

## **Deterrence, Diplomacy, and Crisis Management: Choices in US Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula**

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**S**outh Korea is today arguably the only area in the world (aside from Bosnia) where the outbreak of major regional conflict or instability would automatically involve US troops. This involvement would inevitably occur without prior approval from the President or Congress, since the American troop presence in South Korea itself is designed as a “tripwire” for US involvement. Although the Cold War is over in other parts of the world, US alliance commitments under the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954 with the Republic of Korea and the history of US involvement on the Korean Peninsula would automatically involve the US in any instability—accidental or intentional—that might occur in Korea.

In the latter part of 1996 and early 1997, the CIA and other officials publicly pointed to North Korea as a likely area of instability in the near future. In testimony before the US Senate Intelligence Committee on 11 December 1996, CIA Director John

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Deutch predicted that within three years, North Korea would follow one of three possible paths: "Either it is going to invade the South over one issue or another, or it will break up, or it will collapse internally or implode, because of the incredible economic problems that the country faces. Or third, it will over time lead to some peaceful resolution and a reunification with the South."<sup>1</sup> Admiral Joseph Prueher, in testimony before the House National Security Committee, stated that a collapse in North Korea might occur "within one to ten years, perhaps, but it could come faster."<sup>2</sup> Acting CIA Director George Tenet, testifying before Congress on 5 February emphasized that North Korea was facing an imminent food shortfall of over two million tons.<sup>3</sup>

However, until the mid-February 1997 defection of Hwang Jang-yop, a senior North Korean ideologist, and Secretary Albright's visit to Korea as part of her first overseas tour, there was a mismatch between projections by intelligence officials that North Korea was one of the top three areas of potential instability in the world and the long-term priorities of the Clinton administration. Even if top-level interest in Korea existed in the US government, the fact of the matter is that US national priorities would place other issues above Korea, creating a structural asymmetry of interests and priorities between the governments in Washington and Seoul. The primary result of this asymmetry is to engender feelings in South Korea that the United States is not paying sufficient attention to Korea. Ironically, it is only during a crisis on the Korean peninsula that such an asymmetry of interests is temporarily resolved, but the lack of direct experience with Korea at the highest levels may also render a less

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1 John Deutch, Testimony before the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee, December 11, 1996, and media reports. See Jim Mann, "Future of North Korea May Become Clinton's Biggest Foreign Policy Test," *Los Angeles Times*, Monday, 30 December 1996.

2 "North Korea Collapse Predicted," Associated Press, 6 March 1997.

3 Kyodo News Service, "S. Korea, U.S. set for food aid, pave way for briefing", 7 February 1997.

sure-footed response than might be the case with European or other issues.<sup>4</sup>

A second challenge for US policy in responding to potential instability on the peninsula stems from the near-permanent dysfunctionality that exists as part of the Korean confrontation. The permanency of this dysfunctional state, represented by the fact that North Korea is still technically at war with the United Nations Command and South Korea, serves to desensitize American policy makers to the dangers inherent in the permanency and relative stability of the Korean peninsula amid crisis. The state of crisis has become a state of normalcy, numbing American policy makers to the possibility that crisis could easily recur at any time, but also raising questions about whether indeed a crisis can be said to exist. Alternatively, media "discoveries" of evolving and seemingly shocking new developments in Korean affairs often makes Korea into the "crisis de jour," in which an event taken out of context becomes a defining moment, often with no clearly defined relationship to its true significance in the context of Korean affairs.

The possibility of an unexpected or unanticipated internal crisis in North Korea stemming from its manifest vulnerabilities is a relatively new factor in managing US policy toward the peninsula; it goes beyond the decades-old focus on deterrence and containment of North Korea's military strength. In essence, this type of crisis is one that might result from the continued decline in North Korea's economic and energy capabilities combined with a presumable loss of cohesion, disintegration, or inability by the top leadership to impose political central control within the ruling apparatus. Such an event or series of events might have the following effects: (1) It might trigger a desperate

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4 Robert Manning and others have called for the appointment of a "Dennis Ross"-type of special envoy for the Korean Peninsula in recent testimony before the House Committee on International Relations Subcommittee for East Asia and Pacific, Hearing on US Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula, 26 February 1997.

and destructive policy response by Pyongyang's top leadership, (2) it might result in the temporary loss of control by central political authorities, (3) it might result from a transition in political power from the current regime to a new leadership, and (4) it might possibly even result in the collapse of the North Korean system, following the example of East Germany and other former Communist countries.

