

The First Year of the Roh Administration's North Korea Policy

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The Peace and Prosperity Policy: Continuing and Developing the Sunshine Policy

It has been little over one year since the inauguration of Roh Moo Hyun as president of the Republic of Korea (ROK). During this brief period he has faced many challenges, one in particular being the North Korean nuclear issue. Currently, he confronts a more personal challenge with the possibility of being impeached. It has also been little over a year since the initiation of Roh's so-called "Peace and Prosperity policy" that was first outlined in his inaugural address. The brevity of a single year makes systematic or detailed discussion of this policy somewhat premature, and any attempt to do so here may appear as such. However, reflection on the new participatory government's policy toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is nonetheless important. This article aims to identify those tasks that will lead to more positive developments of the policy's goals and objectives.

The Peace and Prosperity policy is essentially a souped-up successor of the previous Kim Dae Jung administration's Sunshine policy. The reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea pursued by the Kim administration has become the basis for Roh's policy and accordingly his administration has endeavored to maintain positive inter-Korean relations despite the negative impact of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Such positive policy approaches have resulted in the "era of ten thousand South Korean visitors to North Korea" and turned South Korea into North Korea's second most important trading partner. Absent of any pressure or the notion of unification by absorption, the Peace and Prosperity policy has actively pursued exchange and cooperation with North Korea in order to initiate a peaceful process of unification through inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation. Comparatively, however, Roh's plan attempts to go beyond the (primarily) inter-Korean relations focused Sunshine policy and seeks to establish a "Northeast Asian economic hub" and bring an "era of

peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia”.

The Peace and Prosperity Policy and the North Korean Nuclear Issue

Initially, the circumstances and situation faced by the Roh Moo Hyun government's Peace and Prosperity policy led to uncertainty and insecurity. This was particularly the case after the North Korean nuclear issue surfaced in October of 2002. To achieve its overall objective of establishing peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia, it was essential that Roh's policy first bring about a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue. Therefore, resolving this issue became the first step toward successfully implementing the new policy.

In consideration of these circumstances, the Roh government officially laid out three principles regarding the North Korean nuclear issue: 1) not permitting North Korea to have a nuclear weapons program, 2) a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue through dialogue, and 3) South Korea's active role in the resolution process. However, a great deal of confusion followed these initial plans, the primary reason being that the fundamental nature of the nuclear issue and Roh's three principles exhibited limited compatibility. For instance, one aspect of the three principles is to have North Korea give up its nuclear weapons. Ultimately, however, the essence of the nuclear issue centers on normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington, hence it should be understood that the problem requires a comprehensive approach as it is primarily a DPRK-U.S. issue.

If the short-term focus of Roh's three principles is to not permit North Korea to possess or develop nuclear weapons, then naturally the administration will have to concentrate on a policy that seeks dismantlement of the DPRK's nuclear program(s). Therefore, the principle of “not permitting nuclear weapons” becomes the first priority, thus rendering “peaceful resolution” and “active role of South Korea” as mere measures to realize the first goal.

Ultimately, the Roh government's three principles were geared toward having North

Korea abandon its nuclear program first. However, this differs from the fundamental nature of the North Korean nuclear problem that requires a link between Pyongyang's dismantling of its nuclear program and normalization of relations with Washington. The principle of a peaceful resolution is linked to improved DPRK-U.S. relations and the establishment of a peace system on the Korean peninsula. The ROK government proclaims as its first priority the prevention of North Korea from possessing nuclear weapons, while at the same time it wishes to pursue a peaceful resolution, which naturally clashes with the administration's supposed first principle. This kind of incompatibility has only resulted in much policy confusion.

Shortly after Roh's inauguration, it was pointed out that emphasizing a peaceful resolution as the number one priority could potentially lead to instability in the ROK-U.S. alliance or indifference to indications that Pyongyang was indeed developing nuclear weapons. Depending on the situation, the administration was faced with the decision of abandoning its position on a peaceful resolution, and at times by going along with the diplomatic pressure pursued by the United States, the first principle (i.e., not permitting nukes) became more important.

A Lack of Consistency

Although the Peace and Prosperity policy has brought about some positive results, it has been plagued by inconsistency. This is a result of the difficult balancing act of trying to bring the nuclear crisis to an end while simultaneously maintaining inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation--the main objective of the Sunshine policy. In dealing with such conflicting agenda, it is only natural that consistency suffer. Sometimes Seoul emphasized cooperation between South Korea and the United States and pressure on North Korea, while at other times endeavored to maintain inter-Korean relations and thus emphasized reconciliation and cooperation. Ultimately this resulted in a meandering policy approach.

