

AREA UPDATE

BUSH CLOUDS KOREAN SUNSHINE

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A year ago there was a palpable sense of optimism about the Korean peninsula. The Agreed Framework of 1994 between the DPRK and the US had held, despite problems and setbacks, and relations had moved forward. The DPRK agreed to suspend missile testing in September 1999 and the Perry Report of October that year was basically positive, with its talk of engagement and a 'window of opportunity'. This provided a relatively benign background against which inter-Korean moves could take centre stage. The surprise announcement of April 2000 of a North-South summit in June, and then the surprisingly successful summit meeting itself, whilst they captured attention, were perhaps only feasible with American support, or at least acquiescence. That support evaporated with the incoming Bush administration and as a result inter-Korea relations have frozen, fortunately not into general hostility, but into a sort of suspending animation waiting for the administration's review of its Korea policy.

The year 2000 was a kind of *annus mirabilis* for the Korean peninsula. It started with the January 4 establishment of diplomatic relations between the DPRK and Italy. This was as much a product of Kim Dae-jung's 'sunshine policy', which urged allies of the ROK to establish ties with the North, as of Kim Jong Il's 'diplomatic offensive'. The high point was the June summit and the subsequent family exchanges, especially the first set in August. Momentum was kept up with a series of inter-Korean ministerial meetings, tourism and trade contact, and rapid development of the DPRK's diplomatic relations with participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum at the end of July and further bilateral relations Australia (8 May), Philippines (12 July) and Britain (12 December). However, it was the American drama that provided the end-of-year excitement, disappointment and foreboding. The mission of DPRK No 2 Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok (Cho Myong-nok) to Washington in early October led to an even more surprising return visit by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright later that month. This led to talk of a breakthrough in US-DPRK relations – Clinton visiting Pyongyang, dropping of the DPRK from the US 'terrorism list' (a pre-requisite for getting access to international financial organisations and hence loans and investment), the setting up of liaison offices and the move towards normalisation of relations. Alas, it was not to be. With Bush's election victory all this was put on hold. Although

Clinton did not announce the cancellation of his visit until the last moment – 28 December – it was a forgone conclusion once it was certain that the Democrats had lost the presidential election.

It was clear that both Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il were hoping for a Gore victory (as reportedly were most governments around the world). So concerned was Kim Dae-jung that the new administration would undo his 'sunshine policy' that he made an urgent request for a meeting with the incoming president. He attempted to reinforce the message by not merely sending Foreign Minister Lee Joung-binn to arrange the March 7 summit, but also by dispatching at short notice Lim Dong-won, director of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) and his key handler of North Korean affairs, for meetings with Secretary of State Colin Powell, CIA director George Tenet, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice. It did not work. Kim Dae-jung was treated in a perfunctory manner – so much so that the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) took some delight in complaining that Secretary Powell had 'insulted the nation' by giving a press conference while the two leaders were still talking, saying that Bush had 'forcefully told' Kim that he wouldn't continue missile talks with the DPRK. The GNP also said that Bush had 'hurt the pride of the Korean people' by his 'derogatory reference' to Kim Dae-jung as 'this man' during the post-summit press conference.¹

Whilst Kim Dae-jung put a brave face on things it was apparent that he had been rebuffed. Even segments of the American press were highly critical of the Bush team for treating a 'close ally' in this way, as well as being confused by conflicting messages (Powell being seen as more 'pragmatic') and exasperated by the administration's attitude towards negotiations. For example, Thomas L. Friedman, writing in the *New York Times*, after having excoriated Kim Jong Il as a 'a wild man who understands only force' concluded,

Which approach Mr. Bush adopts depends in part on how he understands North Korea's past behavior. But if he doesn't understand that, or he hasn't applied himself to understanding it, or he is so wedded to his own Star Wars missile shield he doesn't want anything to get in the way, or he is so worried about being accused by Republican hard-liners, as his father was, of being a "wimp" that he'll never take yes for an answer from the North — then, Houston, we have a problem.²

