

Forging a Common Approach on Policy toward North Korea Economic and Humanitarian Issues

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The election of Lee Myung-bak as South Korea's next president heralds new opportunities for U.S.-ROK cooperation toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This essay is intended to provide a general context for exploring how and in what manner the United States and South Korea might better coordinate their approaches toward North Korea, and is intended more as a thought-provoking exercise than any definitive guide to the next five years.

This essay will make two general arguments. First, contrary to some expectations, it is unlikely that Lee will immediately back away from engagement with the North.¹ Campaign rhetoric aside, Lee's policy proposals appear to be broadly consistent with an approach that links economic engagement and security factors and continues South Korea's attempt to open North Korea to the outside world. The South Korean public appears to continue to support some type of engagement, and while Lee will have considerable leeway in crafting his administration's policies toward the North, electoral pressures will likely continue to affect his decision-making.

Second, the pace of economic and humanitarian relations with North Korea will largely depend on progress with the denuclearization of North Korea. This paper will not directly address denuclearization, although clearly this remains an important—perhaps the most important—foreign policy priority for both

the U.S. and South Korea. If progress—however halting—continues, it is likely that Lee will continue to pursue engagement and expansion of economic ties with the North. Alternatively, another question is how Lee would respond to a dramatic increase in tension with North Korea, particularly over its nuclear program. It is quite likely that North Korea will test the Lee administration fairly early on. Lee appears more skeptical of North Korea than was his predecessor, and is likely to be more willing to restrict or reduce economic and aid initiatives with North Korea. Yet it is also worth remembering that South Korean presidents—even conservative ones—have an independent streak, and Lee’s definition of South Korean national interest may be different than that of the U.S. Indeed, Scott Snyder has pointed out that “South Korea’s need to enhance the relative importance of inter-Korean economic relations in order to demonstrate political relevance and independence of action from both the United States and China runs counter to American and Chinese interests.”²

After first assessing the domestic and international political context in which Lee Myung-bak takes power, this essay will then focus on two areas of North Korea policy that have potential for coordination: economic and humanitarian issues.

The South Korean Foreign Policy Context

Although it is common to contrast the ideologies and styles of outgoing president Roh Moo-hyun with Lee Myung-bak, perhaps just as important is the contrast in context between the two presidents. Roh took power in early 2003, at the height of a crisis regarding North Korea’s nuclear program and widespread South Korean popular discontent at coercive U.S. policies. These difficulties were heightened by contrasting Japanese and Chinese approaches to North Korea, and indeed frosty relations between the two Asian powers. Navigating those diverse exigencies would have been difficult task no matter who was president. In contrast, Lee enters office in a period of relative regional stability, a year of progress on the North Korean front, improved U.S.-ROK relations, markedly improved China-Japan relations, and even cautious optimism about the future. Most importantly, South Korea’s two

central relationships—U.S. and North Korea—are either stable or improving, and there is momentum moving forward on both fronts.

Thus, as 2008 begins, there is the potential—however slim— for a long-term agreement between the U.S. and DPRK. A year earlier this would have been viewed as inconceivably optimistic. Yet the February 13, 2007, agreement, and the follow-on meetings that have been held by both the Six Party process and at the working group stage, have led to continued, albeit halting, progress. Although North Korea missed the December 31, 2007, deadline to provide the Six Parties with a complete list of nuclear-related sites, the DPRK nuclear program is effectively capped, dismantlement of the Yongbyon reactor has begun, and it has allowed multiple teams of inspectors back into the DPRK. For its part, the United States has pledged to take the DPRK off the State Department’s List of State Sponsors of Terror and the Trading with the Enemy Act, begin removing economic sanctions, provide 50,000 tons of fuel oil (or its equivalent), and has alluded to a possible political relationship of some type in the future.

South Korean domestic politics have also evolved in a more centrist direction. The recent presidential election results would indicate that Korean electoral preferences are becoming normally distributed: over 50 percent voted for the centrist Lee Myung-bak, only 20 percent for the progressive Chung Dong-young, and barely 15 percent for the conservative Lee Hoi-chang. As the first South Korean president in modern history to be elected with a majority, Lee Myung-bak’s presidency reveals both the maturation of South Korean politics and the desire by South Koreans to move beyond partisan politics.

