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Time to End the Korean War: The Korean Nuclear Crisis in the Era of Unification (Spanish translation available)

By Sheila Miyoshi Jager

When North Korea went ahead with its nuclear test on October 9, 2006 in defiance of China's objections, the Bush administration had hoped that Pyongyang's brazen act would finally create the necessary momentum to precipitate a strategic shift in China's and South Korea's view of North Korea. The two countries hold the key to Pyongyang's economic survival and both countries have been reluctant to pursue policies that might lead to its collapse and regional upheaval.

Yet, the initial optimism by the Bush administration that a unified policy on North Korea would at last be reached on the basis of full implementation of the final U.N. Security Council Resolution on North Korea was, in fact, misplaced. Despite Pyongyang's defiance, deep divisions between China and the United States and between South Korea and the United States over the fate of North Korea still exist over what to do about that recalcitrant regime. This is reflected in the divergent responses over the meaning of the UN sanctions meant to punish North Korea. When China's UN ambassador, Wang Guangya, was asked how China would enforce the global crackdown imposed by the UN Security Council, he stated, "I think different countries will do it in different ways" [1]. Rep. Kim Geun-tae, the chairman of South Korea's governing Uri party was even more blunt, stating that his country's policy is not "to be changed following somebody's order to do this or that" [2]. It was precisely such ambivalent thinking that no doubt spurred Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to visit Asia following North Korea's October 9th nuclear test: "The purpose of my trip," she noted, "is to rally the support of our friends and allies in Northeast Asia for a comprehensive strategy," meaning that "every country in the region must share the burdens as well as the benefits of our common security." Calling on China and South Korea to "collectively isolate" North Korea, she added that Pyongyang "cannot destabilize the international system and then expect to exploit elaborate financial networks built for peaceful commerce" [3].

Thus far, China has maintained a delicate balance between cooperating with U.S. pressures without pushing the Kim Jong Il regime so hard as to risk triggering Pyongyang's economic collapse. China does not wants to severely strain relations with the United States over the North Korean issue, but at the same time, Pyongyang's survival is necessary to insure China's long-term geopolitical interests. The last thing Beijing wants is hundreds of thousands of North Korean refugees streaming across the Chinese border and upsetting Beijing's development plans, still less a war on the Korean peninsula. Chinese officials have thus restricted exports to Pyongyang, but, like the Russians, they have not complied with U.S. pressure to board and inspect North Korean ships or intensify land border controls. Some observers have also questioned the effectiveness of these restrictions, doubting whether the confiscation of tea and other luxury goods passing between China and North Korea are actually more symbolic than substantive. Although clearly angered by the test, China also continues to push for a diplomatic solution to the crisis, urging Washington to take a more "flexible" attitude in dealing with Pyongyang. "The Korean Peninsula nuclear issue now stands at the crossroads," Premier Wen Jiabao was quoted as saying to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her recent visit. "What course to follow is directly related to the peace and stability in East Asia and the world at large. There is no other choice but diplomacy and dialogue" [4].

For its part, South Korea, whose evolving alliance with the United States has been intensely scrutinized in recent years, appears even more ambivalent toward Rice's hard-line rallying call. While Pyongyang's nuclear test initially sparked anger and fear in South Korea, it has not had the hoped-for effect of completely reconciling the strained relationship between Seoul and Washington. Indeed, the potential exists to widen the rift between the two allies. In response to U.S. pressures, Kim Dae-jung, the architect of Seoul's engagement policy, blamed the crisis squarely on the Bush administration's hard-line stance toward North Korea. "Since 1994, we stressed a package resolution and the Clinton administration positively accepted this. As a consequence, our plan almost bore fruit," he said. "The George W. Bush administration, however, has ignored this and the result is today's failure" [5]. President Roh Mu-hyun embraced this assessment, abruptly back-tracking on his initial October 9th statement that the engagement policy with North Korea would have to be revamped, by stating just two days later that inter-Korean dialogue would continue, as would South Korean promotion of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and tourism to Mt. Kumgang. Nearly 71 percent of South Koreans backed Roh's continued engagement approach in a recent poll published by the Joong-ang Ilbo following North Korea's nuclear test. In that poll, 70.8 percent stated that "dialogue between North and South Korea was the best way to resolve the current crisis" [6]. As the former South Korean ambassador to the United States, Han Sung-joo, put it, "there is a general consensus in South Korea, not only among politicians but also in the general population, that engagement is the right policy" [7].