Although questions regarding the possibility of regime collapse had surfaced among administration officials in various forms since the Geneva Agreed Framework,<sup>5</sup> the first extensive public statement by an American official to address these possibilities directly was delivered by James Laney in a speech entitled "Beyond Deterrence" at an Asia Society conference in May of 1996. He spoke about the important role of deterrence in guaranteeing four decades of stability on the Korean peninsula, but he raised questions about whether North Korea's continued economic decline and political isolation might present new challenges to regional stability that could express themselves through its military options. "Warnings only work when deterrence is effective. It is the erosion of the effectiveness of our warnings that requires us now to look for new ways of communication and interaction between North and South, and to convince Pyongyang that it has better options than its military one."<sup>6</sup>

North Korea's food problems, economic decline, or political instability each constitute challenges to North Korea's leadership which remain unresolved and are potential catalysts for a new crisis. A report by the US Institute of Peace in October of 1996

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5 Larry A. Niksch, "U.S. Policy Towards North Korea: The Collapse Theory and Its Influence," paper prepared for the Annual International Symposium of Korea National Defense University, 22 August 1996, provides the various impacts on policy of concerns among American officials regarding the possible collapse of North Korea.

6 Ambassador James T. Laney, "North and South Korea: Beyond Deterrence," Speech delivered to Asia Society conference, 11 May 1996.

called for contingency planning to meet such challenges, stating that "prudence requires preparedness for the possibility of a sudden, crisis-induced change on the Korean Peninsula" and calling for a two-track approach which continued to pursue possibilities for dialogue to reduce tensions on the peninsula while also engaging in multilateral consultation and coordination to prepare for the consequences of potential instability.<sup>7</sup>

Among the contingencies explored were the North Korean food crisis and possibilities for either a "silent famine" or massive refugee flows; indicators of economic collapse including the continued downward trend of trade volumes, continued energy and food shortages, and desperation behavior and economic "free-lancing" by local officials; and political-military challenges posed by North Korean instability, including the possibility of a military strike or that a factional struggle might tempt various types of interference from South Korea or China.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Kurt Campbell stated in recent testimony before the House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia that consultations between the United States and South Korea on contingency planning for such scenarios is under way, although he provided no specifics in open session regarding the nature, progress, or goals of such planning.<sup>8</sup>

However, some American analysts express private doubts about the quality of coordination between the United States and South Korea on contingency planning. Others criticize South Korean planners for not taking seriously the real possibility of contingencies and possible collapse; a third group suspects that South Korea has already developed its own independent plans

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7 Scott Snyder, "A Coming Crisis on the Korean Peninsula? The Food Crisis, Economic Decline, and Political Considerations," Special Report of the U.S. Institute of Peace, October 1996, p. 2.

8 Kurt Campbell, "Hearing on US Policy Toward the Korean Peninsula," House Committee on International Relations Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, 26 February 1997.

for handling North Korean instability which it will be reluctant to share with the United States.

A third challenge for US officials in making policy toward the Korean peninsula derives from the tactics of brinkmanship and zero-sum approach that can be discerned to varying degrees on both sides of the Korean peninsula. One result of this brinkmanship and tit-for-tat relations is the Boy Who Cried Wolf syndrome: there have been so many false alarms in which the decibel level between the two Koreas has risen sharply that US policy makers may have become immune to crisis calls or may have failed to discern between real crises and tactical attempts to create an atmosphere of crisis. For instance, North Korea's initial statements during the nuclear crisis that the application of international economic sanctions would be seen as a "declaration of war," Pyongyang's threats to derail the Geneva Agreed Framework if the United States tried to provide North Korea with South Korean made light water reactors, and attempts to use the dire circumstances of North Korea's food situation as leverage to extract food aid from the international community all used the prospect of calamity in order to raise the perceived costs of alternatives to providing concessions to North Korea.

In the context of a threat emanating from the prospect of both DPRK military strength and the weakness shown in its continued downward economic deterioration, there are three specific issues that outline the difficult choices faced by US policy makers in dealing with the Korean peninsula: soft landing as against collapse, the food crisis, and the issue of managing US-ROK relations.

