

**Sustaining Peace in Northeast Asia -  
Engagement or Containment?**

**By**

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Peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula is the cornerstone for peace and prosperity throughout East Asia. Today, the region is at peace. Northeast Asia is home for some of the world's most prosperous and dynamic economies. Also, prospects for stability recently improved with the anticipated resumption of the Six Party Talks at the end of July 2005. A peaceful, diplomatic resolution of the Korean Peninsula's nuclear woes remains a distant hope, but the talks' resumption will, at the very least, restrain tensions and facilitate diplomatic dialogue.

South Korean government policy toward its neighbors has contributed substantially to Northeast Asia's continuing stability since the Cold War's end. After the Soviet Union's collapse discredited communism, South Korea cautiously discarded its preference for containment in favor of engagement with its Cold War adversaries. Looking back, we can now realize that containment intensified and sustained rivalry between the two Koreas, and perpetuated the Korean War's legacy of intense mutual distrust and animosity. Engagement, as now practiced in South Korea, has restrained tensions, facilitated diplomatic resolution of numerous issues, and, most importantly, nurtured South-North reconciliation. Because of South Korea's increasingly sophisticated application of engagement with North Korea, peace and stability persist in Northeast Asia, although tensions between the United States and North Korea have intensified since George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001.

### **Containment verse Engagement**

Containment and engagement were both formulated in Washington during the Cold War. They are essentially strategies for democratic and capitalistic societies to use in dealing with authoritarian, communist societies. The Democratic Administration of President Truman applied the strategy of containment to North Korea at the beginning of the Korean War. His aim was to discredit and isolate North Korea diplomatically and commercially in the hope of undermining its government. South Korea understandably became an ardent practitioner of containment.

In 1972, the Republican Administration of President Nixon, on the advice of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, initiated the new strategy of engagement toward China. His aims were: to induce China to distance itself from its primary ally the Soviet Union, to discard its hostility and isolation in favor of engaging the international community and to transform induce China to transform itself into a respected and prosperous member of the world community. As engagement opened China and transformed its relations with the world, South Korea clung to the strategy of containment toward North Korea. For almost two decades, South-North Korea relations alternated between peaks of tension and brief periods of reconciliation.

### **Engagement and “*Nor Politic*”**

President Roh Dae-woo in 1988, however, decisively discarded containment in favor of engagement. He called his form of engagement “*Nor politic*.” He approached all communist states in the hope of isolating North Korea by enlisting its allies' participation

in the 1988 Seoul Olympiad. His impressive success garnered South Korea respect around the world and greatly expanded its diplomatic and commercial relations with other nations. A surge of South Korean exports and investments followed, even including North Korea's most ardent supporters the Soviet Union and China. By 1992, Seoul had leaped ahead of North Korea militarily, diplomatically, economically and technologically.

Seoul's success may well have convinced Pyongyang's leaders to discard their preference for isolation and to launch their own form of engagement. This set the stage for a surge in successful South-North dialogue between 1990 and 1992. Washington played a supporting role while Seoul forged a series of "basic agreements" with Pyongyang. Seoul's efforts even contributed to Pyongyang's willingness to jointly enter the United Nations and to accept international inspection of its nuclear facilities.

But by 1992, the pace of engagement's success may have unnerved North Korea. In August 1992, Seoul and Beijing normalized their diplomatic and commercial relations. Pyongyang's leaders reacted with a profound sense of insecurity. While Seoul had won diplomatic relations with Moscow and Beijing, Pyongyang had failed to normalize relations with Washington and Tokyo, Seoul's primary champions. While Pyongyang was exposing its nuclear weapons development program to international inspection, Washington's nuclear umbrella over South Korea remained secret. Between 1992 and 2000, Pyongyang vacillated between isolation and engagement of the international community. Seoul under President Kim Yong-sam similarly alternated between containment and engagement.

### **"Sunshine Diplomacy" verse "Neo-containment"**

President Kim Dae-jung moved assertively in 1998 to restore engagement as South Korea's preferred strategy for dealing with North Korea. Journalists labeled his brand of engagement, "Sunshine Diplomacy." This strategy shares with engagement the preference for diplomacy over confrontation, economic cooperation rather than rivalry, and humanitarian concern instead of animosity. The combination of these elements applied consistently finally convinced North Korea to respond positively to South Korea's overtures. The huge cash payment, rumored to be as much as one billion US dollars, undeniably served as a significant enticement to get North Korea's leader to agree to the first South-North Summit of 2000. At the same time, however, money alone could not have convinced North Korea to facilitate the first South-North Summit.

