

The North Korean Nuclear Crisis and Inter-Korean Relations

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INTRODUCTION

After several incidents and dramatic last-minute deals, the North Korean nuclear crisis still seem far from a peaceful solution. As long as the nuclear weapons program remains unresolved, developments in relations between the two Koreas cannot be guaranteed. Under the circumstances, in which North Korea and the U.S. are the key players in negotiations over nuclear weapons, South Korea is finding it difficult to balance its policies between Pyongyang and Washington so as not to show partiality. Looking back at the Kim Young-sam government, one can see how harmful North Korea's nuclear weapons program can be to inter-Korean relations.¹⁾

On the other hand, some argue that relations between the two Koreas must be continuously fostered, at least to prevent tensions

1) From 1993 to 1994, during negotiations with North Korea on its nuclear program, the Kim Young-sam government intentionally hindered and delayed negotiations, worsening inter-Korean relations.

from escalating on the Korean peninsula. The increasingly convincing argument is that in order to ease Washington's strong stance against Pyongyang and to avoid using aggressive measures to solve the weapons program, inter-Korean relations must be improved to reinforce peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. At the same time, Seoul's role should be enhanced to ultimately reach a peaceful and lasting solution. Improved relations between the two Koreas would increase Pyongyang's dependence on Seoul while opening inroads for the South Korean government to influence the North, and it would also be a powerful and positive means to resolve concerns over North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Following the policies of his predecessor, President Roh Moo-hyun is also keen on improving relations with the North while trying to promote a peaceful solution of the nuclear crisis.

The nuclear crisis and inter-Korean relations have a negative correlation in that the former directly restricts improvement of the latter. At the same time, however, the two also have a positive correlation as inter-Korean relations need to be sustained in order for the weapons program to be resolved in a peaceful manner.

Against this backdrop, this paper will review the North Korea policies of the current government, and will trace the government's dilemma amid concerns over the crisis. The paper aims to confirm that a lack of consistency in Seoul's policies is inevitable as the nuclear crisis and inter-Korean relations are closely related. It proposes that the government should act as a buffer, consistently following two conflicting, but necessary principles: seeking peaceful resolution of the crisis and improving inter-Korean relations.

THE ROH GOVERNMENT'S NORTH KOREA POLICY

Soon after taking office, President Roh Moo-hyun announced the policy of peace and prosperity. The government explained that the

policy was meant to “reinforce peace on the Korean peninsula and seek the co-prosperity of both South and North Korea to build a foundation for a peaceful unification and a base for South Korea to become the economic center of Northeast Asia.”²⁾ In sum, the vision for peace and prosperity would take advantage of continued improvements in inter-Korean relations to seek peace and prosperity beyond reconciliation and cooperation, and would consider in its policy objective not just the Korean peninsula, but also Northeast Asia.³⁾

Regarding the North Korean nuclear threat, President Roh officially offered three principles for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue—opposition to the North’s nuclear arms program, a peaceful solution to the issue, and South Korea playing a leading role in resolving the problem.⁴⁾ So far, however, implementation has not been in line with the original vision.⁵⁾ This discrepancy occurred

2) Ministry of Unification, *The Participatory Government’s Policy of Peace and Prosperity* (in Korean), (Seoul: MOU, March 2003), p. 2.

3) Despite the master plan on the policy of peace and prosperity, a few matters must be considered to ensure success of the policy. First, before proposing the policy of peace and prosperity, the Roh government must clearly, with the endorsement of the Korean people, indicate what it aims to do and to what extent it has borrowed from the sunshine policy. Also, unlike the sunshine policy which was a specific policy on North Korea, the policy of peace and prosperity is a vision that encompasses diplomacy, security and unification. Since elements within can be mutually conflicting, an overall framework should be planned, taking into account all possible conflicts. Also, the policy objectives of peace and prosperity can be perceived as too broad, and the initiatives too long-term. In particular, seeking to make Korea an economic center in Northeast Asia can be seen as too extravagant a goal. Kim Keun-sik, “The Roh Moo Hyun Government’s Policy on North Korea: Its Vision and Reality,” a paper presented at a symposium co-hosted by the KDI School of Public Policy and Management and Ritsumeikan University, August 19, 2003.