Top U.S. officials, however, have pressed South Korea to rethink its engagement policy and its continued economic cooperation with Pyongyang. With the stated purpose of ensuring that all nations strictly enforce the sanctions laid out in UN Resolution 1718, Secretary of State Rice suggested that Pyongyang's nuclear tests should cause Seoul to review its activities with North Korea. U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, Washington's top negotiator in the six-party talks, displayed skepticism about Seoul's Mt. Kumgang tourism project, stating that "I think (the Kumgang project) seems designed to give money to the North Korean authorities"[8]. Meanwhile, U.S. ambassador Alexander Vershbow urged Seoul and Beijing to thoroughly review their economic ties with North Korea. "We should do everything to cut off support for North Korea's nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction programs," he said during an Oct. 18th breakfast speech in Seoul. "That is what the central goal of the [U.N. Security Council] resolution is"[9]. Washington is also upping the pressure on Seoul to play a more active part in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) designed to prevent shipment of weapons and other suspect cargo from entering and leaving North Korea. So far, Seoul has rejected direct participation in PSI, stating that such a move might lead to a dangerous escalation of events that could result in a renewed conflict between the two Koreas and a second Korean War. In line with the government's stance, a majority of Uri lawmakers issued a statement on October 12, stating that "the seizure and search of vessels, and a naval blockade under the PSI risk triggering an unsolicited physical clash between the two Koreas" [10].

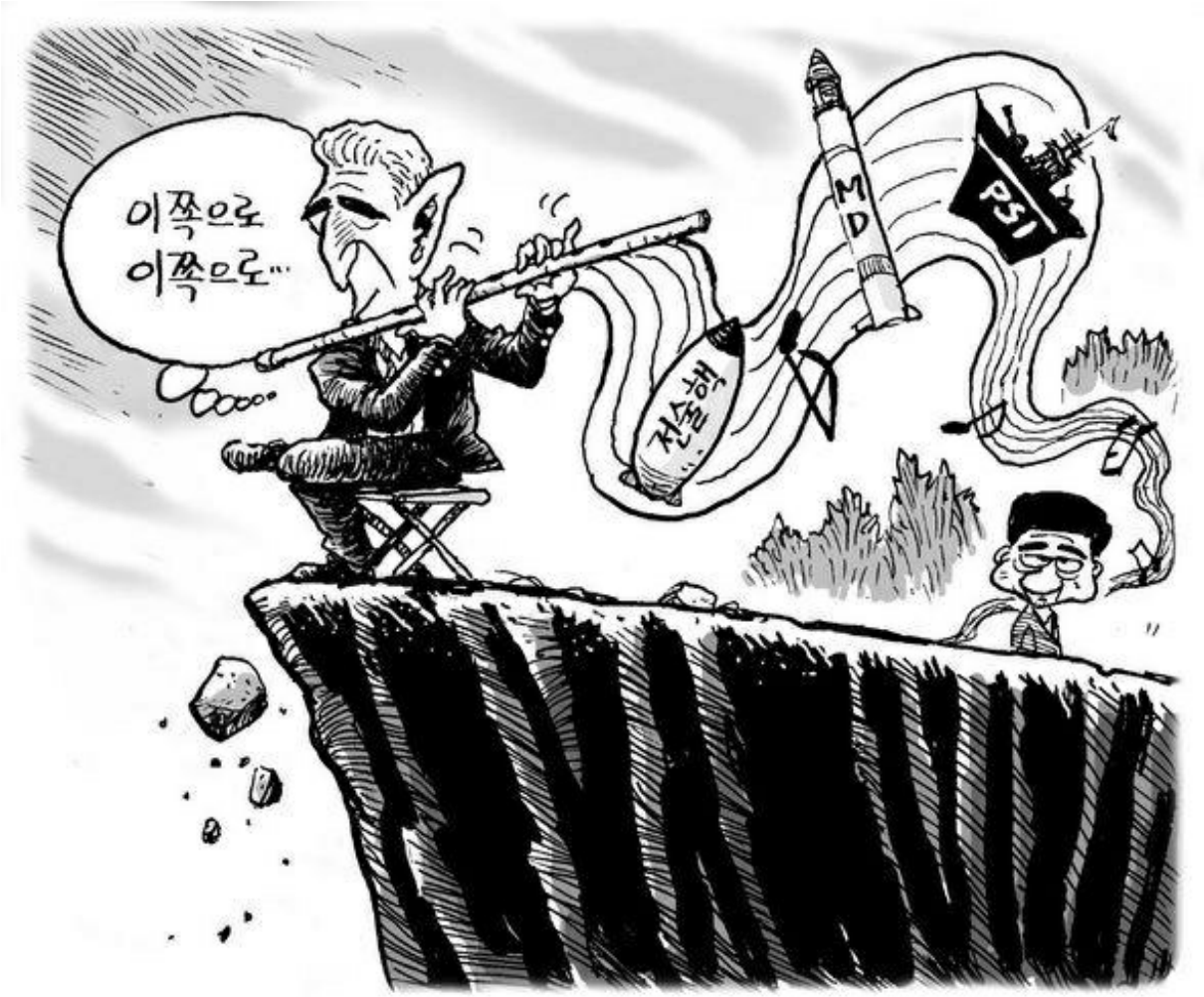
While conservative groups like the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) are not opposed to an engagement policy approach to North Korea per se, they have clashed with progressives over the Roh administration's commitment to continue inter-Korean economic projects in the aftermath of Pyongyang's nuclear test [11]. The leader of the opposition GNP, Park Geun-hae, stated that while she favors engagement, "this policy must operate within certain rules dictated by the security environment" which the North Koreans "have clearly violated by their nuclear test" [12]. It is on this basis that she and other conservatives have demanded that Seoul cease its inter-Korean economic ties with Pyongyang and agree to participate in the PSI advocated by Washington. For their part, progressives have countered that Pyongyang was forced into taking such extreme action due to Washington's hard-line policy stance. "North Korea's nuclear test," said Kim Dae-jung, "its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, its driving out of International Atomic Energy Agency Inspectors, and its breach of the 1994 Agreed Framework have proven that U.S. policies against North Korea's nuclear program have failed." [13]. Those favoring continued engagement with North Korea argue that further isolating North Korea will lead to a worsening security situation on the Korean peninsula and may even provoke Pyongyang to conduct a second nuclear test