Kim Dae-jung, on his return to Seoul, reshuffled his cabinet – replacing Lee Joung-binn with former ambassador to Washington Han Seung-soo and making Lim Dong-won Unification Minister. He kept up pressure on Washington to continue negotiations with the DPRK, and has sought to rescue his policy in various ways. The most immediate problem has been that the North put a partial freeze on relations, including canceling a ministerial meeting at the last moment and delaying any announcement about Kim Jong

¹ Sohn Suk-joo, 'Opposition Irked by Powell's Breach of Protocol', *Korea Times*, 9 March 2001. This, and other articles used in this commentary can be accessed via my website at <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~caplabtb/dprk/>.

² Thomas L. Friedman, 'Macho on North Korea', *New York Times*, 9 March 2001.

Il's promised return visit to Seoul. The freeze is not complete, and contacts still continue. For instance, mail was exchanged for the first time in over 50 years and workers from the South participated in May Day celebrations in the North. There have been attacks in the DPRK media on joint US-ROK military exercises:

This is aimed to chill the growing desire for reunification in South Korea, cool down the north-south relations and round off war preparations. This war rehearsal is a blatant challenge and a perfidy to the June 15 North-South Joint Declaration calling for independent reunification as it is targeted on the fellow countrymen. The endless sabre-rattling against the dialogue partner makes it absolutely impossible for representatives of the north and the south to sit together with smiles on their faces and realize reconciliation and co-operation. Such an act as levelling guns at compatriots to please foreign forces can be committed only by traitors.³

The ROK Defence Minister has been vilified for his assertion that 'North Korea is a force posing potential and direct threat'.⁴ However, there do not seem to have been any criticisms of the ROK government as a whole, or Kim Dae-jung himself, indeed, Kim Jong Il has referred to his 'personal friendship' with him.⁵ Pyongyang has made it clear, if in a rather blunt, even ham-fisted, fashion that the North-South détente is still on the table and the major impediment is the current hostile attitude of the United States.

Pyongyang has, in fact, been hammering home this message in a number of ways since the election. Kim Jong Il made a unannounced visit to China in January, most particularly spending time with Zhu Rongji in Shanghai inspecting hi-tech industries and the stock exchange. This led to much speculation that the DPRK was going to follow the 'Chinese road' and in fact there were calls in the DPRK for 'new thinking'; Kim Jong Il was quoted as saying 'Things are not what they used to be in the 1960s. So no one should follow the way people used to do things in the past.'⁶ However, whilst there were plenty of signs that the DPRK was exploring 'opening up' - officials were sent on training missions to the United States and to Australia for instance - it was clear that this was contingent on better relations with the United States.

Besides his trip to China, Kim Jong Il continued to develop relations with Russia (though his visit to Moscow has been delayed for unspecified reasons). The diplomatic offensive continued with even greater vigour. Since the beginning of the year the DPRK has established diplomatic relations with the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Spain, Germany, Luxembourg, Greece, Brazil, New Zealand, and Kuwait. It has just been announced that relations

³ *Korean Central News Agency*, Pyongyang, 7 May 2001, 'Anti-north military drill blasted'.

⁴ *Korean Central News Agency*, Pyongyang, 30 April 2001, 'KCNA on S. Korean national defence minister's diatribe against DPRK'.

⁵ *The Chosun Ilbo*, *Yonhap News*, 7 May 2001, 'EU Delegation Hails Visit to North a Success'.

⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, 4 January 2001, 'Kim Jong Il Stresses Economic Renovation with New Thinking'.

with France are imminent and that leaves Ireland as the only member of the European Union (EU) yet to establish relations and brings to over 150 the countries with which North Korea has links, though many must be inactive.

