation process," and the U.S. "does not need to make a false choice between negotiating a missile agreement with North Korea and pursuing his [President Bush's] already stated intention to build a NMD" and it "can move forward on both strategies without foreclosing any option" at this point.

Fourth, acknowledge that the political game is played in North Korea as well, just as in the U.S., and pay serious attention to it in order to be able to respond in a more appropriate way. As [Daniel A. Pinkston](#) aptly pointed out, for instance, the U.S. should pay close attention to "Kim Jong Il's political constraints in Pyongyang, which will be framed by a coalition based upon the military and defense industry." The U.S. should support Kim's reform effort, Pinkston argued, if U.S. security objectives are to be achieved: when Kim dismantles the nuclear and missile programs, "alternative employment" for his supporters in the military and defense industries "can only be provided through economic reforms, market opening and foreign investment."

Fifth, be considerate of the predicament of South Korea, a trusted U.S. ally, on the NMD issue. South Korea is in a treacherous situation where it can neither support nor oppose U.S. pursuit of the NMD since the four major powers surrounding the Korean peninsula are deeply divided in this highly contentious matter. If South Koreans were living in the Cold War era, they would not have to hesitate at all in taking sides even in arms race. But Koreans are living in a post-Cold War era where not only Koreans but also other peoples are all trying to build a new relationship with their neighbors in accordance with post-Cold War Geist and modus vivendi. South Korea's seemingly independent behavior on the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in the ROK-Russian Joint Communique of February 27, 2001 should not be interpreted as an opposition to U.S. policy per se, as Aidan Foster-Carter pointed out, but rather as a reflection of South Korea's predicament in which it had to entertain Russia in its own courteous way.

Sixth, don't be reluctant to admit that the Asia-Pacific can be a region where the U.S. may have hard times in the future--much harder than thought of, as was already shown in the recent crash between

a U.S. surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter near Hainan-dao, and try to avoid a situation where China and North Korea are closely united against the U.S. in each and every policy issue.

In this context, do not lose time in winding up a review on the North Korea policy and in resuming missile negotiations with North Korea. An earlier finalization of U.S. policy toward North Korea will be of great benefit to U.S. interest. North Korea has continued to demand a security guarantee from and normalization of relations with the U.S., and is ready to cooperate with the U.S. if the U.S. is ready to help. As was reported in Rodong Sinmun on March 19, 2001, "no country in the world poses a threat to the U.S ... and what we wish to do is to resolve the confrontation with the U.S. and to improve relations with the U.S."

Finally, positively consider President Bush's visit to North Korea, if a missile deal is complete and ready for signing, as many have already suggested. If George Bush, Sr. was the U.S. President who saw the end of the Cold War on a global scale in the early 1990s, wouldn't it be nice for George Bush, Jr. to be the U.S. President who sees the last vestiges of the Cold War disappear in East Asia, introducing a whole new world of peace and stability in this region of the world in such a way that U.S. interests are not challenged in any serious way?

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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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