Figure 1 Condoleeza Rice places Kim Jong Il in a pressure cooker. Hangyore.

Beyond the obvious differences in security considerations between Washington and Seoul with regard to the North Korean crisis, this latest rift between the Roh and Bush administrations over the fate of South Korea's economic and tourism projects with the North also exposes much deeper divisions in the way both countries view the world and their place within it. The United States continues to view the North Korean threat—and the war on terror— through the ideological prism of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry and a hawkish interpretation of the Cold War reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's "evil empire" rhetoric as the key to resolving the crisis (recall Dick Cheney's widely cited comment that famously encapsulated the Bush administration's North Korean policy: "We don't negotiate with evil, we defeat it,"). By contrast, a new generation of South Korean leaders have attempted to move beyond the Cold War era—and the Korean War—by dealing with their northern neighbor within a "post-Cold War" framework based on nationalism and shared ethnic ties and cultural values. As a result, many South Korean leaders, intellectuals and activists has begun to rethink their protracted struggle with North Korea in light of how to finally end the Korean War (and the Cold War) on the Korean peninsula. Rejecting the previous Cold War paradigm that presumed a divided Korea and a subordinate relationship to the United States, these new leaders and activists have begun to seek the realization of the long-held dream of Korean reunification.

These post-Cold War political reevaluations of North Korea, predicated in part on recognition of the enormous human cost in the event of a North Korean collapse or a resumption of the Korean War, have had enormous repercussions both on the way that the younger generation of South Koreans now perceive their wartime past, and their future as well. And this is why those advocating engagement with North Korea continue to press the United States for direct bi-lateral talks with Pyongyang. The goal is not only to resolve the current crisis, but to finally end the on-going war of which this latest crisis is merely a manifestation. Achieving a formal and substantive end to the conflict (the war ended in an armistice agreement in 1953 and not a peace treaty between the belligerents) would resolve the lingering constraints of this history of permanent warfare, which North Koreans repeatedly cite as the purpose for developing their nuclear "deterrent".

The unending Korean War is also the context for understanding the rise of popular anti-Americanism in South Korea. Strains in the U.S.-ROK alliance, that in turn has fueled tensions between the Roh and Bush administrations as they seek to resolve the on-going nuclear crisis, reveal how war memory in South Korea is intimately caught up in the politics of reunification. Attempts to write North Korea back into a shared on-going history of national struggle and triumph over adversity—a familiar theme in Korean history—reveal the growing desire for the "normalization" of relations between the two Koreas. This shift underlies a fundamental reevaluation in South Korea of U.S-South Korean relations. Today, more South Koreans view the United States as a greater threat to their national security than North Korea. In a recent KBS poll, 43 percent of those surveyed blamed the United States for North Korea's nuclear test as opposed to 37 percent who blamed North Korea, and 13.9 percent who blamed the Roh administration [14]. Meanwhile antipathy towards the United States has continued to grow in South Korea, particularly among the younger generation. A recent public opinion poll sponsored by the Choson Ilbo revealed that 65.9 percent of Koreans born in the 1980s (ages 16-25) said they would side with North Korea in the event of a war between North Korea and the United States [15].



