

# Policy Forum 05-84A: Why Seoul Helps the North

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# Why Seoul Helps the North

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Policy Forum Online 05-84A: October 18th, 2005

## "Why Seoul Helps the North"

By Chung-in Moon

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Chung-in Moon](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

### I. Introduction

Chung-in Moon, Professor of political science at Yonsei University in Seoul, writes, "Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that food aid does not exist within a vacuum. It is but one part of a complex and trying effort by the South Korean government to improve inter-Korean relations, reduce military tension and help its North Korean brethren."

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## **II. Essay by Chung-in Moon**

- Why Seoul Helps the North  
by Chung-in Moon

Humanitarian assistance from the international community has helped North Korea to alleviate famine and human disasters over the past decade. But last week, North Korea's deputy foreign minister, Choe Su-Hon, asked the United Nations to halt its assistance through the World Food Program by the end of 2005.

Officially this decision was attributed to a better harvest and the need to shift aid from humanitarian to development assistance. Behind the official position, however, lies North Korea's growing anxiety over international aid workers exposing North Korean society to the outside world, and over recent activities of the U.S. Commission on Human Rights in North Korea, which links humanitarian assistance to human rights conditions.

Alarmed international aid organizations have argued that the North continues to suffer from food shortages and that once again its political motive of regime security will victimize the disadvantaged.

After North Korea's recent announcement, South Korea has been accused of being Pyongyang's accomplice. International observers of North Korea's food crisis have blamed Seoul for the North's decision to discontinue aid from the WFP, claiming that the South's unmonitored transfer of food has allowed the North to cope with its food problem.

The argument has even been made that South Korea should suspend its direct food assistance to the North, and instead distribute it solely through the WFP to ensure more transparent and effective monitoring.

The accusations against South Korea are grossly misleading, as Seoul's decision to transfer food directly is a combination of several factors that take into account the plight of the needy in North Korea.

It is true that the lion's share of Seoul's food assistance - about 400,000 tons per year since 2002 - is directly transferred to the North. But South Korea has also been a steady donor to the WFP's efforts in the North, contributing 100,000 tons of grain to the program in 2004. This accounted for 27 percent of the program's total food aid to the North.

As contributions from the United States and Japan have dwindled, South Korea's relative portion has risen. And though the South's bilateral food assistance is relatively large, it is still far short of resolving North Korea's food problem. Thus it seems presumptuous to ascribe North Korea's request to Seoul's food assistance.

Seoul's decision to transfer food directly also reflects several domestic factors. As is the case with U.S. Public Law 480, much of the food given to the North is closely tied to the disposal of surplus rice in South Korea. In addition, the relatively high overhead cost of distribution through the WFP - 30 percent - has made South Korean politicians and bureaucrats prefer a direct transfer.

Another factor to consider is South Korea's decision in 2000 to give rice aid to the North on a loan

basis, and not through grants. This was done in an apparent attempt to help the North recognize the importance of reciprocal transactions.

Because Seoul's loan-based food assistance is for the general North Korean population, it has relatively limited leverage in securing transparency of distribution, compared to the WFP, where free food aid is provided strictly for socially vulnerable groups. Nevertheless, Seoul has been making every effort to prevent the diversion of food assistance to inappropriate sectors, and has increased the frequency of monitoring from only once in 2002 to 10 in 2004 and a forecasted 20 times in 2005. These figures may be barely passable according to WFP standards, but they represent a significant change for Seoul.

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that food aid does not exist within a vacuum. It is but one part of a complex and trying effort by the South Korean government to improve inter-Korean relations, reduce military tension and help its North Korean brethren. A one-dimensional moralistic outcry, no matter how well intentioned, may inadvertently result in complicating the progress already made.

South Korea's alleged complicity in the North's recent decision seems unmerited, and Seoul is unlikely to give up its bilateral transfers for the sake of the World Food Program. But the South has much to learn from the program's experiences and should reconsider the current mix of bilateral and multilateral assistance.

International donors must also realize the limits of humanitarian intervention in dealing with North Korea, which is an economically ailing but politically hard state.

And lastly, North Korea should understand that a shift to development assistance depends on first graduating from humanitarian assistance in an acceptable manner.

### **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](mailto: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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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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