

Diplomacy by Dereliction: U.S. Policy Toward Korea is in Disarray

By Bruce Cumings

President George W. Bush will visit Seoul for the first time in mid-February, as part of a major East Asian trip that includes visits to Tokyo and Beijing. Republic of Korea President Kim Dae Jung is urging Bush to give support to his "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea and return to the policy of "engaging" Pyongyang pursued by the Clinton administration. A year after taking office, Bush has presided over a cacophony of mixed signals and diplomatic backsliding that has left U.S. policy toward Korea in disarray. But there is still a chance to revive crucial negotiations with North Korea that are deeply in the interest of American and Northeast Asian peace and security.

In his two previous meetings with Kim Dae Jung (in Washington last March and in Shanghai in October) President Bush embarrassed the Korean leader, fresh from winning the Nobel Peace Prize, with off-the-cuff remarks about North Korea being untrustworthy (no news to anyone outside that country) and with gratuitous jibes at its leader, Kim Jong Il, for not measuring up to American expectations. In his "state of the union" address on January 29, Bush linked North Korea with Iran and Iraq as part of an "axis of evil." Meanwhile Secretary of State Colin Powell has urged a revival of talks with North Korea, and the State Department says it is ready for talks anywhere, at any time. Other Bush administration officials tell reporters that the North threatens its neighbors with weapons of mass destruction and call for unprecedented inspections of its military facilities. These contradictory signals now threaten the hard-won results of a decade of patient and difficult diplomacy.

The first fruit of this diplomacy was the October 1994 Framework Agreement that froze North Korea's gas-graphite nuclear reactor, a result only

achieved after a dangerous crisis in June 1994 that narrowly averted a new war. In 1997-98 the State Department carried out a major review of Korea policy under the leadership of Dr. William Perry, a former Defense Secretary and a Republican. At his inauguration in February 1998 Kim Dae Jung reoriented Seoul's policy toward the North dramatically, ultimately leading to the first meeting ever between the two Korean heads of state in June 2000.

Critics say the North has given up little or nothing in response to these changes. But it lost a huge investment in nuclear power when its reactor was shut down, and in January 2000 Kim Jong Il embarked on an energetic new turn in DPRK diplomacy, developing formal relations with most European Union and British Commonwealth countries, all of them American allies and friends. Last June EU leaders negotiated a DPRK moratorium on long-range missile testing until 2003. The North has also signed several international agreements opposing terrorism.

The Pyongyang summit, the State Department's policy review, and North Korea's new direction all prepared the ground for a critically important deal on North Korea's most threatening weapons, its long-range missiles. North Korea was willing to forgo construction, deployment, and international sales of all missiles with a range of more than 300 miles. If President Clinton had been willing to do Kim Jong Il the favor of a visit to Pyongyang, American negotiators were convinced that Kim would also have agreed to enter the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which would limit all North Korean missiles to an upper range of 180 miles. In return the U.S. would provide some \$1 billion in food aid to the regime, presumably for several years. This

missile program is primarily a money-making venture for the regime, and clearly it is much cheaper and more advantageous to buy it out rather than to let it grow.

President Clinton and his negotiators on Korea had their bags packed for weeks in November 2000—but as Clinton's National Security adviser Sandy Berger later put it, it wasn't a good idea for the President to leave the country when they didn't know "whether there could be a major constitutional crisis." After the Supreme Court stepped in to give the 2000 presidential election to George W. Bush, it was too late.

But it is not too late to return to engagement with the North. For both Seoul and Washington, engagement was predicated on crucial *realpolitik* assumptions that rarely were voiced publicly. The first is that North Korea would not collapse in the post-cold war era; if its back were to the wall, it was more likely to go down fighting in a catastrophic war. Therefore the DPRK had to be dealt with as it is, not as foreigners might like it to be. Second, Kim Dae Jung and many high-level Americans had rightly come to believe that Pyongyang does not oppose a continuing U.S. troop

presence in Korea, if Washington were to play the role of an "honest broker" between the two Koreas. (At the 2000 summit Kim Jong Il confirmed this view, according to Kim Dae Jung.) This new diplomacy constitutes the first serious attempt to achieve North-South reconciliation *within* the existing Northeast Asian security structure. It also envisions a way for the U.S. to retain its security commitment even after unification (Secretary of Defense William Cohen stated in 1998 that American forces would stay in Korea after unification), and thus maintain a balance of power between China, Russia, and Japan.

The attacks on September 11th understandably led the Bush administration to focus almost exclusively on global terrorism and the war in Afghanistan. But by now their inaction on Korea policy looks more like dereliction. Few realize that within hours of the attacks Pyongyang denounced them and sent a diplomatic note of condolence, and assiduously sought to get itself off the State Department's list of "terrorist" nations by signing on to several international agreements against terrorism. Whatever opportunism may be involved here, these are unprecedented and positive changes that

demonstrate the North's desire for good relations with the U.S.

In 1995 Colin Powell said that if the North dared to use its missiles and weapons of mass destruction, the U.S. would turn North Korea into "a charcoal briquette." Clearly North Korea cannot use its missiles without risking its own complete destruction. Now that Powell is Secretary of State, he appears to grasp the importance of the missile deal that Bill Clinton nearly pulled off. Once others in the Bush administration understand that the alternatives to negotiating with the North are all worse than agreements that have been gotten (in 1994) and can still be gotten today, one hopes they will return to serious negotiations with Pyongyang—and the hopes and dreams of Koreans for reconciliation with their brethren will not again be dashed.

(Bruce Cummings is a professor of History at the University of Chicago and author of Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American—East Asian Relations (Duke University Press). This is a revised version of an editorial that appeared in the Asahi Shimbun on February 16.)

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