Indeed, the abortive Lee Hoi-chang candidacy allowed Lee Myung-bak to portray himself as a centrist, and Lee Myung-bak’s aides were quick to define his approach as “neither Right nor Left.”³ Lee Hoi-chang, a staunch conservative, entered the presidential race with barely two months remaining, arguing that any form of reciprocity with North Korea was a mistake, and that North Korea should not get any aid until it has completely abandoned its nuclear programs. Lee Hoi-chang also argued that the past decade of leftist rule has endangered South Korea’s alliance with the U.S. and called the U.S.

return of full operational control of Korean troops to Seoul by 2012 a “very bad agreement.”⁴ Although most pundits focused on the progressive losses, given Lee Hoi-chang’s dismal election results, it also appears that old-style conservatives are also a diminishing minority in South Korea.

Thus, in many ways Lee inherits a South Korean foreign policy situation that has a number of strengths. This context will initially provide Lee with a great deal of leeway within which to decide his foreign policy.

The Future of South Korean Public Opinion toward the North

One issue that may arise during Lee’s administration is the depth and extent of South Korean public opinion regarding policy toward North Korea. The election results appear broadly consistent with, and reflective of, the trend of South Korean public opinion over the past decade. Although there may be fatigue from the Roh administration, there also appears little movement away from a broad consensus that some type of engagement of North Korea is desirable. Many observers note that the South Korean public appears to want engagement, but engagement tempered with a focus on reciprocity from the North. To take one recent example, although Americans of all political persuasions were skeptical of the second inter-Korean summit of October 2007, a *Hankook Ilbo* poll taken after the summit revealed that 74 percent of South Koreans approved of the summit, and the president’s approval rating doubled, to 43.4 percent.⁵ In fact, the past five years provide little evidence that as tensions with North Korea rise, the South Korean public becomes more prone to containment or coercive strategies.

I have argued elsewhere that South Korean attitudes toward North Korea are not emotional, but based on interests and a slowly changing and deeply held national identity.⁶ The next five years will provide an interesting test of my argument: both whether South Korean public opinion continues to support engagement; and second, how the South Korean public would respond to a more coercive approach to the North.

If at some point Lee decides to take a harder line, it is not obvious how or whether Korean public opinion will constrain or support that policy shift. South Korean presidents—as do most chief executives—have wide latitude in conducting foreign policy, and being lame ducks from the minute they take office, South Korean presidents do not face electoral pressures in the same way as U.S. presidents. That is, South Korean presidents are imperfect agents of their electoral principals, and Lee will forge his own path. Yet it is also worth remembering that the South Korean public can be especially involved and vigorous, and thus one key aspect of Lee’s foreign policy will be the extent to which the manner and direction in which South Korean public opinion evolves, and the extent to which Lee can actually shape South Korean public opinion. Both leaders and publics affect each other—neither form attitudes in a vacuum. Given the reciprocal nature of this process, it is impossible to predict how much Lee can shape public opinion and how much he will have to respond to it, but how this process plays out over the next five years will be one of the central aspects to how South Korea’s foreign policy develops.

Lee Myung-bak’s Policy toward North Korea

During the presidential campaign, Lee Myung-bak contrasted his form of “engagement with reciprocity” with outgoing president Roh Moo-hyun’s engagement. Thus, although the speed and amount of engagement and aid may slow somewhat, it appears unlikely that Lee Myung-bak would radically change the course of foreign policy toward the North, especially with the progress that has come over the nuclear issue in the past year. Lee has said that, “When it comes to North Korea, I will be thorough yet flexible,” and after the election the *Choson Ilbo* reported that a Lee aide has said that the cooperation projects already underway would not be suspended.⁷ Lee’s hedging reflects his need to distance himself from the previous administration while still responding to the clear electoral advantage of supporting engagement of some kind with the North.

Lee’s official platform emphasizes two basic approaches: engagement with reciprocity, and a focus on humanitarian and economic concerns in addition to

security priorities. *If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapon program and opens its economy*, Lee has pledged to meet the North with a number of projects:

- Make the North Korean economy an export-oriented one with assistance from South Korea, which has sufficient capital and development experience;
- Open the South Korean media market to North Korean television, radio, and newspapers, and suggest that he would provide rice and fertilizer aid to the North with no strings attached.
- Ask the international development community to provide about \$40 billion which can be invested for reconstruction and development of North Korea;
- Increase the annual per capita income in North Korea, which remains approximately \$500 (\$914 according to the Bank of Korea) now to \$3,000 in ten years;
- Rebuild the North's economy, education system, finance sector, infrastructure and welfare. Plant millions of trees on mountains stripped bare for timber;
- Build a new highway that links Seoul to the North Korean city of Sinuiju on the Chinese border; and
- Set up five free-economic zones in the North⁸

Lee's platform argues that:

