

DIVERGENT THREAT PERCEPTIONS ON NORTH KOREA

by

Hyeong Jung Park, Visiting Fellow

Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, The Brookings Institution

Democracies usually do not go into war with each other. The relations between two democratic countries, however, may oscillate widely, in some occasions abruptly from the best to the worst in a short period. Such has been the case between South Korea and the United States with regard to North Korea perceptions and policies, though the worst phase has passed away.

1. Perceptions gap as a dynamic process

Understandably, it has not been surprising that divergent perceptions on North Korea have coexisted between the United States and South Korea as well as within each country. In South Korea and in the United States, there have been always several different sorts of politically important perceptions on North Korea. Arguably, those held by the decision makers in the administration can be regarded as the most important. Sometimes, however, even decision makers in the same administration cannot share a workable consensus on North Korea. Ultimately only a democratic political mechanism can decide which position will survive. In short, the issue of perception gaps on North Korea between the two countries should be regarded as a dynamic process played out in the democratic mechanism in each country and dependant upon changing combinations of policy from each side.

During the Kim Dae Jung-Clinton years of 1998-2000, there were no serious perception gaps on North Korea and the North Korean threat. However, between 2001-2002, relations between Kim and Bush became unbridgeable. During the three year period 2003-2005, Roh-Bush relations caused abnormally strong mutual repugnance, and the divorce metaphor was typically used to describe the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Going through the 9.19 agreement and America's financial measures to North Korea in 2005, South Korea was delighted and then frustrated with the U.S.

During 2005-2006, however, it became gradually clear that Rice, Hill and others in the Bush administration's second term were trying hard to reset America's North Korea policy in a realistic direction. Ultimately, North Korea's missile test in July and its nuclear test in October 2006 also made South Korea more realistic about North Korea's intentions and threat. In the meantime, the democratic mechanism purged some of the hard line political influence in both countries. In the United States, Rumsfeld and others resigned after the Republican defeat in the November congressional election in 2006. In South Korea, the '386 generation' power block has virtually disintegrated.

It was after November 2006 that meaningful policy cooperation between realistic elements in each government became possible. The product of cooperation was the conclusion of Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement at the third

session of the fifth round of the Six-Party Talks on 13 February, 2007. With this, the United States resumed taking the lead in the negotiations with North Korea, and South Korea linked progress in the inter-Korean relations with implementation of the 2.13 action plan. In this context, the South Korean government took a position, which had been unthinkable in the past years of 2001-2006: at the 21st inter-Korean ministerial talk in late May 2007, South Korea made it clear that the shipment of rice supply would not begin until North Korea shuts down the Yongbyon 5-MW nuclear reactor, as part of initial actions promised in the 2.13 agreement.

In retrospect, the perception gaps on North Korea(n threat) have been supposedly most serious during the period of 2003-2004, when ideological and idealistic elements on both sides (i.e., neo-conservatives in the United States and '386' elite politicians in South Korea) were simultaneously at the culmination of their power and influence in each country. With strong confidence in domestic support and driven by ideological idealism, they both clashed undiplomatically and irresponsibly with each other. It was also the period when strong anti-American sentiments in South Korea and equally strong Korea bashing in the United States provoked a most gloomy diagnosis about the health of bilateral relations.

The two countries returned back to a more or less normal condition with regard to perceptions gap on North Korea between them and in each country, after the influence of ideological and idealistic elements noticeably declined, not only among those in decision making positions but also in the society as a whole in both countries. At this juncture, in mid 2007, while the two governments share workable consensus on how to deal with North Korean threat, there are, as usual, many noises in each country about the current course of North Korea policy. Some groups in both countries have legitimate concerns about the welfare of the North Korean people more than anything else, and are agitating a policy for toppling Kim Jong Il's regime on behalf of 'liberating' the North Korean people from oppression. In South Korea, some groups are still attacking the Roh government as 'pro-North Korean,' while the '386' pundits are loudly complaining about the linkage of inter-Korean relations with denuclearization. In the United States, some old guards are bemoaning feelings of betrayal and attacking the Bush administration, to whose cause they had until recently been loyal.

2. Differences of Threats Perception and how to bridge them

Threats originating from the North Korean regime can be differentiated in five categories: 1. conventional military threats; 2. threats related to North Korea's possession of weapons of mass destruction; 3. threats of ideological contamination; 4. threats related to North Korea as a failing country; 5. threats to the welfare of its population. The main focus will be limited here to the first and second threats.

