

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

ENGAGEMENT OF NORTH KOREA: SUPPORT FOR THE “SUNSHINE POLICY”

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19 SEPTEMBER 2001

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 19 SEP 2001		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 19-09-2001 to 19-09-2001	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Engagement of North Korea: Support for the 'Sunshine Policy'				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 15	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Developing a U.S. roadmap for dealing with totalitarian regimes has always proven to be a daunting task, especially when these states threaten the use of force to gain the international spotlight and accompanying attention. Foreign policy realists would be inclined to take a very strict, hard line with the leadership of what used to be referred to as “rogue states,” a term less popular in current political lexicon but probably more accurate in description. Others may choose to let regional countries deal with the bad neighbor as the U.S. focuses on perhaps more pressing domestic needs. However, as proven throughout history, there is a danger in isolationism that will likely force a reluctant government’s hand to formulate a national security strategy in the international arena.

In dealing with the North Korean regime, the U.S. has an opportunity to walk down a potentially fruitful but very long and uneasy road. In 1998, the Republic of South Korea (ROK) government, under President Kim Dae Jung, instituted a “Constructive Engagement Policy” designed to stabilize the Korean peninsula while opening up contacts at multiple levels between the two countries. Dubbed the “Sunshine Policy,” this approach attempts to separate economics from politics and promote family reunification and other exchange programs. In light of the potential promises of this methodology, the U.S. government should support the South Korean president’s Sunshine Policy as a necessary form of engaging North Korea in the 21st century.

U.S. Policy

As of July 2000, the U.S. national interest in the Korean peninsula could be viewed as either “vital,” to “ensure allies’ survival and their active cooperation with the U.S. in

shaping an international system in which we can thrive,” or “extremely important,” wherein the U.S. must support “the well-being of U.S. allies and friends and protect them from aggression.”¹ Depending on how you interpret the subtle differences between ensuring South Korea’s survival and simply maintaining the peace, it is arguable that one condition cannot exist without the other given the current UNC Armistice situation on the peninsula. Nevertheless, the U.S. has a stated national interest in promoting the well-being of a key ally in Northeast Asia, which has secondary effect of providing stability to the Pacific region.

In developing its foreign policy objectives related to national interests, the U.S. must accurately visualize the end result for Korea in order to shape the outcome. The desire to not only maintain peace in the region but promoting growth and prosperity for a key ally must be weighed against the costs of expending national resources. A danger lies in starting out with what one can afford and then setting an objective that comes in just under the budget wire. More importantly, policy makers must identify a reasonable end state that can drive short and long range objectives, thereby allowing resources to be committed in a logical fashion. In supporting stated national interests, the means must feasibly be on par with an end state that closely resembles long-term stability of the Korean peninsula. Important in this long range view is the need to avoid a sudden collapse of the North Korean government that would create a chaotic environment of military conflict or humanitarian refugee problems. Combined with a responsibility to

¹ *America’s National Interests*, by Robert Ellsworth, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser, Chairmen, Commission on National Interests, July 2000, 6.

lead the recovery of the North Korean infrastructure, South Korea would likely be unable to absorb a rapid change in affairs, such as an accelerated reunification of the peninsula.

Background

Operating under an Armistice Agreement since the 1953 Korean War ceasefire, South Korea has undergone dramatic changes, moving from an authoritarian, militaristic state to one utilizing democratic processes. Much of ROK institutional psychology is attributed to painful memories of the Korean War and subsequent, and somewhat frequent, skirmishes the country had with the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) that, in many ways, reached an all time low with the 1983 bombing in Rangoon. That attack killed 17 members of the South Korean presidential entourage and narrowly missed the President himself.² The 1990s ushered in further difficulties when evidence existed that North Korea was pursuing a nuclear capability, resulting in a short-lived U.S. military buildup and a 1994 Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) light water nuclear reactor agreement that, fortunately, brought tensions back under control. Finally, the December 1997 election of President Kim Dae Jung broke many traditional paradigms, both in provincial politics as well as in determining how to best deal with the DPRK regime.

During the previous administration of President Kim Young Sam, U.S. leadership grew frustrated with ROK failures to produce a usable, long-range policy for addressing

² Leon V. Sigal, "Countdown on Korea: Will U.S. Hardliners Torpedo South Korea's Rapprochement with the North?" *The American Prospect*, August 27, 2001, 23.