### **Soft Landing Versus Collapse**

Many of the difficulties between the United States and South Korea in managing policy toward the Korean peninsula during the past year have stemmed from the differing priorities placed on maintaining stability versus achieving conditions that might

facilitate Korean reunification. Although US policy has been that the United States supports a peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula according to the desires of the Korean people themselves, policy makers have been slow to realize that the process of managing stabilization and tension reduction on the peninsula inevitably has an impact on the prospects for the shape of Korean reunification. Americans often reassure their ROK allies that South Korea has won the Cold War because of its towering economic, political, and even military advantages in many areas over the North, yet the confrontation remains unresolved. Despite being named the winners by acclamation, South Koreans feel that they are not in a position to step into the winner's circle or to celebrate until after having received the long-awaited victor's prize of reunification.

It is part of the DPRK's strategy to separate the issue of security from that of reunification, an issue which everyone agrees must be settled by Koreans themselves; however, just as Pyongyang must realize that the primary interlocutor on reduction of tensions and establishment of a secure peace on the Korean peninsula inevitably must be Seoul, American policy makers should also recognize that because of US involvement in the tension-reduction process and because of American influence on the Korean peninsula, it is impossible for the United States to abstain from a role in shaping the context for the process of reunification.

The inadvertent and confused secondary signals given by US policy makers on the issue of Korean reunification are reflected most clearly in an examination of statements on the possibility, likelihood, and desirability of a North Korean collapse versus a soft landing. The American debate on this issue has in many respects mirrored the South Korean debate, but with less intensity and from a more distanced perspective.

Although the Geneva Agreed Framework has proved to be more successful than anticipated in addressing the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program (some of the harshest critics of the Agreed Framework believed that Pyongyang

would never trade away such a powerful card), the Framework itself—a product of unprecedented direct negotiations between the United States and North Korea—is the unintended source of much of this confusion. The agreement confers legitimacy on North Korea as a negotiating partner over the long term, providing vague promises of steadily improving US-DPRK relations over the decade during which the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) will build light-water reactors in the North. Ironically, US negotiators offered private justifications for the Agreed Framework that it was improbable that the project would ever reach completion because of the likelihood of North Korea's collapse within that time frame. Jim Hoagland wrote in the *Washington Post* a year after the Agreed Framework was completed that American negotiators privately described the project as a Trojan horse that might even facilitate North Korea's collapse.<sup>9</sup>

The practical implications of the Agreed Framework from the perspective of the issue of Korean reunification, however, have aroused the suspicions of those who might interpret US policy as opposing reunification. They argue that North Korea has used provisions in the Agreed Framework allowing improved US-DPRK relations in an attempt to change its international situation so as to assure regime survival. North Korea has also gained material benefits through the Agreed Framework that critics argue have served to prop up and strengthen the Pyongyang regime. Perhaps most significant, the Clinton administration has increasingly demonstrated its own vested interest in perpetuating the Agreed Framework in order to avoid the prospect of a widespread crisis on the peninsula, precisely the opposite view from the welcome for North Korea's collapse that was presented by those who were part of the negotiations.

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9 Larry A. Niksch, "U.S. Policy Towards North Korea: The Collapse Theory and Its Influence," paper prepared for the Annual International Symposium of Korea National Defense University, 22 August 1996.



The major side effect of the Clinton administration's commitment to the Agreed Framework has been the interpretation among some South Korean analysts that the United States is pursuing a status quo policy in support of the continued existence of North Korea and the perpetuation of Korea's division. The juxtaposition of these contrasting themes suggests one of two equally unsettling possibilities from the perspective of those who believe that the likelihood of reunification has grown more imminent: either the guiding US policy on how or when Korean reunification is desired to occur is too ambiguous to meet the concrete challenges of imminent reunification, or this issue is a secondary priority for US policy makers who are focused primarily on maintaining stability and have simply given little if any thought to the implications for reunification.

Although many Korea specialists in the American policy community accept the Clinton administration's desire to see a soft landing for North Korea—in which current problems are managed in such a way that gradual economic reforms can result in a peaceful transition and eventual reunification—the perception that the DPRK government continues to be unwilling to engage in reform has recently raised voices of skepticism regarding the attainability of a soft-landing policy. Jim Mann has characterized the debate as between hawks, who believe that the United States and its allies should not bail out North Korea, the doves, who are supporters of the soft landing policy, and the hummingbirds, who think North Korea is still strong enough to survive without having made far-reaching changes.<sup>10</sup> Most notable is the recent resurgence of hawkish views that has accompanied North Korea's continued downward decline.