The EU connection is vital. A top-level delegation - Joran Persson, President of the European Council and Prime Minister of Sweden, Javier Solana, high representative for common foreign and security policy of the EU, and Chris Patten, commissioner for external relations of the European Commission, visited Pyongyang from 2-3 May for talks with Kim Jong Il and his government. Although the EU has said publicly that the visit had nothing to do with Bush's Korean policy it clearly was meant as an unequivocal message that the European Union was very concerned and wanted to play a role as peace-maker. This was well understood in both Pyongyang and Seoul. The delegation flew from Pyongyang to Seoul to have discussions with Kim Dae-jung and brought with them two messages from Kim Jong Il. One was that Pyongyang would unilaterally continue with the moratorium on missile testing until 2003 and the other was that the return visit to Seoul was still definitely on, if the Americans came back to the table. It was widely agreed that 'the ball is back in the US court'.⁷

There it stands at the time of writing. The US review of Korean policy is not yet concluded and it is possible that Bush may be swayed by pressure from Seoul and Europe. Europe has other bones of contention with Washington, including Kyoto and the Balkans. China and Russia, who have had their own separate scuffles with the new administration, have also made clear their concern over Bush's Korea policy. Putin and Kim Dae-jung enraged Washington during the Russian leader's visit in February with a joint condemnation of the US National Missile Defense (NMD), so much so that Seoul was forced 'to utter "regret" four times'.⁸

And there's the rub. Bush's Korean policy is not so much about Korea but about justifying NMD. Commentators around the world, from Europe, Seoul, Pyongyang and in the United States itself are agreed that Bush 'needs rogues states' and North Korea has to be cast in that role. The rogue state argument has always been thin on both technical grounds (they can't do it) and political ones (why would they want to commit suicide?), but has sufficient paranoia to be attractively above rational debate. It is also widely accepted that NMD is aimed primarily at China, not Korea, but that it is impolitic to make that too specific.

The next few months may be crucial. If Bush resumes serious negotiations with Pyongyang, rather than as a sideshow on the road to NMD, then a resolution can be achieved relatively easily. There should be no substantial issues between the US and the DPRK; there are no conflicting territorial claims for instance. The local parties, the governments of the two Koreas, are currently basically in agreement. This is in marked contrast with the Middle East or Kashmir, for instance, where there are real and intractable local differences. Détente would open up the way for the alleviation and then resolution of the humanitarian situation in the North (which is still desperate).

⁷ *Korea Times* 4 May 2001, '[Today's Editorial] Now, Ball Is In US Court'; *Asia Times Online*, 5 May 2001, 'Koreas: The ball's back in the US court'.

⁸ Oh Young-jin, 'Armitage's Visit Leaves Seoul With Hope, Anxiety', *Korea Times*, 11 May 2001.

It would also bring great political and economic benefits to the South. But what will happen if Bush remains intransigent? NMD will spark an arms race involving Russia, China, Japan, and others, such as India, as the repercussions spread. Resolution of inter-Korean differences will become increasingly difficult and may falter entirely. The economic crisis in the North, with its resultant malnutrition and misery will be more difficult, perhaps impossible, to solve. There could be armed conflict with incalculable consequences. This is a bleak prospect indeed.

Scarcely has a choice been so stark. The problem with NMD is not that it may not work, or that it is pointless, but that it is so profitable and that may be its irresistible attraction. It has also become the centre-piece of the Bush administration's foreign and security policy, the 'strategic framework' of 'nonproliferation, counter-proliferation, missile defense and the unilateral reduction of nuclear arsenals'. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Seoul on 10 May as part of a 'charm tour' to sell NMD. He made soothing noises that the US government would indeed resume negotiations with Pyongyang when its policy review was completed. This was seized upon by some segments of the press as an indication that Bush was now supporting Kim Dae-jung's policy. Others were more sceptical. The point was, as the new Foreign Minister Han Seung-soo made clear to Armitage, that what Seoul wants is not just the resumption of Washington-Pyongyang talks but a dialogue of substance.⁹

It is unlikely that the US government does have a real commitment to negotiations with the DPRK because that would diminish the rationale for NMD. The coming months will tell, but it is clear that the ball is in Bush's court.

⁹ Oh Young-jin, 'Armitage's Visit Leaves Seoul With Hope, Anxiety', Korea Times, 11 May 2001.

Looking for enemies



Tom Scott cartoon, *The Evening Post*, 10 May 2001.