Ever since the summit, the two Koreas have achieved greater progress toward reconciliation than they were able to do during the previous 50 years. This progress is not a consequence of money. Rather it has been nurture by an unprecedented array of successful joint South-North ventures. During the past five years, Koreans on both sides of the De-militarized Zone (DMZ) have engaged in various types of political and military dialogue. This dialogue has reduced tensions and clashes along the DMZ, and set the precedent for the resolution of differences through dialogue rather than armed competition. Economic integration is making tremendous progress. Trade continues to

grow. The Kaesong Industrial Park and the Mt. Kumgang Tourist project have convinced both sides to penetrate the DMZ with roads and eventually railroads. Humanitarian assistance has improved the quality of life for the North Korean people and facilitated person-to-person contact on a massive scale. An impressively diverse array of social and cultural exchanges remind North and South Koreans that they are all Koreans with a shared ancestry, history, culture and language.

When President George W. Bush assumed office in January 2001, he dismissed engagement's success and concentrated instead on its shortcomings. Bush promptly re-oriented his government's strategy from engagement to "neo-containment" of North Korea. He dismissed North Korea as unworthy of diplomatic dialogue and faulted it for the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework's collapse. Loudly he chastised Pyongyang for failing to fulfill its international commitments while threatening it and other members of his self-proclaimed "axis of evil" with a "pre-emptive" strategy of nuclear counter proliferation. President Bush also confronted then President Kim Dae-jung and urged him to cease "appeasing" North Korea. He also urged Kim's successor Roh Moo-hyun to stop "pandering" North Korea.

### **Anti-American or Pro-Korean?**

Fortunately for Korea, and all of Northeast Asia, President Roh Moo-hyun has sustained his government's engagement of North Korea and did not bow to President Bush's assertive unilateralism. Some have incorrectly labeled President Roh's stance as "anti-American." On the contrary, his stance is pro-Korean. It promotes Koreans' foremost priority – peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. But it is also "pro-American" since the United States shares the goal, along with all the other nations of Northeast Asia.

President Roh's policy of "economic cooperation" has sustained Pyongyang's confidence in the sincerity of Seoul's efforts to promote national reconciliation. Also, his policies have nurtured Pyongyang's sense of security by demonstrating that Seoul is in fact asserting a significant degree of independence from President Bush's preference for a much more confrontational and coercive approach to North Korea. At the same time, Roh's reliance on engagement has restrained Bush's ability to unilaterally pursue his "neo-containment" of North Korea, both in terms of economic sanctions and possible military action.

Also, President Roh's preference for engagement over containment has profoundly affected both Washington's and North Korea's approach to resolving the nuclear issue. As recently became evident, President Bush and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il have both felt compelled to adjust their respective strategies regarding the Six Party Talks. This process has taken one year of intense quiet diplomacy, but Seoul's patience persistence, in conjunction with China's collaboration, has paid handsome dividends. Washington and Pyongyang have finally agreed to halt their tension producing war of words and instead to demonstrate reciprocal flexibility to restart the Six Party Talks.

South Korea can proudly claim considerable credit for this significant diplomatic accomplishment. Seoul helped restrain the level of tension and promote an atmosphere conducive to diplomacy during the past year US-North Korea dueling. It also tempered Pyongyang's impulsiveness and sustained its preference for diplomacy by providing a carefully calibrated flow of economic inducements to North Korea. Simultaneously, Seoul's quietly and resolutely counseled Washington to put peace before national pride, diplomacy before confrontation and flexibility before resoluteness. Consequently, despite the repeated cycles of escalating tension between Washington and Pyongyang, peace has prevailed in Northeast Asia. Such an atmosphere is vital for the region's continuing economic vitality and the anticipated success of the Six Party Talks.

### **On the Minus Side**

The South Korean government, however, continues its struggle to find a balance between its nationalistic and unilateral impulses, and between "carrots and sticks" or "inducements and sanctions." One of the most glaring shortcomings is its continuing preference for unilateral action rather than multilateral cooperation. This became blatantly clear during Unification Minister Chong Dong-yong's meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. At the meeting he promised that South Korea would provide North Korea a huge amount of electricity, if and when it promised to discard its nuclear weapons. He did so in the hope of inducing North Korea to return to the Six Party Talks. Only after having met with North Korea's leader did Minister Chong consult with the United States about the idea. Ranking Bush Administration officials termed the offer "creative" to avoid any appearance of friction between Washington and Seoul.

Seoul's handling of the offer, however, demonstrated its preference for unilateral action and a lack of appreciation for the potential benefits of multilateral cooperation. By going first to Pyongyang, Seoul revealed its eagerness to minimize the risk of Washington's opposition while also demonstrating its sense of political insecurity at home by striving to garner political credit for itself. Although North Korea has yet to respond to Seoul's offer, Seoul has already loudly claimed, without any supporting evidence, that the offer helped convince Pyongyang to return to the Six Party Talks. On the other hand, had Seoul presented its offer in as part of a multilateral package in conjunction with Washington and Tokyo, the impact in Pyongyang arguably could have been both more profound and productive over the long run.