Karen Elliott House's argument is that "for a terminal regime there are no miracle cures," so the Clinton administration would be wise not to attempt to save North Korea's leaders from

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10 Jim Mann, "Future of North Korea May Become Clinton's Biggest Foreign Policy Test," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 December 1996.

collapsing under the weight of their own failed policies. Protection from the enhanced risk of military instability caused by any suicidal "lashing out" by North Korea "doesn't lie in more appeasement . . . the diplomacy is theater of the absurd: Pyongyang promises, then procrastinates, then provokes, then pauses. After a prolonged pause come new promises, and the cycle starts anew." Enhanced deterrence is the answer according to House; the United States should "cease seeking to prop up Pyongyang and let its inevitable collapse come sooner rather than later."<sup>11</sup>

Although House presents a compelling moral argument for not standing in the way of North Korea's demise, her argument makes three dangerous assumptions: (1) that the collapse of North Korea is imminent and inevitable, (2) that outside actors such as China or Japan will not use North Korea's vulnerability to increase their own leverage in ways that may undercut US interests, (3) that the United States or other external parties have the capacity to influence North Korea's future, which lies primarily in the hands of its own leadership. She dismisses options for American diplomacy to manage inter-Korean tensions while failing to underscore the need for contingency planning to prepare for the scenario of collapse which she paints as inevitable.

As its title suggests, Nicholas Eberstadt's provocative argument in favor of "hastening Korean reunification" is more forward-leaning than Karen Elliott House's editorial, but this argument also founders in several key areas. Like Karen House's argument, Eberstadt overemphasizes the likely influence of US policy in determining whether or not North Korea is able to survive. However, if the United States attempts to hasten Korean reunification but does not have the capacity to succeed, such a

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11 Karen Elliott House, "Let North Korea Collapse," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 1997, p. A14.

policy would be perceived as provocative and would heighten the likelihood of confrontation and conflict.

Eberstadt argues that the risks of delaying reunification may outweigh whatever costs are involved in seeking early reunification. The potential economic and military costs accompanying the likely implosion of North Korea, in his view, should give Western nations pause as they "classify the Korean question as a problem that can be postponed and then muddled through."<sup>12</sup> He argues that the costs of Korea's reunification will only grow as the economic levels of North and South grow further apart, and the North Korean military grows more lethal as reunification is delayed. Eberstadt paints a rather optimistic picture of a "free and united Korea" that "would be a force for stability and prosperity."<sup>13</sup> According to Eberstadt, "A united Korea's foreign policy would likely be moderate and pragmatic,"<sup>14</sup> voluntarily giving up a nuclear weapons option and setting aside decades-old feelings of hostility for Japan.

Although the exercise of considering the possibility of hastening Korean reunification is worth thinking through, Eberstadt provides in the course of his own argument a lengthy list of the major "constraints" that will likely give policy makers pause in applying his policy to the current situation in Asia: "Neither China nor Russia can be counted on to cooperate," "South Korea, Japan, and the United States have already restricted their freedom of movement through the Agreed Framework," "China in particular has reason to appreciate the status quo," "South Korea's transition from a dirigiste system to a fully open market economy is not yet complete," "The 1996 squabble over the disputed Tokdo-Takeshima islands, which culminated in a South Korean military landing on those barren rocks, is exactly the sort

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12 Eberstadt, *Foreign Affairs*, p. 80.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

of distraction that a defense policy for South Korea cannot afford," "With regard to South Korea, the South must begin to think not only about deterrence but about reconciliation."<sup>15</sup> In the unlikely event that these matters have been resolved, Eberstadt's policy recommendation becomes salient. In the meantime, given the weakening economy of the North, in which gas shortages are an obstacle to timely delivery of food shipments, does it make sense to assume that the military has simultaneously been able to squirrel away amounts of money sufficient to fund a continuing covert nuclear weapons program and a missile program?

