


Policy Forum 08-028: Pragmatism and North Korea Policy

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By Rudiger Frank

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I. Introduction

Rudiger Frank, Professor of East Asian Political Economy at the University of Vienna, "As soon as the usual two strong years in office of the new administration in Seoul are over, the Blue House, facing renewed pressure from its voters, will have to return to the engagement policy anyway. On the balance sheet we will see nothing but a loss of time and of influence. Confidence, contacts, access that have been destroyed during this period will have to be rebuilt, if this is possible at all."

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II. Article by Rudiger Frank

- "Pragmatism and North Korea Policy"

By Rudiger Frank

Among the many false assumptions around North Korea is the claim that this country and its leadership are not predictable. The opposite is true; North Korea has one of the most predictable regimes on earth. Speculations about the future are an extension of the past. The bigger the knowledge-base of past experiences is, the easier such an extrapolation becomes. As a byproduct of the totalitarian system, political leadership in North Korea exhibited enormous stability and continuity. In fact, since 1948 it had only two leaders, both from the same family, the same party, and operating under the same agenda. We had six decades to study that system and its behavior. Compare this to the ten very different leaders of South Korea with their shifting agendas.

It is therefore somewhat frustrating to see how North Korea does exactly what was to be expected after the new government in Seoul decided to take a tougher stance. Until 1998, there has been half a century of experience with North Korea's reactions to tough talk, to demands for reciprocity, to attempts at forcing it to move into a certain direction. Almost instinctively, Pyongyang reacted by offensive rhetoric and harsh measures. It was like a little dance; tit-for-tat, tit-for-tat, with no real movement while everyone was busy and exhausted. What a waste of time and resources.

This is why especially long-time observers have been intrigued to see the departure from this silly ritual with the announcement of the sunshine policy ten years ago. The stronger side showed maturity, broke the stalemate unilaterally and used the window of opportunity that had opened through the economic collapse of North Korea's trade partners, a leadership change, and the tragic events of the 1995-1997 famine. The results were amazing, ranging from tourism to economic cooperation. The North Korean leadership developed the necessary confidence to embark, cautiously, on the road to systemic adjustments. This triggered a social transformation that we are yet unable to understand and appreciate fully. Since 2002, Seoul demonstrated its continued interest in North Korea despite the conflict over the nuclear issue, emphasized the commonalities despite the many differences, and thereby successfully undermined decades of anti-South Korean propaganda. Japan became sidelined due to its hard-line policy on the abductees, while Seoul, for the first time, managed to develop its own distinctive foreign policy profile in a matter of the highest national interest. There was hope for an end to the old tradition of outsiders deciding over Korea's destiny.

We might now witness a return to the old dance of mutual accusations, unilateral demands and stagnation. As long as this is a deliberate measure, sacrificing inter-Korean relations and especially the Gaeseong Industrial Zone for the sake of domestic politics or the relationship with the United States, this policy can be debated regarding its efficiency but must be accepted. However, if the underlying rationale were the naive belief that this is the best way to promote change in North Korea and to move towards gradual and peaceful unification, doubts are in place. Pyongyang has never bowed down to direct pressure, for pride is all they have. Kim Jong-il can deviate from his father's line only from a position of strength, and not while he is under attack.

Pragmatism means dealing with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. The sunshine policy was a highly pragmatic and realistic approach, albeit covered in an emotional and idealistic cloth, and it worked. The return to a policy that has failed for over five decades would neither be smart nor pragmatic; it would be highly idealistic and ignorant of history. Nature dislikes vacuum. The space

opened by South Korea's withdrawal will be filled quickly. China and Russia will expand their presence in North Korea. Joint Ventures will be founded, the special zone in Sineuiju will be opened, Russia will build the railway, and Pyongyang will find new ways to cooperatively deal with Washington and even with Tokyo.

South Korea will wake up one day and realize that it has given up all the precious leverage it once had over Pyongyang, just like Russia did under Yeltsin. Remember how quickly Seoul lost its interest and stopped sending money when there was no special relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang anymore? Russia's influence in the region recovered only after Putin decided to deal with Kim Jong-il again. Or look at Japan: Not long ago, it was North Korea's major economic partner and close to reaching normalization that would have opened the way for Japanese investment into the resource-rich country. Now China plays that role. The North Koreans did what they felt they could to get the deal with Tokyo in 2002. As that was not enough, they did not give more but rather called it quits. Japan has of course been right in demanding full disclosure of serious crimes before continuing cooperation, but was it realistic and pragmatic?

Learning from other's mistakes can prevent huge costs. As soon as the usual two strong years in office of the new administration in Seoul are over, the Blue House, facing renewed pressure from its voters, will have to return to the engagement policy anyway. On the balance sheet we will see nothing but a loss of time and of influence. Confidence, contacts, access that have been destroyed during this period will have to be rebuilt, if this is possible at all. Such a foreseeable waste of precious resources should displease any business-minded leader; true pragmatism is needed now to avoid such a scenario.

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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