With regard to conventional military threats, there was a consensus on their reduced seriousness between the Roh and Bush administrations. Therefore, the two countries could agree upon a reduction and relocation of U.S. forces and even a transition of

wartime operation control. The latter, however, became a national issue of serious political contention between President Roh and a great majority of retired high ranking military officials, while, in the opinion polls, a majority of the population demonstrated their concerns. There was also evidence that the issue has been contentious in circles of American experts. Under Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, the U.S. side has been absolutely stubborn about maintaining the timeline of 2009 to finish the transition of wartime operational control, no matter what happens in matters of Korean security, including a second nuclear weapon test by North Korea. With his successor, Mr. Gates, the U.S. side agreed on the time line of 2012, as the Korean side has wished

With regard to threats from North Korea's possession of weapons of mass destruction, some have claimed that the threats led to an emergence of menacing perception gaps between two countries, which became grave enough to threaten the continuance of the ROK-U.S. alliance. As usual in everyday life, however, the accuser and the accused have different stories.

However, for the United States, North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, especially its possible transfer of nuclear material and technology, have been regarded as an existential national security threat, as it seemed that South Korea did not care much about it. South Korea has been often accused of being preoccupied with appeasing and helping an obnoxious North Korean regime survive in order to promote reconciliation. What additionally angered the Bush administration has been that the South Korean government seemed to regard North Korea and China as more responsible stakeholders for peace and prosperity on the Korean peninsula than the United States. Many Americans argued that with the disappearance of a common threat perception, the ROK-U.S. alliance has lost its rationale for continuance.

Unfortunately, for the majority of South Koreans, it was rather the Bush administration's ABC (anything but Clinton) North Korea policy, which effectively encouraged North Korea's nuclear weapons development. It was also rather the Bush administration's penchant for unilateralism, regime change policy and seeking military, instead of diplomatic, solutions, which threatened peace on the Korean peninsula. Roughly during 2003-2006, confident that America's 'real' North Korea policy was one of regime change, and fearing its imaginable calamity to peace and prosperity on the Korean peninsula, South Korea has been extremely suspicious of America's intentions in its every policy move, and extremely passive in cooperation.

Fortunately, thanks to hard working and unyielding realists on both countries in the previous years, workable consensuses on how to deal with North Korean threats are now provided with. In the bilateral dimension, two documents should be mentioned: on the principles of North Korea policy, the Joint Declaration on the ROK-U.S. Alliance and Peace on the Korean Peninsula on November 17, 2005; on the 'modernization' of alliance, Summary Report of the Joint Vision Study on September 27, 2006. Regarding the Six Party Talks process, the 9.19 agreement in 2005 and the 2.13 action plan in 2007 should be mentioned.

The consensuses in the four documents can be summarized in six objectives: 1. denuclearization of the Korean peninsula; 2. normalization of DPRK-U.S. relations; 3. normalization of DPRK-Japan relations; 4. economy and energy cooperation; 5. Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism; 6. establishment of a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula. In brief, in all four documents, while deterring North Korea's military threat, denuclearization of North Korea is conceived to be achieved simultaneously with the resolution of Korean issues and transformation of Northeast Asian international relations.

With those documents and strategic consensuses, the two countries share a good starting point for sustaining cooperation in North Korea policy and developing a long term joint strategy to North Korea. North Korean issues can be resolved only if a united and sustained strategic pressure from neighboring countries, among which South Korea and the United States should be the core promoters for a joint strategy. On the American side, its negotiation with North Korea should be supported by a regional strategy to defuse strategic mistrusts and promote cooperation among regional countries. On the South Korean side, it needs to take North Korea's security threat more seriously. South Koreans should be concerned that North Korea's development of weapons of mass destruction gravely deteriorates South Korea's security environment by aggravating security dilemma and competition in Northeast Asia.

3. Prospects for the future

It is simply normal that there are perception gaps on North Korea(n threat), different concerns and interests between South Korea and the United States. The former is a middle power in Northeast Asia and a direct neighbor to North Korea, and the latter is a superpower with global reach and the regional balancer in Northeast Asia. The question is how the gaps and differences can be productively and wisely managed between incumbent governments on both sides. They can be exaggerated and cause serious conflicts, when ideologically widely divergent, idealistic and intolerant governments coexist side by side. Alternatively, they can be managed synergistically, if centrist-realistic decision makers with rich experience in statesmanship coexist and cooperate, in both Seoul and Washington. The reality will be somewhere in the middle.

Before long, both countries will have new presidents, South Korea in early 2008, the United States in early 2009. Then the haze that covers the uncertainty for the future dissonance or cooperation between the two countries with regard to North Korea will disappear. What can be said for now is that in both countries the majority prefers the opposition, and the consensus on the North Korean issue among South Korea, the United States and China is stronger than ever.