

Eyes on Different Prizes

By John Feffer | May 12, 2003

Roh Moo-hyun is coming to Washington with a public and a private message. Publicly, the South Korean president will affirm his government's desire to strengthen its relationship with the United States and bring a peaceful end to the nuclear crisis with North Korea. The private message, which won't appear in any newspaper headlines, will be: "Mr. Bush, please don't screw things up for us."

The two Koreas have been moving closer together, despite the rhetoric coming out of Washington and Pyongyang's persistent attempts to acquire a nuclear weapon. According to the South Korean ministry of unification, interactions between North and South Korea last year were the most intensive since regular contacts began in 1989.

This year, after removing mines from the Demilitarized Zone, the two countries established the first road link in fifty years, and several delegations have already made the trip north. A sixth reunion of divided families has also taken place. The two sides will soon begin construction on a huge joint industrial park just north of the border.

Roh Moo-hyun is keeping his eyes on this prize of greater inter-Korean cooperation. If the two Germans were able to pull off such a feat during the most dangerous years of the cold war, surely Korea can follow suit. Unfortunately, both North Korea and the United States are eyeing very different prizes.

Since taking office in 2000, President Bush has steered U.S. relations toward this isolated country into a diplomatic cul-de-sac. Even before including North Korea in the infamous "axis of evil," the Bush administration was keeping an ever-elusive prize in its sight: regime change in Pyongyang.

Toward this end, the administration has campaigned against any policies that might extend the life of the current North Korean government, from the 1994 Agreed Framework to South Korea's engagement policy. The Bush team has so far relied on economic containment and diplomatic non-engagement to bring down the North Korean government. Should these strategies prove insufficient, the admin-

istration has also drawn up several military scenarios, including a surgical strike on North Korea's nuclear complex.

In its pursuit of a nuclear weapons program, Pyongyang has been an accomplice in this deterioration in relations. During the 1990s, North Korea considered its nuclear and missile programs as bargaining chips and deterrents. In the late 1990s, it became clear that the bargaining chip of a potential nuclear program was not securing the kind of diplomatic recognition (from the United States or Japan) or economic carrots (nuclear energy, foreign direct investment) that North Korea expected. Pyongyang enlisted the help of Pakistan to develop a secret uranium enrichment program and, when the Bush administration brought a new hard line to Washington, accelerated this program in 2001.

The Iraq war confirmed Pyongyang's worst suspicions: weak countries get invaded, the United States doesn't put much faith in inspection regimes, and unilateralism and preventive war lie at the heart of the new foreign policy coming out of Washington. From Pyongyang's perspective, a potential nuclear program wasn't sufficient as a useful bargaining chip. Meanwhile the deterrent of a real nuclear weapon—a prize that Pyongyang claims to have developed but whose existence it has yet to demonstrate—has so far proven capable of thwarting a U.S. attack.

Enter Roh Moo-hyun. He has stressed the critical importance of inter-Korean relations even to the point of ruling out a military solution to the current nuclear crisis. Roh didn't make too much fuss when South Korea was excluded from the April negotiations in Beijing. Yet Seoul has also put pressure on Pyongyang to make the first move by giving up its



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nuclear program prior to receiving aid and security guarantees from Washington. At the same time, Roh Moo-hyun made the domestically unpopular decision to join the U.S. coalition in the war on Iraq. This was an implied quid pro quo: we'll fight your war if you support our peace.

Roh is calculating that his peace posture will persuade hard-liners in Washington and Pyongyang to set aside their differences in the interests of a pragmatic accommodation. North Korea is willing to deal. The Bush administration has so far been hesitant to negotiate. The prize that Bush eyes—regime collapse in Pyongyang—is in fact a booby prize, for it would result in military insecurity, economic crisis, and a refugee catastrophe in the region, with no cer-

tainty that democracy would prevail or that weapons of mass destruction would end up in secure hands.

This week Roh Moo-hyun will deliver this quiet message to Washington. With reconstruction bogging down in Iraq and the U.S. economy on the skids, the Bush administration would be wise to listen to this man of peace.

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