George Bush leads Roh Moo-hyun to the cliff edge with the tune of PSI. Hangyore.

At its core, then, the marked difference in the perception and treatment of the North Korean crisis by the Bush and Roh administrations can be attributed to two profoundly different views of the Cold War and the Korean War. Whereas the Bush administration continues to view the Cold War in light of the U.S. "victory" over communism, and its role in the Korean War as South Korea's "savior" from a menacing and aggressive regime that continues to threaten the peace and stability of the world, the Roh administration has adamantly rejected this narrative, in an effort to finally end the Cold War on the Korean peninsula and bring about the peaceful reunification of the two Koreas. Many in South Korea also resent what they see as an attempt by the United States to drive a wedge between the Koreas. Indeed, there is a shared elite and public consensus that the Cold War ideological opposition between communism and liberal democracy is now being replaced by differences of tradition, values and social realities among nations. The search for a "post-division" identity in contemporary South Korea plays an important part in the shift away from confrontation with North Korea toward reconciling the bonds of community that was torn apart by the Cold War. Moving beyond the Cold War narrative of the Korean War, South Koreans are attempting to re-write this history by re-affirming an old mythos of national victimization and struggle that seeks to bind North and South Korea as one nation against powerful foreign foes (Japan and the United States) that would (albeit inadvertently) destroy it. It is this reasoning that has led the Roh administration to vigorously oppose U.S. pressure to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative, claiming that it could lead South Korea to unwanted armed conflict with Pyongyang .

South Korean youth demonstrate against Condoleezza Rice's message

As Uri Party chairman Kim Geun-tae emphatically stated, "It is imperative that we remind ourselves that we are still in a state of war. A trivial act at sea could trigger a full-fledged military showdown between South Korea and North Korea" [16].

Since the root source of the current crisis must be understood in the context of the larger crisis which is the on-going Korean War, pressing for strict enforcement of the Security Council's punitive sanctions against North Korea, purportedly the main reason for Secretary of State Rice's Asian trip, will not discourage North Korea's nuclear ambitions; it will merely enflame them. Since North Korea and the U.S. are still technically at war, the attempt by the Bush administration to further isolate North Korea in order to bring about regime change will simply provoke the Kim Jong Il regime to seek to strengthen its military and nuclear arsenal in the name of national "self-defense." Because North Koreans are told, and we must assume many believe, that their country is in a state of war—a belief reinforced by the Bush administration's actions toward North Korea—they have been able to withstand the hardships associated with a wartime mobilization that has continued for half a century. The more belligerent the United States appears, the greater the North Korean resolve to resist. And this is why, despite all the predictions of regime collapse, North Korea, which has dealt with U.S. threats for more than half a century, will not go away any time soon. The communist regimes of Eastern Europe collapsed almost overnight because their leaders were viewed as illegitimate occupiers of their nation; the North Korean regime has survived in the face of sustained attack because its leaders, whether we like it or not, are still viewed by many as patriotic defenders of the nation. Just as North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung, was hailed as a patriot who fought the Japanese for the independence of his nation, Kim Jong Il's credentials as a national leader have been burnished precisely to the extent that he is perceived as having been able to stand up to the great American foe.

Furthermore, pressuring Seoul to abandon economic cooperation with Pyongyang will likely lead to the further deterioration in relations between Seoul and Washington. South Korean efforts to build warmer relations with North Korea must be broadly understood not only as an attempt to move beyond the Korean War and the Cold War framework that had sustained it—including the U.S.-South Korean alliance and U.S.-ROK combined military command—but also to return to a pre-war consensus based upon the elusive and emotional ties of nationalism, ethnic identity, and shared cultural affinities. Such reformulations of pan-Korean nationalism and identity have necessarily put South Korea on a path of confrontation with the United States over the best methods for achieving a resolution to the latest North Korean crisis. South Korea's overriding concern is how to resolve the issue of Korean reunification and to peacefully integrate North Korea into the world's most dynamic economic region, with or without nuclear weapons [17].