For instance, after his inauguration, Roh allowed for a special investigation into allegations concerning money transfers to North Korea before the June 2000 inter-

Korean summit. As a result, the government had to accept blame for politically damaging the spirit of the June 15 Joint Declaration. At a summit meeting in Washington in May 2003, an agreement was reached to pursue “additional measures” and it was suggested that the nuclear issue be linked to inter-Korean relations. These decisions only served to cause a slow freeze in North-South relations. Even if inherent structural problems in the Peace and Prosperity policy due to the North Korean nuclear problem are acknowledged, it is still apparent that the Roh government vacillated between dialogue with and pressure on Pyongyang with a confused policy approach and no firm basis for dealing with the nuclear issue.

The Roh government sometimes regards not allowing nuclear weapons in North Korea as the most important principle but at other times it regards a peaceful resolution as the first priority. This only leads to a predicament rather than a functional combination of the two principles. In the event that Seoul pursues a policy of not condoning nuclear weapons in the DPRK, the Roh government will have to emphasize ROK-U.S. cooperation over inter-Korean relations, and stress pressure over dialogue; the reverse is true if “a peaceful resolution” is given priority. Regardless of which takes precedence, there still exists the potential for further policy confusion and inconsistency.

Future Tasks and Maintaining Consistency

Even during his election campaign, Roh viewed reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea and the nuclear issue as two separate issues and since has made efforts to maintain and develop inter-Korean relations despite the nuclear problem. In spite of some criticism, the principle of reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea is clearly still the proper approach for achieving a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue and establishing peace on the Korean peninsula. And regardless of the difficulty and increased duration of taking such a position, South Korea needs to make a strong case for dialogue and compromise in order to have North Korea abandon its nuclear program on its own rather than consider or opt for harsher methods such as containment or military action as advocated by some officials in Washington. If the Peace and Prosperity policy is truly a continuation of the Sunshine policy, the Roh government

will have to adhere firmly to the principle of reconciliation and cooperation as the best approach despite the obstacles.

The proper order of the Roh administration's principles for resolving the nuclear issue is clear. On the basis of this, consistency in policy needs to be established. Whatever the situation or conditions, the principles must be realized through more than just a strong conviction or belief. In other words, they must be firmly established and applied. In order to maintain consistency, the three principles concerning the nuclear issue are in need of some modification. To solve the conflict between the principles of not permitting North Korea to have nuclear weapons and seeking a peaceful resolution, a plan should be established to "use peaceful means to have North Korea give up its nuclear weapons." In addition, the South Korean government should set aside--for the time being--its desire to play a more active role in resolving the problem. Rather, consideration of the fundamental nature of the nuclear issue is needed along with suggestions for creating an opportunity to bring about the normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington. Such an approach would be more apposite to the nature and character of the nuclear issue.

Furthermore, in order to maintain consistency in its Peace and Prosperity policy, the Roh government must confront and solve the dual nature of its "cooperation dilemma." Without healthy ROK-U.S. cooperation, it will be difficult for Seoul to induce change in Washington's attitude. Likewise, if there is no progress in inter-Korean relations, it will be hard to bring about a change in Pyongyang's position. Despite Washington's hard-line policy, Seoul's cooperation with officials in the White House is not likely to have a negative affect on inter-Korean relations. However, care should be exercised. Shaking the foundation of the ROK-U.S. alliance for the sake of maintaining inter-Korean relations is obviously undesirable.

It seems that much of the policy confusion resulted from the Roh government's excessive emphasis on South Korea's principles, which on the whole differed from the opinions of the United States. In reality, however, during the process of ROK-U.S. cooperation, Seoul was actually being led by Washington. Due to unsophisticated

diplomacy, in the event that the ROK-U.S. alliance becomes unstable and the Korean government is forced to compensate for this by jumping on the U.S. hard-line bandwagon--something that very likely will strain inter-Korean relations--it will then be difficult for Seoul to raise its voice concerning both the United States and North Korea. Thus in trying to maintain both its relations with Washington and Pyongyang, Seoul will not be able to have its cake and eat it too. Under the new conditions of the post-cold war order and inter-Korean reconciliation, maintaining a balance will require wisdom on the part of Seoul. To flex its diplomatic muscle, Seoul must now begin to prepare a resolution and implement it.