4) Ministry of Unification, *op. cit.*, p. 12

5) In the actual implementation of the three principles, the South Korean government sometimes seemed to recognize the nuclear weapons program,

because the government's three principles did not properly address the nature of North Korea's nuclear problem. In other words, the three principles were aimed at ending the urgent crisis, when, in fact, that issue is between North Korea and the U.S., which requires a more comprehensive approach, even considering U.S.-North Korea normalization.

Roh's three-step strategy toward peace and prosperity aims to resolve North Korea's nuclear weapons program, bring lasting peace on the Korean peninsula and finally, build an economic hub for Northeast Asia. The three principles of the nuclear weapons program were proposed as a short-term strategy for resolving the nuclear threat. The goal of this mid-term strategy is to bring lasting peace on the Korean peninsula, which includes initiatives to support normalization of relations between Pyongyang and Washington (and Pyongyang and Tokyo) and create a new international environment.⁶⁾ The government established the initial aim, to deter North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and, after achieving this objective, Roh planned to normalize relations between North Korea and the U.S., thus realizing the vision of lasting peace on the peninsula.⁷⁾

If the three principles were, in the short-term, focused on deterring North Korea's development of nuclear weapons in the short-term, policies should be concentrated on inducing Pyongyang to give up its development of the weapons. In this case, the primary

sometimes seemed to back away from the principle of peaceful resolution, and at other times seemed to resist taking an active role.

6) Ministry of Unification, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

7) Recent books published by the Government Information Agency outline "progress based on consensus and support of the Korean people" as the strategy for introducing a framework for lasting peace on the peninsula instead of "creating a new international environment which includes supporting the normalization of relations between North Korea and the US." Government Information Agency, *State Vision and Initiatives for the Participatory Government* (Seoul: GIA, March 2003), p. 17; Kim Jin-hyang, *Building a Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula* (Seoul: GIA, August 2003), p. 73.

principle would be to deter North Korean nuclear development. Others, such as peaceful resolution and actively expanding South Korea's role, would simply be possible approaches to achieving the principle. Also in this case, means other than peaceful, such as military force or sanctions, would be considered in order to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program.⁸⁾

Essentially, President Roh's three principles for resolving the nuclear issue and the three-step strategy of the policy of peace and prosperity were both primarily focused on deterring North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, when the nature of the nuclear issues is tied to U.S.-North Korea normalization. Logically, therefore, dismantling the program is the sole primary principle. However, the issue of peaceful resolution included in the three principles has become a link between improving Pyongyang-Washington relations and bringing lasting peace on the Korean peninsula. Therefore, the three principles, as they were primarily aimed at eliminating the nuclear program, have become isolated from the nature of the nuclear issue. At the same time, by concurrently seeking a peaceful resolution, which can be contradictory to the primary objective of opposing the North's nuclear development, implementation of these policies has resulted in confusion.

As President Roh's vision for resolving the nuclear threat was inherently limited, the government at times appeared to put priority on "peaceful resolution" while intentionally downplaying U.S.-South Korean relations and turning a blind eye to signs of the North's nuclear development.⁹⁾ At times, the principle of peaceful resolution

8) The principle should be one that even allows the South Korean government to temporarily step back from trying to take on an active role for the purpose of achieving the primary objective of deterring North Korea and ending its nuclear weapons program. In particular, under the current circumstances and power dynamics seeking to make the Korean government play an active role should be an option, but not a firm principle.

9) Every time Washington suggested the possibility of sanctions against North Korea or a surgical strike, the Roh government opposed it, citing the need to seek

was set aside. By supporting Washington's increased pressure on Pyongyang, the government appeared to give deterrence of the weapons program higher priority.

SOUTH KOREA'S POLICY DILEMMA

The government's three principles to resolve North Korea's nuclear crisis constituted a vision primarily aimed at opposing the North's nuclear program, but in reality, it appeared to give equal weight to peaceful resolution and deterrence. And this resulted from the fact that the government tried to associate the U.S.-North Korea normalization issue with the issue of building a peace regime on the Korean peninsula. Therefore, among the three principles, sometimes deterring the nuclear program needed the highest priority while at other times peaceful resolution, including improved relations, was more important. This created a dilemma between the two rather than leading to mutual positive influence.