North Korea.³ President Kim Dae Jung, himself a former dissident previously jailed for his liberal views, rose to the occasion by instituting his Constructive Engagement policy, otherwise known as the “Sunshine Policy.” This new approach, officially declared during President Kim Dae Jung’s February 25, 1998, inaugural address, attempted to address two major and inextricably related issues. First, while stating an unwillingness to tolerate any provocations from North Korea, ROK leadership renounced any attempt to harm the DPRK. Second, to speed the reconciliation process, President Kim Dae Jung promised to encourage private sector business opportunities in North Korea without government intervention.⁴ These opportunities also included people to people contacts, such as family reunions, and increased tourism. However, despite differing substantially from previous containment and reciprocity-oriented strategies, many of these programs would still require government dialogues and reciprocity in order to be permitted -- a continual sticking point hampering policy success. Yet this very program was instrumental in garnering President Kim the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize and praise from U.S. lawmakers, to include glowing congratulatory remarks from Congressman Ed Royce (D-California), U.S. Vice Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific.⁵

Mirroring President Kim Dae Jung’s approach, the Clinton administration fully supported engaging North Korean leadership in the late 1990s. A State Department review of U.S. policy, directed by President Clinton and led by Dr. William J. Perry,

³ Ralph A. Cossa, “South Korea’s Package Deal,” *The PacNet Newsletter 1999*, (The Center for Strategic and International Studies), March 12, 1999, 1.

⁴ Rinn-Sup Shinn, “South Korea: ‘Sunshine Policy’ and Political Context,” *Congressional Research Service*, (Congressional Information Service, Inc., Policy Papers), May 27, 1999, 1.

⁵ Ed Royce, “Vice Chairman Royce Congratulates South Korean President Kim on Nobel Peace Prize,” (FDCH Press Releases), October 13, 2000, 1.

recommended a “two-path strategy” that would combine a “new, comprehensive and integrated approach to our negotiations”⁶ with steps to reduce pressures on North Korea that it “perceives as threatening.” This approach recommended U.S. normalization of relations with the DPRK and relaxation of sanctions in exchange for elimination of its nuclear and long-range missile programs. Economic sanctions were indeed relaxed on September 17, 1999, after receiving assurances that North Korea would continue its moratorium on long-range ballistic missile testing.⁷

However, tensions again arose when newly elected President George W. Bush directed a fresh policy review shortly after taking office in January 2001. This analysis was still ongoing when President Kim Dae Jung paid an official visit to the White House in March 2001, receiving cool support for his engagement policy due to U.S. skepticism about North Korea’s regime.⁸ This lack of full encouragement fueled criticism of the Sunshine Policy, particularly within the opposition Grand National Party that had consistently complained the approach was too soft in dealing with an aggressive North Korea. U.S. inaction resulted in a slowdown in positive inter-Korean activities that have only recently been readdressed. Yim Sung Joon, the South Korean deputy foreign minister, stated in early September 2001 that the two sides should focus on “easy” matters such as family reunions and economic issues for now.⁹ Although the stage was

⁶ William J. Perry, “Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations,” (U.S. State Department), October 12, 1999, 8.

⁷ “Implementation of Easing of Sanctions Against North Korea,” (U.S. State Department Fact Sheet), June 19, 2000, 1.

⁸ “Not So Sunny in the Koreas,” *Economist* 358, (March 17, 2001): 41.

⁹ Paul Shin, “North Korea Accepts South Proposal,” (Associated Press Report), September 6, 2001.

set for President Bush to finally reaffirm his support for an engagement strategy in the summer of 2001, the damage had already been done.

Assumptions

Arguments for support of the Sunshine Policy and its accompanying engagement strategy are rooted in basic assumptions of target state, allied, other international, and U.S. domestic interests.

North Korea: Despite its occasionally quirky actions, the governing regime must still be categorized as a rational actor. Even though classified as a “rogue” state, DPRK leadership is still able to make cost versus benefit decisions. Additionally, one should assume that the regime (1) is motivated by an interest in maintaining power, (2) maintains a sizable weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability with an intent to use it in conflict, (3) has the potential to reinstate nuclear production capabilities, (4) possesses a limited long range missile capability to supplement its large standing armed forces, and (5) is economically unable to provide for its population for the foreseeable future.