What this means is that Washington must come to terms with the emergence of pan-Korean nationalism in South Korea in which ending the Korean War is the main goal. In practical terms, this will require that the United States engage North Korea in direct bi-lateral talks aimed at finally settling the hostile relations between the two countries with the ultimate goal of concluding a peace treaty and establishing diplomatic relations. The future of the Korean peninsula hinges on ending the Korean War by helping all Koreans realize the goal of national reunification. Pressing Seoul to adopt measures that conflict with these national interests as a way of dealing with nuclear North Korea denies this post-Cold War reality and the desires of a new generation of South Koreans who seek reconciliation, not confrontation, with North Korea. This denial, and the continued pursuit of a policy that ignores these new post-Cold War/post-Korean War realities and desires, will likely result in further strains in the relations between the United States and South Korea and the deterioration of Northeast Asia's security environment. Most ominously, it risks resumption of another Korean War.

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[1] USA Today "China Inspects North Korean Cargo; Australia Ban Ships from Its Ports" October 16, 2006.

[2] Thom Shanker and Martin Fackler, "South Korea Says It Will Continue Projects in North," New York Times, October 19, 1006.

[3] Glen Kessler and Dafna Linzer, "Rice Trip to Push Full Sanctions for North Korea," Washington Post, October 17, 2006

[4] Le Tian, "Prudence Key to Resolving Nuclear Issue," China Daily, October 21, 2006

[5] Kim Dae-jung delivered these comments during a lecture entitled, "The Realities of the Korean Peninsula and the Four Powers" at Chonnam National University on October 11, 2006. The speech was reprinted in Korean newspapers and internet sites the following day. See **excerpts**.

[6] The Poll was conducted by "Joins P'unghyang-gae" (research.joins.com) polling company and published in the Joogang Ilbo, October 13, 2006.

[7] Norimitsu Onishi, "Tough Talk From Seoul, if Little Will for a Fight," New York Times, October 10, 2006.

[8] Ryu Jin, "Seoul to Keep Mt. Kumgang Project Going," Korea Times, October 18, 2006.

[9] Park Song-wu, "Vershbow Wants Seoul to Cut Economic Ties with North Korea," The Korea Times, October 18, 2006.

[10] Jin Dae-woong, "Uri lawmakers opposed expanded PSI role," Korea Herald, October 14, 2006.

[11] The issue also exposes the deep generational divide in South Korean society between older and younger South Koreans. Since the liberation of Korea in 1945, the right-left ideological divide, along with regionalism, has defined South Korean politics. However, the term "South-South conflict," (nam-nam galtung) is different from previous political divisions in the past as its origins have to do specifically with conflicts within South Korean society over policy toward North Korea. Generally speaking, the term "South-South conflict" came into use as part of the media's lexicon after the June 2000 inter-Korean summit. Thereafter, it has gained widespread use with the inauguration of Roh Mu-hyun's government in 2002. By and large, the so-called "386 generation" (those who were born in the 1960s and came of age in the 1980s), support an active engagement policy approach toward North Korea. This approach differs from that of the older generation of Koreans who grew up during the Korean War and its aftermath, and for whom the experience of the North-South conflict is still a living memory. While it is a misnomer to characterize conservatives as being against engagement per se, they differ from progressives in their insistence on having much more stringent checks on South Korea's dealings with the North.

[12] "Park Keun-hae: pukhan daemunae chukul dunun opda [We Cannot Die Because of North Korea]," Choson Ilbo, October 18, 2006.

[13] "DJ: haetpyolchongch'aek silp'aenun' : haekuihan iron" [Kim Dae Jung: The failure of the Sunshine Policy: An Outrageous Viewpoint]. Choson Ilbo, October 11, 2006.

[14] "'Pukhaeksatae kachang k'un ch'eakim" mikuk 43%, pukhan 37%'" [Main Responsibility for North Korea's Nuclear Tests: The United States, 43 %; North Korea, 37 %]. KBS poll published in OhmyNews, October 17, 2006.

[15] "South Korean Opinion Polls: Majority Favors Nuclear Weapons; 1980s Generation Question U.S. Ties," **WMD Insights**: Issues and Viewpoints in the International Media (Dec/Jam 2006 Issue).

[16] Jin Dae-woong, "Uri lawmakers Opposed to Expanded PSI Role," Korea Herald, October 14, 2005.

[17] David Kang makes a similar point in his op-ed piece, "A Better Strategy" Washington Post, November 28, 2005.

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