Pressure versus Dialogue

After North Korea's nuclear weapons problem was highlighted in October 2002, President Roh Moo-hyun, even as a presidential candidate, constantly emphasized the importance of resolving issues through peaceful dialogue, and he promoted talks with Pyongyang over pressure tactics. When the so-called strategy of "tailored containment" was carried in the U.S. press in December 2002, Roh Moo-hyun, president-elect at the time, expressed concerns over the strategy.¹⁰ Even after two aggressive moves by Pyongyang around

a peaceful resolution. Also, when North Korea acknowledged having nuclear material, insisted that it had processed nuclear material or had conducted high explosive tests, the Roh government appeared to discount the matter on grounds of insufficient evidence.

the time of President Roh's inauguration (the launching of a ground-to-ship missile and a North Korean fighter approaching a U.S. reconnaissance plane) he was still stressing peaceful resolution of matters through dialogue. The President's decision to respond to the U.S. request to dispatch troops to the war with Iraq, against strong opposition from civic organizations in South Korea, was also aimed at easing the U.S. hard-line stance on the nuclear crisis.

However, the government's policy of peaceful resolution through dialogue seems to have weakened since the South Korea-U.S. summit in May 2003. In particular, President Roh agreed with the U.S. President Bush to take "further steps" to prepare for increased threats from North Korea and gave tacit permission on Washington's additional pressures.

Some argued that if the agreement reached by the two leaders at the U.S.-South Korea summit is tantamount to pro-U.S. support as part of the three principles, it can also be assumed that in any future decisions on military action against North Korea, Seoul will have to endorse the U.S. Others even worried that since attending the summit, President Roh has given up his once-consistent position on peaceful resolution under the South Korea-U.S. alliance.

Through China's mediation, the first six-party talks got under way last year opening channels for dialogue with the North. Roh's government once again placed more weight on peacefully resolving the issue than pressuring the North. In the course of policy consultations among high level officials of South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, South Korea proposed a detailed roadmap for North Korea

10) On December 31, 2002, president-elect Roh Moo-hyun in a meeting with his transition committee, stated that he doubted whether Washington's policy of containing North Korea was effective, either in controlling the North or making it surrender. He added that such a matter should no longer be simply announced by Washington and then accepted by Seoul, as it may have been in the past, but should be announced jointly after the two parties had reached a collective decision in the spirit of the South Korea-U.S. alliance. *Yonhap News Agency*, December 31, 2002.

and consistently requested that the U.S. present an offer to Pyongyang so that progress could be made in negotiations. Last July, even after South Korea's National Intelligence Service disclosed the North's high-explosive test, the government expected the nuclear issue to be resolved in a peaceful manner through the six-party talks. Also, shortly before the talks, when North Korea indicated it might not attend the Daegu Universiade, and also demanded an official apology for the incident in which the North Korean flag was damaged, President Roh, against widespread opposition and criticism, quickly expressed his regrets in hopes of maintaining the momentum for dialogue.

SOUTH KOREA-U.S. COOPERATION VERSUS INTER-KOREA RELATIONS

As a presidential candidate Roh Moo Hyun consistently argued that South Korea seek to resolve North Korea's nuclear weapons program while fostering inter-Korean economic cooperation at the same time, and he stressed the importance of reconciliation and cooperation with the North. Even as president-elect, he continued to support exchange and cooperation with North Korea despite escalating tensions over the nuclear weapons program.¹¹⁾ Roh's position on maintaining a cooperative relationship with Pyongyang was so firm that it raised concerns about weakening of U.S.-South Korea ties. Despite escalating tensions between Washington and Pyongyang, the government continued talks with North Korea as

11) On February 13, 2003 in a meeting, President-elect Roh Moo Hyun stressed the importance of providing North Korea aid and maintaining positive relations, saying that the government was not showering North Korea with money. He added that the era of Northeast Asia would not be possible without overcoming the issue between the two Koreas, and the government's initiatives were aimed at ensuring a promising future.

planned, and provided untied food aid. Economic cooperation between the two Koreas also progressed, regardless of the political and military situations on the Korean peninsula, and social exchanges such as the reunion of separated families also continued.

