



U.S.-North Korea Relations

By John Feffer

North Korea is the United States' longest-standing adversary. The U.S. helped to divide the Korean peninsula at the end of World War II, then waged war against North Korea in the 1950s. It has maintained economic sanctions against Pyongyang for nearly fifty years. In this post-cold war era, North Korea remains a useful demon. The Pentagon has inflated the North Korean threat in order to rationalize its desire for a missile defense system, to justify a capacity to fight two wars simultaneously, and to explain the need to maintain 37,000 troops in South Korea (and 100,000 troops in Asia overall).

Relations between the two countries worsened in the early 1990s when North Korea expanded its nuclear program and the U.S. considered bombing the suspected weapons development facilities. In 1994, after Jimmy Carter sat down with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, the two sides eventually negotiated their way back from the brink of war. The resulting Agreed Framework required that North Korea freeze its nuclear program in exchange for shipments of heavy fuel oil

from the U.S. and two light-water nuclear reactors to be built by an international consortium funded largely by Japan and South Korea. As part of this agreement, the U.S. and North Korea pledged to move toward full normalization of relations.

The Agreed Framework averted war but did not create a lasting peace. The U.S. government has continued to criticize North Korean sales of advanced missile technology to countries such as Pakistan and Iran. In August 1998, without notification, North Korea launched a missile/satellite that passed over Japan and demonstrated its possession of three-stage rocket technology.

At the same time, U.S. and South Korean intelligence agencies leaked information that an underground facility in North Korea might house a nuclear weapons program. The Clinton administration, reluctant at first to give much credence to the underground nuclear facility, eventually insisted on access to determine if

North Korea had departed from the terms of the Agreed Framework (to which it had so far adhered).

North Korea, too, has a list of grievances. It has charged the United States with violating the Agreed Framework by not delivering the heavy fuel oil according to schedule and by not moving forward as planned with the light-water reactors. It has also accused the Clinton administration of backtracking on its promise to normalize relations and thus to lift economic sanctions. Finally, North Korea has criticized the U.S. military buildup in Northeast Asia.

The relationship between the two powers is not entirely antagonistic. In response to the food crisis that intensified in North Korea beginning in 1995, the Clinton administration has provided millions of dollars in humanitarian aid (over \$170 million in 1998), principally through the UN. In April 1999, the U.S. government agreed to its first direct assistance to North Korea: 100,000 metric tons of food as well as a project coordinated with several U.S. nongovernmental organizations that will introduce new potato varieties to North Korean farms. The two countries are also cooperating to find the remains of U.S. soldiers killed in the North during the Korean War. And North Korea has sent several delegations to the United States for technical assistance regarding energy and agriculture.

One factor that has changed the terms of engagement on the Korean peninsula is South Korea's new president, Kim Dae Jung. Although past South Korean presidents supported Washington's hard-line policies, Kim Dae Jung has come out clearly for engagement. On taking office in 1998, Kim immediately unveiled his "sunshine policy." According to this policy, South Korea no longer seeks to reunify the peninsula by absorbing North Korea. Despite some patronizing overtones, whereby a more advanced South reaches out to help a backward North, the sunshine policy's promotion of economic and social contacts between the two Koreas is a marked improvement over aggressive rhetoric and gestures.

Clinton administration policy toward North Korea is currently caught between a fifty-year legacy of containment and a tentative commitment to engagement. An agreement signed in March 1999 regarding U.S. access to the suspected underground nuclear weapons facility may point to greater cooperation. But hard-line sentiment in Congress and among prominent policymakers continues to pressure the administration to take a more hawkish stance.

Key Points

- The North Korean "threat" is a key justification for U.S. military spending, the presence of U.S. troops in Asia, and a new theater missile defense system.
- North Korea has criticized the U.S. for not lifting economic sanctions. The U.S. has criticized North Korean missile exports and has suspected Pyongyang of secretly developing a nuclear weapons program.
- Despite their often hostile rhetoric, North Korea and the United States have cooperated successfully on MIAs as well as famine relief and technical assistance programs.