Similarly, Seoul continues to lavish inducements on Pyongyang while receiving marginal dividends in return. Every time a North Korean delegation attends talks with their South Korean counterparts, Seoul rewards Pyongyang with impressive amounts of "humanitarian aid." In May, Seoul promised Pyongyang would soon receive 200,000 metric tons of chemical fertilizer for engaging in Vice Ministerial Talks. After Pyongyang send a Ministerial level delegation to Seoul a month later, the Roh Administration announced it would ship 500,000 metric tons of rice to North Korea. What these inducements have achieved concretely remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, such practices encourage Pyongyang to continue its “shopping chart” diplomacy. Every time it needs food, fuel, investment, etc., it refuses to engage in dialogue with South Korea or to stay away from the Six Party Talks. The more adamant Pyongyang’s refusal to remain aloof, the more inducements Beijing and Seoul put in its shopping chart. When North Korea decides it has achieved maximum gains in terms of commodities, etc. it returns to talks. Since June 2004, when North Korea last attended the Six Party Talks, China has greatly increased its investment in North Korea’s economy, improved selective sectors of its infrastructure, sustain the supply of most of its crude oil needs and substantial increased its imports of minerals and other commodities from its ally. Meanwhile, Seoul has likewise continued its substantial investment in the Kaesong Industrial Park, the Mt. Kumgang Tourist Project, and the provision of fertilizer, food, medicine and clothing.

Alas, the Roh Administration is struggling to demonstrate what it has gained in return. Pyongyang thus far has adroitly avoided giving Seoul anything durable, other than access to the Kaesong Industrial Park. North Korea has yet to restrain its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, to improve the quality of life for its citizens, to take steps to improve relations with South Korea’s foremost allies, the United States and South Korea. Eventually, one can expect the people of South Korea to become disillusioned with Roh’s “economic cooperation” strategy, unless it accomplishes concrete results in the near future.

In this regard, however, the Roh Administration appears to rely on Koreans’ historical inclination to distrust superpowers, i.e. the United States and Japan, to deflect criticism at home away from himself and his strategies’ shortcomings. Like President Bush, President Roh expects his allies to follow his lead and to support his strategy. When it serves his purposes, he is quick to cite either or both allies as the reason of his strategy’s shortcomings. When North Korea remained reluctant to return to the Six Party Talks, despite Seoul’s repeated inducements, the Roh Administration pointed the finger at the Bush Administration’s rhetoric and inflexibility toward North Korea. Roh expects Washington and Tokyo to be flexible, when South Korea’s wants to give Pyongyang “carrots,” but tries to use his allies as “sticks” once negotiations resume. Understandably, this has produced friction between Seoul and its allies, something that Pyongyang has adroitly manipulated to receive maximum material gains from South Korea.

At the same time, Seoul has vacillated between Pyongyang and Tokyo. It wants Tokyo to be touch when dealing with Pyongyang, but then teamed up with Pyongyang against Japan when Dokto Island again exploded as an issue. The Roh Moo Hyun Administration, like its predecessors since President Roh Dae-woo, has shifted from using shrill warnings about the “North Korean threat” to loud complaints about Japan’s colonialism as a club to still its domestic critics.

Seoul’s contradictory tactics in dealing with its allies impedes confronting North Korea with a united front consistent of South Korea, the United States and Japan. Instead, Pyongyang benefits by playing Seoul against Tokyo or Washington. This is a serious

impediment to progress toward a peaceful diplomatic resolution of the nuclear and other issues to be negotiated in the Six Party Talks.

In short, the Roh Moo-hyun Administration, like the two previous administrations, has yet to firmly establish its near and long term priorities, and to refine implementation of its engagement strategy toward North Korea. Unless it does this soon, public and ally support for its “economic cooperation” policy will wane, and along with it progress toward national reconciliation and the attainment of a peaceful, nuclear free Korean Peninsula.

### **Toward a Durable Peace**

Ultimately, peace and stability in Northeast Asia hinge on Korea’s fate. Inevitably, the path to a durable peace requires Korea’s unification. But abrupt unification, either via regime collapse or forced change, is not in the interest of Korea or its neighbors. It could mean political chaos, even civil war, and the possible undermining of the region’s prosperity. On the other hand, gradual unification will remain a distant hope because it is certain to be a highly complex and contentious political process. Koreans came to recognize this on the eve of their 2000 Summit. Ever since, they have wisely focused on national reconciliation and economic cooperation and integration. Engagement better facilitates both processes, as history documents.

The Bush Administration would do well to recognize that President Roh’s current policy of economic cooperation, a form of engagement, promotes by peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, while nurturing Korean reconciliation. Over the long term, it also sustains peace and prosperity throughout the region. After all, this is precisely what Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo, and Washington are attempting to achieve through the Six Party Talks.