However, the government faced criticism that its once-consistent principle to seek reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea had weakened since the summit talks with the United States in May 2003. Specifically, since the talks, the North Korea's nuclear weapons program had been linked to inter-Korean exchange and cooperation at the summit, the government had taken a noticeably different position compared to its past conciliatory stance. For example, at the fifth Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Promotion Committee, held immediately after the summit, South Korea responded to a North Korean reference to the term "disaster," by suggesting that it would break off talks. This sudden intransigence was branded "childish arrogance" by many critics.¹²⁾ Also a cause for criticism, Roh sent a mid-level government official rather than a minister to the long-awaited groundbreaking ceremony to relink the Seoul-Shinuiju and East Coast Line. And another perceived blunder was that Roh did not issue a government statement on June 15, the anniversary of the historic 2001 inter-Korean summit. Such incidents were perceived negatively as signs that the Roh government was less keen on reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea.

Some argue that President's Roh's commitment to reconciliation and cooperation began fading even before the South Korea-U.S. summit, when he acquiesced to the demand for a special prosecutor's investigation into allegations that funds had been transferred to North Korea under the Kim Dae-jung government. Last year, when President Roh was urged to veto the Special Prosecutor's Investigation Act, which had been passed in the

12) The government's decision to fire warning shots at a North Korean fishing boat that crossed the north limit line (NLL) off the West Coast last June was criticized as the most extreme display of the Korean government's arrogance.

National Assembly by the majority Grand National Party, he decided to approve the Act after considering the political situation at the time. As a result, the significance of the inter-Korean summit and the Joint Declaration was diminished once the special investigation confirmed the allegations.

The credibility of Inter-Korean relations, which had been challenged by the special prosecutor's investigation and the intensified alliance between Seoul and Washington, started to normalize in July 2003. The seventh reunion of separated families took place, and official talks on various levels resumed as planned. Also, at the 11th Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks, the two parties reached an agreement on the possibility of resolving concerns over North Korea's nuclear weapons program through multilateral talks.¹³⁾ Furthermore, President Roh tried to maintain positive relations with North Korea by vetoing the amended Special Prosecutor's Investigation Act. Drafted by the Grand National Party, it allowed an extension of the previous Act. In late June, construction commenced on an industrial complex in Kaesong, North Korea and soon after, a joint statement on inter-Korean economic cooperation was announced. Also, the Mt. Kumkang tourism project was relaunched, and social and cultural exchanges between the two Korea were reinitiated, including events such as the August 15 Liberation Day celebration.

In particular, the possibility of peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue was raised after the six-party talks in August, indicating that the Roh government had once again placed priority on maintaining and strengthening relations with Pyongyang. As expected,

13) At the 11th Inter-Korean Ministerial Talks, held from July 9 to 12, the two Koreas announced that joint efforts were needed to maintain peace and security on the Korean peninsula and that both would work together to resolve the nuclear issue in a peaceful manner through appropriate dialogue. With the rare expression "appropriate dialogue," the two parties opened up the possibility of engaging in multilateral talks. *Yonhap News Agency*, July 12, 2003

government-level talks produced constructive results and in the fall, nongovernmental-level exchange and cooperation was more active than it had been in the past.

THE FUTURE DIRECTION OF SOUTH KOREAN POLICY

The Nature of the Nuclear Issue and Principles for a Solution

When North Korea first revealed that it had a clandestine nuclear program involving enriched uranium, deterring Pyongyang from developing nuclear arms was not the only issue.¹⁴⁾ Initially, it involved North Korea trying to develop nuclear weapons and the U.S. trying to prohibit proliferation of nuclear arms. However, the issue is closely associated with redefining relations between North Korea and the U.S. in the post-Cold War era and furthermore, it is related to bringing lasting peace on the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia.¹⁵⁾ Therefore, the real intention is to induce the U.S. to guarantee security for the North Korean regime, and ultimately to

14) Contrary views on the purpose of North Korean nuclear development, see Kim Young-ho, "North Korea's Nuclear Issue and South Korea-U.S. Relations: Status and Outlook," (in Korean), *Unification Policy Review*, Vol. 12 No.1 (2003); Park Jong-chul, "The Structure of North Korea-U.S. Conflict and Outlook for Negotiations," (in Korean), *Unification Policy Review*, Vol. 12 No. 1 (2003).