Although both Eberstadt's and House's arguments are not ultimately convincing, they provide a useful service in drawing attention to the point that not enough attention has been paid to the fact that security and reunification issues have become inextricable elements of US and South Korean policy that are in dire need of comprehensive coordination. While North Korea's leadership has bound itself by its own rope, it has also shown an extraordinary instinct for survival, and in an era in which no external power will actively intervene in North Korea's domestic affairs, the leadership continues to hold its fate in its own hands.

### **Food Crisis**

A related area in which a potential crisis poses difficult choices for American foreign policy is the issue of how to respond to North Korea's food situation. Pyongyang's invitation for the United Nations World Food Programme (UNWPF) to enter the country for the first time in the fall of 1995 following major floods marked a departure in practice from its traditional focus on self-reliance. It was the first time that the reclusive leadership had been willing to accept the assistance and involvement of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-90.

international organizations, and it showed desperation of the situation caused by a mismanaged agricultural system that was unable to provide self-sufficiency in food without heavy doses of agricultural fertilizer and energy inputs that had formerly been received from China and the Soviet Union.

A second year of more minor flooding in 1996 has perpetuated the involvement of the UNWPF and expanded opportunities for long-term involvement by international and non-governmental organizations in meeting North Korea's agricultural needs. The DPRK government found what has gradually become a new constituency in support of donations to meet its food needs that could not be met through the government's own failing resources.

The issue of how food aid should be handled and whether it is necessary to forestall the prospect either of a "silent famine" or the movement of millions of starving North Korean refugees, a major humanitarian crisis-in-the-making, has become a serious issue of debate in policy circles. That debate has intensified as the crop damage from floods has receded as a rationale for North Korea's agricultural failings and the bankruptcy of North Korea's system—literally and figuratively—has come to the fore. Sporadic pressure from a South Korean government skeptical of the extent of North Korean food needs and fostering suspicions that grain reserves continue to be held by the North Korean military has further complicated and politicized the debate over whether and how food aid should be provided to North Korea.

As a question for policy makers, the debate over food for North Korea contains several central components. First, is a decision to give food aid separate from political considerations or is it an inherently political decision? Andrew Natsios castigated the US government for failing to resist external political pressures, calling on the Clinton administration to maintain past practice of separating the food issue from political considerations, citing the Reagan-era doctrine, "a hungry child knows no

politics."<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Bob Manning and Jim Przystup responded in an opinion column entitled "Feed Me Or I'll Kill You" that without military and agricultural reforms in North Korea, requests for food assistance were little more than a North Korean hold-up and shakedown of the international community.<sup>17</sup> James Lilley has charged that the North Korean government's malfeasance in its spending priorities which provide for self-aggrandizement (through the completion of a large pedestrian mall in front of the building where the body of Kim Il Sung lies in state) and for continued military priorities which take up over one-quarter of national GDP should raise serious questions about the North Korean government's qualifications to receive food aid without also helping itself.<sup>18</sup>

Second, should the food issue be approached as a security and a humanitarian issue or should provision of food to North Korea be used as a policy tool, a carrot to induce desired North Korean behavior in exchange for certain types of fundamental reform? If provision of food is both a humanitarian and a security issue, the minimal conditions for delivery might include monitoring to ensure that food is not diverted to the North Korean military or for other unauthorized uses. Provision of food with minimal conditions may also be desirable as a moral choice since the North Korean government is apparently failing to meet the needs of its own people; however, unconditional or minimally conditional food aid runs the risk of being perceived as indirect support or propping up of a despotic regime.

The use of food aid as a carrot, or tool to gain policy leverage, carries its own dilemmas. Regardless of whether food aid is

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16 Andrew Natsios, "Feed North Korea: Don't Play Politics with Hunger," *Washington Post*, 9 February 1997, p. C01.

17 Robert A. Manning and James Przystup, "Feed Me Or I'll Kill You," *Washington Post*, 20 February 1997.

18 James Lilley, Congressional Testimony Before the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, 26 February 1997.

linked to participation in negotiations such as the four-party talks proposal for peace talks made by Presidents Clinton and Kim Young Sam in April of 1996, Pyongyang may use the perception of linkage to create leverage or to attempt to gain undeserved rewards simply for showing up at negotiations in which it has no real intention to engage substantively. On the other hand, using North Korean participation in such negotiations as a condition for provision of food aid may end up being self-defeating or unwittingly create conditions of gridlock in achieving diplomatic objectives because Pyongyang has steadfastly rejected talks whenever there may be perceptions that it is being pressured into making concessions. The issue of leverage may carry additional ramifications if food aid can be used to increase external influence on the DPRK leadership, as some have suggested in the context of North Korea's increased dependence on China for food aid.