The essential precondition for this doctrine is that the DPRK should complete its nuclear dismantlement. The nuclear freeze is not enough. If and only when this occurs, we stand ready to assist North Korea in its road to self-initiated openness. Our North Korea policy must center on solving the perennial problem of hunger, and then supporting for North Koreans' basic human rights and dignity. If Chairman Kim Jong-il makes a decisive choice of giving up nuclear weapons and liberalizing its economy, the international community will respond with an equally decisive choice.⁹

Lee Myung-bak has also focused attention on North Korean citizens, who are the most direct victims of the North Korean regime's rule:

As the situation worsens for North Koreans, the international community cannot stand idle. Infusions of food and fertilizers may alleviate hunger, but they are not a fundamental solution... Therefore, our North Korea policy must be based on two key foundations—helping to resolve the perennial problem of hunger and support for basic human rights and dignity....As we speak, China is rewriting its economic history based on the same two principles.¹⁰

One key difference between Lee and Roh is Lee's prioritization in solving the North Korean nuclear issue first, and making progress on other issues contingent on progress on the nuclear issue. Roh was far more willing to ignore the nuclear issue in favor of economic and cultural relations. This change in foreign policy should bring the U.S. and South Korean policy priorities more in line with each other, which will be useful in coordinating policy.

The U.S. Role

Just as important as South Korea's foreign policy is U.S. policy. Although the past year has seen somewhat remarkable progress in dealing with the North Korean nuclear issue, this process has barely begun, and continued progress is far from guaranteed. Furthermore, the U.S. itself is entering a presidential election year, and thus although it is possible to make some predictions for the next 12 months, a new administration in 2009—whether Democratic or Republican—will create new uncertainties in policies and actions going forward. By 2009, there will likely be a U.S. review of North Korea policy by the new administration, and the new president will decide how best to proceed with respect to the DPRK. Furthermore, if the U.S. and the Six Party process continue to make progress on denuclearizing the DPRK, some groups in the U.S. may consequently increase their pressure to criticize North Korea about its human rights.

That is, national security—and in particular, North Korea's nuclear program—is clearly the top U.S. priority. However, if the nuclear issue is solved, then it is quite likely that human rights violations will become an increasingly

important priority, especially in Congress, which may have implications for the nuclear negotiations. At this point, it appears that Congress is generally supportive of the Bush administration's approach to North Korea, although whether that general willingness to allow the administration the time and tools it desires will continue in the future depends on a number of international and domestic factors.

Some have also argued that North Korea would have problems even without a close relationship with the U.S., and that increasing contact with the U.S. may actually increase destabilization.¹¹ For the U.S., this may be an opportunity as well as a challenge. The February 2007 agreement envisions a political relationship, which will be harder to achieve than a "simple" nuclear agreement. It is not possible to actually envision and craft a U.S.-DPRK relationship except through diplomacy. Those in favor of a political relationship argue that it is demonstrably in the U.S. interest to have a physical presence in North Korea, because it provides important information and a better sense of internal DPRK dynamics, and allows the U.S. to react more quickly to events in North Korea. In fact, the Bush administration may be urged to consider pushing for a liaison office in North Korea and other physical placement of U.S. personnel in North Korea. This leads to a question: Is the U.S. really willing to consider a diplomatic relationship with the North? It is not obvious how the U.S. would come down on that question.

North-South Economic Interactions and U.S. Sanctions

At present the U.S. is not opposed to South Korean economic relations with North Korea as long as those interactions do not undercut progress on the nuclear issue. In this, Lee Myung-bak will likely prove a more cooperative alliance partner than was Roh Moo-hyun. However, a number of realities will likely inhibit active U.S.-North Korean economic interactions for the foreseeable future.

Compared to a decade earlier, South and North Korea have moved quite far in their economic relations. North-South merchandise trade exceeded U.S. \$1 billion for the first time in 2005, and is expected to grow 26 percent in 2007 to \$1.7 billion.¹² The Kaesong Industrial Complex, a special economic zone or industrial park just north of the DMZ, contained over 64 South Korean companies employing 19,000 North Korean workers by October 2007, an increase of over 50 percent from the previous year, and total production at Kaesong has experienced average monthly increases of over 19 percent.¹³ South Korean aid to the North surpassed \$227 million (211 billion *won*) in 2006, most in the form of fertilizer and flood relief, with private South Korean aid in 2006 over \$100 million (94 billion *won*).¹⁴ After a one-year hiatus due to North Korea's missile and nuclear tests, in June 2007 the South resumed food aid shipments to the north, pledging 400,000 tons of rice by the beginning of 2008.¹⁵