15) Aptly referred to as "a clash between the international society's agenda for non-proliferation and North Korea's agenda for sovereignty." Seo Bo-hyuk, "North Korea's Identity Politics toward the U.S. in the post-Cold War era" (in Korean), *Korean Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (Spring 2003). Also in a similar context, Huh Moon-young described the current nuclear issue as a collision between Washington's hegemony strategy and Pyongyang's survival strategy. Huh Moon Young, *Recognition of North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program and South Korea's Policy Direction: Focusing on Changes in Negotiations Between the U.S. and North Korea* (in Korean), (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2002).

improve U.S.-North Korea relations. At the same time, the issue challenges the U.S. to set a vision for order in Northeast Asia and relations with North Korea in the post-Cold War era.¹⁶⁾ In essence, one must recognize that the issue concerning North Korea's nuclear weapons program goes beyond simply resolving the nuclear threat: it is actually aimed at redefinition of relations between Pyongyang and Washington and at establishing a new set of dynamics in Northeast Asia.

The resolution of the nuclear issue should be sought first based on this recognition. If the issue at hand were simply about deterring North Korea and ending the nuclear weapons program, the immediate solution would be to use all possible measures: sanctions, pressure and military action. However, as the true nature of the issue is ultimately about redefining relations and power dynamics in Northeast Asia, a more comprehensive approach is needed.

With this understanding, the first principle is to lead the North to dismantle its nuclear program. North Korea's abandonment of the program is a precondition to improving U.S.-North Korea relations and to introducing a new peaceful order in Northeast Asia. It is most critical, as there will be no normalization or lasting peace on the Korean peninsula as long as the nuclear threat lingers.

Second, normalization of relations and introduction of a peaceful order in Northeast Asia should be sought during the resolution of the nuclear crisis. Some may argue that the peace regime can be achieved even with the collapse of the North Korean regime or a change in political power, but this is undesirable as well as impossible.¹⁷⁾ Of course, a long-term approach could be taken to force

16) The Bush administration's inconsistent policy on North Korea, between regime change and selective engagement, is due to opposing views on how U.S.-North Korea relations should be redefined in the post-Cold War era.

17) Seeking the collapse or replacement of the North Korean regime is clearly unrealistic. It will not collapse in the near future, and if it does, South Korea may not be able to deal with the aftermath. Moreover, countries surrounding the

the withering and ultimate collapse of the regime but in similar situations a country that has set out to contain another has rarely achieved its policy objective in the end.¹⁸⁾ Also, due to the moral dilemma¹⁹⁾ prior to the collapse, fundamental new challenges would surface such as the severing of inter-Korean ties or increased tensions on the Korean peninsula. Therefore, it would be wrong to attempt to use the nuclear issue to replace the power structure or to target the collapse of the regime. If the current nuclear issue involves not only forcing North Korea to abandon its weapons program but also redefining relations between North Korea and the U.S., the solution entails a wide range of issues such as recognizing the North Korean regime, normalizing North Korea-U.S. relations and introducing lasting peace in Northeast Asia.

Third, diplomatic measures and peaceful means, rather than military action should be used to force North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program. Military action or the worst scenario, war, could bring the nuclear weapons program to an end, but would destroy any possibility of normalized relations or lasting peace on the Korean peninsula. According to a 1994 study, when North Korea's nuclear weapons program first surfaced and the U.S. was considering taking military action, it was estimated that within 12 hours, more than 5,000 bombs would be dropped on Seoul, and within three months casualties would include 490,000 Korean troops and 52,000 U.S. troops, not to mention civilian casualties and

Korean peninsula do not desire a sudden collapse or unification scenario in which South Korea would absorb the North.