South Korea: One could postulate that (1) ROK administration officials desire inclusion in any U.S.-North Korean negotiations, (2) the ROK government will maintain support for continued U.S. military presence in a defensive posture in South Korea, and (3) South Koreans desire peninsula reunification at some point in the future. In addition, the Sunshine Policy itself assumes that (1) there exists an emerging need to ease North Korea’s concerns about domestic and external uncertainties, (2) North Korea’s firepower could devastate Seoul without having ground forces even cross the current Demilitarized

Zone (DMZ), (3) peaceful stability is necessary to attract foreign investment, and (4) the previous confrontational culture will gradually change to minimize the chances of renewed hostilities.¹⁰

International Players: The Korean situation does not exist in a global vacuum. In particular, regional actors such as Japan, Russia, and China can be expected to maintain an interest in Korea, particularly in ensuring Northeast Asian stability through economic ties and support of bilateral/multilateral agreements between signatories. All of these countries could also be expected to maintain some level of interest in acting as a moderator, in concert with the U.S., in resolving North-South differences.

U.S. Domestic: Assumptions on the home front are critical in determining the applicability and validity of any national security strategy. One must expect that (1) congressional and popular support for any national strategy may vary between realist and idealist viewpoints, with recent congressional opinion leaning toward more conservative, hawkish stances, and (2) U.S. policy makers believe that positive public support for maintaining U.S. troops in South Korea in a purely defensive posture will continue for the foreseeable future.

Analysis: Strategic Engagement

The most promising approach to dealing with the North Korean regime is through engagement in economic, diplomatic, and informational arenas, while continuing to militarily contain the DPRK military forces through a strong deterrence. This national

¹⁰ Rinn-Sup Shinn, "South Korea: 'Sunshine Policy' and Political Context," *Congressional Research Service*, (Congressional Information Service, Inc., Policy Papers), May 27, 1999, 7.

security strategy should stress full backing of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" on the diplomatic, informational, and economic levels.

Key to realizing U.S. national goals is to merge them with South Korean policy objectives where desired end states are similar. Given the realities of a ROK government that understandably shows some reluctance to deal with the social, economic, and political costs of reunification, two basic South Korean objectives emerge. The first, and probably the easiest to align with U.S. goals, is the desire to avoid war.¹¹ The cost of armed conflict on the Korean peninsula, especially one in which WMD usage is likely, would be devastating. The stage for further long range missile and nuclear program development, troop deployment, and arms reduction talks is therefore established, treating all military-related issues in a combined, coherent manner. The second, and possibly the most revealing, ROK aim is an end state with a less belligerent, more cooperative DPRK regime focused on making substantive changes to its totalitarian system of government.

Constant engagement through cooperative contact is key to the ROK government gaining increased insight into the inner mechanisms of the DPRK. South Korea hopes that even minimal contact with the DPRK will help "corrupt" the North Korean system, normally well hidden behind an obsessive wall of state secrecy, enough to reduce its credibility with its own population. The Sunshine Policy's approach to increasing contacts at estranged family and economic levels may engender more open dealings at the diplomatic level and, in the long run, reduce misunderstandings and

¹¹ "North Korea: Risks and Rewards of Engagement," *Journal of International Affairs* 54, no. 2, (Spring 2001): 469.

misinterpretations of intent -- a major source of conflict, especially given North Korea's tendency to engage in brinkmanship to garner international aid and support.

Support of the Sunshine Policy also has secondary effects that are useful to U.S. interests in the long term. By following a coordinated team approach with President Kim Dae Jung, the U.S. would provide credibility to a key leadership figure who has recently come under intense domestic pressure to alter his strategic approach. In a region well known for a requirement to "save face," policy is most closely identified with the man. Any visible lack of U.S. support for President Kim's political views going into the December 2002 ROK presidential elections could easily lead to an undesirable reversal in principles guiding South Korean policies.

Regardless of any "go it alone" predisposition the U.S. occasionally tends to portray, settling the Korean situation cannot simply be a bilateral or tripartite agreement. International players maintain their own distinct strategic interests in the Korean peninsula. China, as a co-signatory with the U.S. to the 1953 Armistice Agreement, has instituted a history of policies that encourages the survival of the DPRK. However, in recent years, Chinese business has become more active in South Korea and, therefore, maintains good relations with ROK government officials. Chinese President Jiang Zemin, in a late summer 2001 visit to Pyongyang, initiated a more active role, left open in the absence of concerted U.S. actions, by attempting to push North Korea's Kim Jong Il back into talks with South Korea.¹² These gestures came only a month after Russian President Vladimir Putin urged North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, while visiting Moscow

¹² Robert Marquand, "China Nudges Korea Toward the Outside World," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 6, 2001, n.p.

on a state trip, to travel to Seoul in hopes of resuming dialogue.¹³ During this visit, the DPRK also signed a pact with Russia calling for the removal of U.S. troops from the region in an eight-point “Moscow Declaration,”¹⁴ an alarming development that seemed to be a result of President Bush’s more hard line stance toward North Korea.