The difficulty in coming to grips with a proper policy response to North Korea's food situation lies in the overlap between the humanitarian, economic, and political components of the problem. This food crisis is a classic example of a food shortage caused by politics; however, unlike in Africa where failed state structures or civil wars have been the source of political obstacles to food distribution, North Korea's food shortages arise not from systemic breakdown, but rather from the continued existence of institutional structures of Cold War confrontation combined with the North Korean leadership's own inability to adapt its political system to new circumstances. The result is that it has failed to develop alternative political and economic relationships with new trading partners following collapse of support from traditional allies in Russia and China.

The international community's offer to assist North Korea on a humanitarian basis following the floods of 1995 and 1996 was a proper response to the hardship caused by a natural disaster affecting its food production capacity, but there are practical limits to the capacity of the UNWFP to meet all of North Korea's

needs, which include a substantial structural incapacity to produce enough food for all of its people. Since the program's primary contributions are from governments, a decision to extend assistance beyond the immediate humanitarian need caused by the floods is beyond the mandate of the UNWFP. The expansion of its latest appeal, to 200,000 tons of grain—targeting children in flood affected areas aged six or younger—approaches the limits of what can be justified specifically as a humanitarian response to damage caused by flooding in 1995 and 1996. Even with this expansion on humanitarian grounds, however, the international response to the humanitarian component of North Korea's food crisis has been woefully inadequate.

To an unusual extent, the UNWFP has received support from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who have attempted to respond to the appeal for North Korea. Efforts by South Korean grass-roots organizations and church group coalitions such as the Korean Sharing Movement have been particularly notable for such efforts. Although the Pyongyang leadership has continued to limit access by NGOs, responses by these organizations should be encouraged. If possible, direct NGO access to North Korea should be expanded, although the UNWFP is a suitable conduit for provision of nongovernmental aid in response to North Korean appeals. The Seoul government and other governments should encourage, not oppose, grass-roots NGO efforts to respond to North Korea's humanitarian crisis. A truly nongovernmental response organized through South Korean grass-roots NGO and civic groups should not be limited by politics; in fact, their access to North Korean counterparts on a people-to-people basis should be encouraged.

Unfortunately, any humanitarian response to the massive food shortfall caused by North Korea's agricultural inefficiencies will serve only as a band-aid approach unless fundamental political and economic obstacles are also addressed. It should be clear that this food crisis is not an agricultural problem, but rather an economic problem and a political problem. Economic reforms on



the part of the North Korean government are a necessary and inevitable part of a comprehensive response to solve the food problem, but the leadership in Pyongyang has little motivation to embark on a course of reform without assurances of the benefits that come with economic integration. One approach might be to link the economic integration of North Korea into the international economic system with a response to the food issue. Such an approach might involve negotiations with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank to provide steadily expanding food credits and technical assistance in agricultural production methods to North Korean economic transparency and other reforms.

Although the policy approach of linking food to the four-party talks is a less desirable approach and one that is uncomfortable for American policy makers who might prefer to avoid the perception that food is being used as a weapon, President Kim Young Sam's government clearly established a linkage between food aid and Pyongyang's response to the four-party talks proposal in his August 1996 Liberation Day speech. The ROK Ministry of National Unification has offered periodic public statements that South Korea's response to North Korea's difficulties would be "generous," if only it would come to the negotiating table. Indeed, in negotiations held in April 1997, at which the DPRK was to give a response to the four-party talks, the major sticking points were not whether it would come or the agenda and protocol for the talks, but how much food aid Seoul would give and when.

Indeed, there are several difficulties with the linkage of food aid to the four-party peace talks on the Korean peninsula. First, it has become clear that for political reasons South Korea's provision of food necessarily must be linked to substantive progress in such talks, not simply to process, i.e., whether the North Koreans show up. They recognize and are wary of the vagaries of South Korea's domestic opinion and, as a result, require concrete assurances from the ROK government. Second,

the agenda for the talks may take years to negotiate because substantive progress on tension reduction and military draw downs will be necessary in order to achieve a lasting peace on the peninsula. All this could conceivably take place in the absence of economic reform, leaving South Korea in the position of effectively subsidizing a substantial North Korean food bill without addressing the core of the problem. Third, a long-term program of food aid is not politically sustainable even in South Korea, where the generosity of the citizens to their Northern neighbors may prove short-lived if it appears that the Seoul government is trading negotiations on political issues for a North Korean "welfare program."