- 18) No one can guarantee that a strategy to weaken North Korea would quickly lead to collapse. In 1994, after North Korean leader Kim Il-sung died, South Korea had high hopes that his death would soon lead to the collapse of the regime. Instead of collapsing, however, North Korea managed to muddle through.
- 19) If all exchanges were to be immediately discontinued and constant pressure were to be applied on North Korea until the regime collapses, the damage incurred would not affect Kim Jong-il and the upper echelon, but the innocent people of North Korea.

property damage.²⁰⁾ Such predictions sufficiently prove that a war is not only undesirable, but is an unacceptable option for South Koreans living on the peninsula. Conservatives in South Korea and Washington will probably not suggest military action as the first solution. However, even moderate pressure on Pyongyang could create a mounting effect and provoke military action.

AMENDING THE THREE PRINCIPLES AND THE POLICY OF PEACE AND PROSPERITY

As reviewed above, the three principles to resolving the nuclear issues were inherently contradictory. Therefore, in order for the South Korean government to maintain a consistent policy on North Korea's nuclear arms in the future and to actively expand its role in the matter, the existing three principles need to be amended. In other words, the contradiction that exists between deterrence and peaceful resolution must be removed. Instead, the objective should be to "deter North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program in a peaceful manner." As expanding the role of South Korean government is secondary to resolving the nuclear issue, it should be replaced with "providing the momentum for normalizing relations between North Korea and the US" regarding the nature of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Also, as noted earlier, this principle seems suitable to the nuclear issue.

In the same context, the government's policy of peace and prosperity also needs to be amended in terms of its approach. In step one, the direction for resolving the nuclear issue should be set, and subsequent steps should seek to build a framework for lasting peace on the Korean peninsula and to build an economic hub in Northeast Asia. Such an approach will complete the logic: Inter-Korean relations cannot be improved, nor can a plan for lasting peace be

20) Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas* (tr. in Korean), (Seoul: Gilsan, 2002), pp. 461-463.

forged without resolution of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.²¹⁾

Therefore, the policy of peace and prosperity should be amended to clearly seek resolution of the nuclear issue, introduction of a framework for lasting peace on the Korean peninsula, and development of an economic center in Northeast Asia simultaneously. This is clearly more effective than a gradual approach, in which one step would be resolved first before proceeding to the next step.²²⁾ Only such an amendment will enable the South Korean government to continue the quest for peaceful inter-Korean relations despite the nuclear impasse.

CONCLUSION

In the past, South Korea has not been allowed to take an active part in resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. However, if the issue is addressed more broadly, to include dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons program in a peaceful manner and also to improve relations between North Korea and the U.S., South Korea could play a more significant and constructive role. If firm initiatives are simultaneously carried out to resolve the nuclear issue and to improve inter-Korean relations, and the vision for peace and prosperity is clearly presented, Seoul could play an even greater role

21) Koh Yoo-hwan, "Concrete Plan for the Policy of Peace and Prosperity," a paper presented at a seminar hosted by the Advisory Council on Democratic and Peaceful Unification, November 21, 2003.

22) On November 28, 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun at a meeting with committee members of the Advisory Council on Democratic and Peaceful Unification, noted that he could be misperceived as making the resolution of the nuclear issue a precondition to advancing inter-Korean relations, which he was not intending. Also, he added that it was only intended to highlight the seriousness of the nuclear issue by stressing that inter-Korean relations could be hindered if the nuclear weapons issue veered out of control.

in resolving North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

While North Korea's nuclear weapons program and inter-Korean relations may be antithetical, South Korea must maintain a consistent approach and try to create a virtuous cycle between the two issues. Only then will improved relations between the two Koreas contribute to a peaceful solution.

Even in the event that tensions surrounding the nuclear issue heighten, the Roh government must maintain a consistent stance: working toward improved relations with North Korea, and acting as a mediator to ease conflict. Also, if relations improve between North Korea and the U.S., the government should encourage Pyongyang to actively participate in talks with Washington, using strengthened inter-Korean relations as a foundation.