In addition to China and Russia, Japan must play an important role in stabilizing the Korean peninsula. Despite historical animosity between Korea and Japan, the Japanese government continues to maintain a crucial stake in Korean security.¹⁵ First, there exists a danger of any peninsula war spilling over to Japan, to include attacks against the island nation by North Korean long range missiles. Secondly, Japanese-South Korean relations have continued to improve over recent years, a relationship that can best be described as defending a regional ally vice an old friend from aggression. Finally, a reunified Korea provides a potential regional competition between Japan and China over resources. All told, Japan has opened an engagement policy with North Korea, consisting of both direct diplomatic contacts and stating formal support for President Kim Dae Jung’s Sunshine Policy.

A critical element of achieving more openness through this Nobel prize winning policy is that all interested parties, whether global or regional, can engage in an informational transformation of North Korea. When the floodgates of the internet and uncensored media are opened in the DPRK, influence north of the DMZ is possible.

¹³ Nicholas Kravlev, “Putin Urges Kim to Travel to Seoul,” *Washington Times*, August 7, 2001, 9.

¹⁴ Ji Ho Kim, “Withdrawal Of U.S. Troops Included In N.K.-Russia Pact,” *Korea Herald*, August 6, 2001, n.p.

¹⁵ “North Korea: Risks and Rewards of Engagement,” *Journal of International Affairs* 54, no. 2, (Spring 2001): 468.

Although not expected to reach the average North Korean citizen bound by abject poverty and a very low standard of living, there exists the possibility of introducing a new, more entrepreneurial business class into society similar to that existing in China today. Gaining influence in the long haul could therefore be achievable as members of the current regime, many members of which are of very advanced years, begins to transition to new leadership.

Alternatives for Consideration

In analyzing approaches to achieving national security objectives in Korea, other potential methods must be addressed. The obvious alternative of direct military intervention/invasion of North Korea is not addressed as it does not fit the common sense test of applying rational, democratic societal values and norms to the situation at hand.

Direct U.S.-North Korean talks. This approach requires direct negotiation between U.S. and DPRK officials to ensure compliance with non-proliferation, missile development, and arms reduction issues. Increased economic sanctions or direct aid can be used in exchange for reciprocity. The potential also exists to develop roles for Japan and China to act as third party moderators. **Counter point:** Unfortunately, this avenue undercuts South Korean credibility and attacks ROK government legitimacy in North Korean eyes. Although this approach is preferred by North Korean leadership, the result would likely be a loss of political support for engagement within the ROK government.

Hard line compellence. Prodding North Korean compliance through coercive means on non-proliferation, missile development, and freezing of any nuclear programs has potential given the current security situation. The U.S. maintains the credibility and

means to follow through, both militarily and economically, on any threat. **Counterpoint:** This line of attack would likely paint the U.S. as an aggressor in the international community and increase tensions, strengthening the potential for miscommunication or a misstep leading to a regional conflict. In addition, this hard line approach would likely undercut ROK policies addressing North Korea and initiate a ROK demand for decreased U.S. troop levels in South Korea, a potentially destabilizing scenario in Asia.

Summary

A coherent national security strategy need not be complicated. Indeed, the simpler the plan, the less the chances of a foreign policy gaffe either through misunderstanding of intent or by marching in the wrong direction. In engaging the North Korean regime, President Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" provides an opportunity to align U.S. national interests with South Korean objectives to avoid conflict and attempt to bring DPRK activities out in the open. By separating economics from politics, the policy offers the best chances of peacefully bringing a rational but occasionally unpredictable actor to the negotiating table on a regular basis. The opportunity to complement strained U.S. resources with South Korean assets further advances combined, mutual interests.

The ability to promote personal exchanges and business opportunities is critical to the success of any attempts to engender a new business class and influence North Korean decision-making in the long run. In light of the potential promises of the South Korean president's Sunshine Policy, the U.S. government should quickly back this approach to bolster ROK support before the U.S. squanders its negotiating strength in Korea through inaction and perceived disinterest.

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