There are at least two U.S. government policies toward North Korea. Elements within the Clinton administration support limited engagement and steps toward normalization of relations. In the CIA and the Pentagon, however, many are deeply skeptical of engagement and would prefer to see the imminent collapse of the regime, regardless of the consequences.

This tension at the policymaking center has rendered U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea inconsistent and, in some cases, deeply flawed. Instead of addressing the full range of bilateral disagreements, Washington has taken a piecemeal approach that has not meshed with the new policies of South Korea's Kim Dae Jung. Moreover, the Clinton administration has hardened its containment posture in the Northeast Asia region, strengthening North Korea's siege mentality.

The problems begin with Washington's half-hearted commitment to the 1994 Agreed Framework. When the U.S. signed the Agreed Framework, many in the administration expected the North Korean government to collapse before the promised light-water nuclear reactors would be operational in 2003. Rather than a step toward normalization, the agreement functioned as a stopgap measure. The North Korean government, however, has not collapsed. The power plant construction, whether by design or by accident, has encountered delays. More critically, the Clinton administration gave in to congressional opposition and lifted only the least important of the economic sanctions that Pyongyang desperately wants removed. Although Washington rhetorically supports a more open and internationally integrated North Korea, the economic embargo further severs Pyongyang from the capitalist world and reinforces the isolationist faction within the North Korean political elite.

A second problem concerns interpretation. North Korea, in the grip of a food crisis and a general economic collapse, is desperate to earn hard currency. This desperation is one of the reasons for its provocative acts. North Korea, negotiating from a weak position, is accumulating bargaining chips to get the best deal from the U.S. and Japan. Washington, however, has treated the missile launch and the missile sales as military gestures designed to threaten the national security of the United States and its Asian allies. In other words, the U.S. has developed military responses to a crisis that requires primarily economic solutions.

The South Korean government has understood North Korea's predicament as economically based and has shaped its policy toward its northern neighbor (Nordpolitik) accordingly. The "sunshine policy" has led to unprecedented economic cooperation between North and South. The South Korean government has given the go-ahead to several private ventures, including the Hyundai project that has brought tens of thousands of tourists by boat to Mt. Kumgang in the North. Dozens of South Korean businesses are poised to go north to negotiate joint ventures and to supply surplus

industrial equipment. Meanwhile, the construction of the light-water reactors has focused North and South Korean workers on a common goal—a prefiguring of the kind of projects that will eventually knit together the broken halves of the Korean peninsula.

Yet the "sunshine policy" has its critics within South Korea, and economic investments in the North are still mostly on paper. Without a similar push for engagement from the Clinton administration, Kim Dae Jung's attempts to reach out to North Korea may fall victim to conservative opposition.

Former U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, designated by the Clinton administration to make policy recommendations on North Korea, will issue a report of his findings in May or June. It is generally expected that he will favor upholding the Agreed Framework, especially in light of the March 1999 agreement, under which North Korea has permitted U.S. access to the suspected underground nuclear facility. Still, there are many voices within Congress, such as Benjamin Gilman and Henry Hyde, who have opposed both this deal and other moves toward engagement. A recent report produced for the National Defense University by former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage has argued that if North Korea doesn't satisfy all U.S. demands, then the U.S. must take sterner measures.

In Northeast Asia more generally, the U.S. has already taken sterner measures. It continues to conduct war games in the vicinity of North Korea, and in 1998 changed its battlefield simulation to include invasion and defeat of the North. The administration plans to build a theater missile defense system that will theoretically protect allies in the region from perceived missile threats from North Korea and China. Despite billions of dollars of research, missile defense has yet to be proven technically feasible, and the proposed system has unnecessarily antagonized Russia and China.

Moreover, in cooperation with conservative Japanese policymakers, the U.S. has redefined its alliance with Japan so that the latter will provide more support for U.S. operations in the region, shoulder more of the financial burden, and expand the military role of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. For the first time in fifty years, Japan is considering the development of first-strike capabilities. These moves challenge Japan's pacifist constitution, raise fears among the victims of Japan's colonial past (chiefly China and the two Koreas), and sharpen conflict in an already volatile region.