Although there has been vigorous debate about the extent and seriousness of North Korea's economic reforms, there is little doubt that North Korea is more open to outside influences now than it was a decade earlier.¹⁶ As Victor Cha noted about the recent inter-Korean summit, "Kim Jong Il cared less about all the South Korean politicians, including Roh, than talking, toasting, and expending his charm on the South Korean conglomerate chairman in the delegation."¹⁷

However, although economic relations between the North and South continue to grow and deepen, the U.S. for the foreseeable future may be only a passive participant in that process. One key aspect of the negotiations involves the U.S. pledge to remove the DPRK from the State Department's List of State Sponsors of Terror and the Trading with the Enemy Act. It is widely believed that removal of North Korea from these designations will allow economic interactions to take place, and even potentially allow goods produced in Kaesong to be included in the U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and there are many more steps necessary before this can occur.

Removing sanctions from North Korea is far harder than it appears. North Korea is one of the most heavily sanctioned states in the world. The U.S. president does not merely make a declaration that the DPRK is no longer a state sponsor of terrorism and then an automatic process creates a cascade in which all sanctions are removed from the country. There are a myriad of laws and regulations that affect U.S.-DPRK economic, cultural, and political relations, and each one of them needs to be dealt with individually. In fact, there are at least 42 different laws restricting economic activity between the U.S. and the DPRK.

Furthermore, there is relatively little U.S. business interest in relations with North Korea. Administration officials have privately remarked that while many U.S. businesses have expressed strong attitudes towards U.S. policy to other countries such as China, there is no domestic business constituency pushing for increased economic ties with the DPRK. This arises, of course, because business opportunities in the North are vanishingly absent. In this way, the U.S. faces little domestic political pressure on its policies, and economic engagement will almost certainly not be a high priority of the next U.S. administration. As was evidenced by the Bush administration's agreeing to allow a U.S. symphony to visit Pyongyang, the U.S. may provide cultural opportunities, even if an economic focus in U.S. policy is absent.

Humanitarian and Human Rights in North Korea

To Lee's credit, he has not backed away from emphasizing the plight of North Korean citizens, the vast majority of whom lead impoverished and miserable lives. The agricultural sector remains unstable and food production is barely sufficient in good years to provide subsistence for the population. North Korea's human rights abuses are well-known: perhaps 100,000 to 200,000 political prisoners, forced abortions, and the absence of basic political, economic, and social rights. Yet the South Korean approach to human rights is not monolithic, and it has played out in South Korea differently than in other areas of the world. In other countries, human rights is a liberal cause that attracts celebrities. With North Korea, focusing on human rights has

been seen as yet another way to undermine an engagement policy. Indeed, many South Koreans have accepted the notion that focusing on North Korean human rights is part of a neoconservative attempt to undercut denuclearization and reconciliation efforts and affect regime change in the North. As a result, South Korea has tended to keep human rights issues separate from other negotiations.

Pragmatically, few leaders of any country will prioritize the human rights of another country as more important than the national security of their own country. This is neither moral nor immoral, but rather an acknowledgement of the way the world works. Whether it be the U.S. or South Korea, the nuclear issue in North Korea will likely continue to receive priority by the leadership over humanitarian issues. Yet this should not stop policymakers, NGOs, and individuals from doing what they can to alleviate the suffering in North Korea.

One problem is that the term “human rights” is little more than a broad category, and can mean many different things. There are political human rights, such as the releasing of political prisoners, and rights to freedom of speech, assembly and worship. But there are also economic human rights, such as the right to work and the right to an education; and social human rights, such as the right to adequate health care and equality of women. Family reunions are the primary human rights problem for South Korea—families have been divided for 60 years, and many family members are passing away. As a result, South Koreans focus heavily on reuniting families before it is too late. In contrast, the U.S. wants to close down concentration camps and free political prisoners. Both countries have attempted to address starvation and humanitarian suffering.

Just as there are a myriad of different human rights, there are a myriad of ways in which to affect them. Broadly, these approaches can be characterized as “curse the darkness” or “light a candle.” Those hoping for a dramatic change in North Korean human rights will be disappointed. It is hard to imagine any external policy or pressure (“curse the darkness”) that has immediate

or major effects. The U.S. Congress does not speak with one voice. With the exception of the Brownback bill, there is fatigue in Congress related to human rights issues, and only a core group in Congress is committed to the North Korean human rights issue. Thus, it is not clear how the issue will play out in the U.S. and Seoul, and as a result, there is no game plan to coordinate with Seoul in this area.