Key Problems

- U.S. support of the 1994 Agreed Framework has been inconsistent. Washington has delayed shipments of heavy oil and made only token moves toward normalizing relations with North Korea.
 - The Clinton administration has not thrown sufficient support behind South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy" of engaging North Korea.
 - The U.S. has contributed to North Korea's siege mentality by pursuing a theater missile defense system and by encouraging Japan to expand its military role in the region.
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Even as it simultaneously wages war in Iraq and Yugoslavia, the Clinton administration could attempt to bring peace to the Korean peninsula. To do so, it must take the dramatic first step of normalizing relations with North Korea. This would form the centerpiece of a comprehensive package addressing North Korea's economic and security concerns.

Key Recommendations

- The Clinton administration must devise a comprehensive package for North Korea that focuses on normalizing relations and lifting economic sanctions.
- The U.S. must coordinate North Korean engagement so that it supports South Korean initiatives and works with Japan's own efforts to normalize relations with North Korea.
- The U.S. must take the first steps in demilitarizing Asia by canceling its missile defense plans, reducing troop counts, formally ending the Korean War, and preparing for eventual disengagement from Korea.

On the U.S. end, normalizing relations would begin with a substantial amount of humanitarian aid to address North Korean famine and agricultural problems. Though no one knows how many have died from hunger so far, nutritional surveys have shown a frightening degree of malnutrition among children. International agencies monitoring food distribution have determined that little if any of the aid has been diverted from those in need.

The United States must also begin lifting economic sanctions to honor a promise implicit in the Agreed Framework. For years, Washington

refused to consider removing sanctions in deference to Seoul. Kim Dae Jung, however, now favors the lifting of sanctions. Sanctions, alone, do not isolate North Korea, but other countries (as well as banks and companies) would more readily consider loans to and investments in North Korea were sanctions removed.

North Korea, too, has a part to play in this comprehensive package. It must agree to controls on the exporting and testing of its missiles. In the same way that the Agreed Framework drew a line between the production of nuclear energy and the building of nuclear weapons, a package deal must restrict North Korea's missile tests while permitting further development of satellite technology. As for missile exports, North Korea has already demonstrated that it is willing to bargain for cash. Most recently, North Korea offered to stop exports in exchange for \$1 billion annually from the United States for three years. This is an opening bid that can clearly be negotiated, especially as there is evidence of a recent decline in North Korean missile exports.

For North Korea to feel safe giving up its missile development program, the U.S. must work with the

other countries in the region to reduce militaries and strengthen confidence-building measures—including consultations among defense officials, notification of military maneuvers in the Sea of Japan, and the exchange of information about defense expenditures. The U.S. is by far the dominant military presence in the region with 100,000 troops and billions of dollars of sophisticated weaponry. Therefore it must take the first steps toward demilitarization, including canceling plans for a missile defense system.

On the Korean peninsula, demilitarization must begin with a treaty to bring a formal end to the Korean War. Four-party negotiations involving North Korea, South Korea, China, and the United States have been inching toward a peace treaty that can replace the current, uneasy armistice. To date, the sticking point has been North Korea's demand that U.S. troops be withdrawn from South Korea. First, the four-party talks should be expanded to include Russia and Japan, to capitalize on Moscow's warming relations with Pyongyang. Second, the U.S. must consider restructuring its military force to become a true peacekeeping body in preparation for eventual disengagement from Korea.

Such a package deal is in line with South Korean proposals. It is critically important for the U.S. government to support Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy." A normalization of U.S.-North Korean relations must also be coordinated with Japan. Currently, the Japanese government is considering a deal that would send 4-10 billion dollars to North Korea if foreign relations are formally established. Such an agreement would herald a new age of regional cooperation, much as the normalization of Japan-South Korean relations did in 1965.

A package deal with North Korea will require President Clinton to use substantial political capital to overcome objections in Congress and within the administration. It will require a decisive swing away from the legacy of containment and toward a policy of engagement. The rewards, however, greatly outweigh the risks. By reaching out to North Korea, President Clinton has a unique opportunity to make his mark on history by ending the cold war in Asia.

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