Realistically, political human rights in North Korea will be the hardest to improve—barring fundamental change in the North Korean leadership, it is hard to envision any external policy or pressure appreciably affecting the political rights of North Koreans. Incremental change may occur, most notably for humanitarian reasons of alleviating suffering of common North Korean citizens, in the form of medical, food, and other aid brought by either NGOs or governments (the “light a candle” approach). Another area in which coordination between the U.S. and South Korea could be useful is in dealing with North Korean refugees. Although China’s role is critical on this issue, the U.S. and South Korea could work more closely in dealing with and smoothing refugees’ integration into a new country.

In China and Libya the international community has had more leverage to broaden the agenda. The U.S. already had diplomatic relations and economic relations with China, while Libya wanted access to international oil. Although some see North Korea’s ultimate goal as reconciliation with the U.S., it is still not clear if that is truly the North Korean goal. In this respect, the success of South Korea’s decade of engagement has created genuine leverage over North Korea. If there is a need to broaden the agenda to include leverage, South Korea has been more concerned about North Korean stability than has been the U.S., and thus the U.S. actually has little leverage on the North. How to go about building and using leverage could be an agenda item for U.S.-South Korea coordination.

In this case, Lee Myung-bak may likely coordinate humanitarian aid and pressure more closely with the United States than did Roh Moo-hyun. This is important, because as Haggard and Noland have pointed out, “handing

more unconditional aid can have adverse effects on the [recipient] country's willingness to comply with basic humanitarian principles."¹⁸ If South Korea and the U.S. coordinate more closely, the North may not be as capable of finding opportunities for avoiding compliance and monitoring. Although Chinese aid remains an important factor, more close coordination between the U.S. and South Korea on humanitarian aid, refugees, and other political aspects to human rights poses a potentially promising manner in which to effect change in the North.

This international coordination, however, appears to be more effective when combined with active interaction with North Korea. Karin J. Lee noted that, "Pressure is only one of many tools, and is often ineffective, particularly when used alone. Change is dependent on increasing, not decreasing contact, and increasing information flow through inviting North Koreans to interact with rest of the world."¹⁹ In this context, Tom Malinowski, Washington Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch, has argued that early normalization of relations between the U.S. and North Korea is critical to improving human rights in North Korea.²⁰ As the nuclear situation evolves, both the U.S. and South Korea will most likely increasingly pay attention to ways in which they can affect humanitarian and human rights changes in North Korea, and better coordination between the two countries can only increase the possibility of success, however partial.

Given the uncertainties that remain over the direction and pace of the North's nuclear programs, it is quite likely that humanitarian and human rights issues will remain a second priority for the coming year. Beyond that time frame, however, Seoul and Washington have a number of issues over which close coordination between the two can only help improve conditions in North Korea.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The U.S. and South Korea do not need to have identical policies on North Korean humanitarian and economic issues, and different policies do not imply a lack of cooperation. In fact, some difference in policies allows a more

nanced approach to North Korea, and managing expectations is now more important than ever.

This paper has necessarily avoided a full discussion of all the dynamics at play on the Peninsula, and coordination of policy beyond 2008 will depend on a host of factors, such as North Korea's behavior and the economic and security situation as it evolves; the U.S. presidential election results; how Chinese goals and actions are central to any solution with North Korea; Japan's stance, particularly on the abductees; and the role of other states and other issues, such as territorial disputes. Coordinating policy over all of these issues and with all these actors is doubtless important for success in reining in North Korea's nuclear program, promoting economic reform and helping North Korean citizens. However, it is probably safe to say that the keystone of any good approach to the DPRK is close coordination between the U.S. and South Korea.

What are concrete measures where the U.S. and ROK might coordinate? One possibility is to focus more on *process* rather than on *results* in terms of U.S.-ROK coordination. Toward that end, there are a number of specific recommendations that may be useful to consider in the coming months:

- ***Hold a U.S.-ROK-Japan dialogue with the World Food Program on humanitarian aid to North Korea.***
- ***Enter into a U.S.-ROK dialogue on broadening the agenda with North Korea to provide leverage in a coordinated manner.***
- ***Focus on international standards on human rights.***
- ***South Korea should define its road map for engaging North Korea with denuclearization, Kaesong, successful completion of the Six Party Talks, and meeting Phase Two obligations, and link progress to benchmarks.***
- ***Enter into a coordinated U.S.-ROK discussion on economic and humanitarian contingency planning, not just focused on military contingencies.*** This planning could involve the Chinese, who have come up with their own contingency plans.²¹ One possibility would be to base the planning on natural disasters, rather than regime failure in North Korea.

Chapter 1 Notes

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