Finally, given the dire reports of the UN World Food Programme and others that North Korea faces a food shortfall of one to two million tons in 1997, the parameters of the food debate might easily change if there are more visible manifestations of crisis, in which high uncertainty and narrowing options might tempt the United States and others to push food aid as a means by which to prevent the spread of instability beyond North Korean borders. In this event, the "carrot" of food aid may turn out to be a dwindling asset as a negotiating chit, or even a liability as a smoke screen that prevents the settlement of the more fundamental issue of structural reform.

### **Managing US-South Korean Relations**

A third challenge for US policy that might result from a crisis on the Korean peninsula is the task of managing US-ROK relations. Despite close coordination between the two governments and the existence of clearly defined, shared national interests at the foundation of a decades-long security relationship, public perceptions of major political differences have surfaced repeatedly on aspects of policy coordination on North Korea. To a certain extent, friction over policy nuances may actually be a reflection of the closeness of policy coordination

between the two governments; frictions may also result from the magnitude of the challenges presented in managing the changes that accompany North Korea's extreme vulnerability. In recent years, crises have brought tensions to the surface as the United States and South Korea have attempted to reconcile differences in their relative priorities.

Frustrations on either side have been reflected in a variety of ways. First, unresolvable internal differences within the South Korean policy community on how to deal with North Korea have occasionally spilled over to create sensitivities on aspects of American policy toward North Korea. Despite rhetorical support for a shared policy of pursuing a soft landing, actions and statements by some South Korean policy makers, even including President Kim Young Sam, have appeared to deviate from this position, suggesting policy inconsistency, division, and disarray which reflects the fragility of policy consensus on how to deal with the North.

The frustrations of individual American officials with the fluctuations in South Korean policy and its extraordinary attentiveness to even minor changes in the political mood of the South Korean public has occasionally been reflected in accurate but impolitic comments to the media. The *New York Times* quoted an unnamed US official as calling South Korea a "headache" to deal with<sup>19</sup> and the *Washington Post* reported that North Korean counterparts are sometimes easier to deal with than South Korean allies.<sup>20</sup> A New York Times editorial emphasized the need to work closely with the Seoul government on major policy toward the North, but then proceeded to skewer South Korea for not being more cooperative in dealings with the North.<sup>21</sup> US

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19 Nicholas D. Kristoff, "How A Stalled Submarine Sank North Korea's Hopes," *New York Times*, 17 November 1996.

20 Jeffrey Smith, "Korean Talks Jeopardized by New Tensions; U.S. Opening to North Strains Relations with South," *Washington Post*, 17 February 1997.

21 "Korea: Friend or Foe?" *New York Times*, 21 February 1997.

official concerns over the possibility that the ROK military could be tempted to go North in the event of instability or suspicions that South Korea has not shared contingency plans with the United States are concrete manifestations of fraying at the edges, as are persistent and unfounded South Korean fears that the United States may seek to cut a special deal with North Korea behind the backs of allies in Seoul. The latest Special Report from the US Institute of Peace underscored the need for close policy coordination at the highest levels to forestall perceptions that there may be gaps in US-ROK cooperation and to cope with the potentially vast challenges resulting from any potential crisis in North Korea.<sup>22</sup>

The issue of managing an improved relationship between the United States and North Korea while also facilitating improved North-South relations will remain the biggest challenge for US-South Korean relations. It is clear that North-South dialogue is a practical requirement both for improving US-North Korean relations and for maintaining harmony in US-South Korean relations. In this respect, the diplomatic challenge for the United States is to balance the roles of ally and facilitator of tension reduction on the Korean peninsula. One analogy might be the situation the United States faces as both a friend of Israel and as a guarantor of peace arrangements between Israel and the Palestinian authorities. The *Middle East analogy*, however, suggests that caution, skill, and sustained high-level attention to a negotiation process are prerequisites for a US role in facilitating the success of a peace process on the Korean peninsula.

In a *Foreign Policy* article entitled "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea,"<sup>23</sup> Selig Harrison has suggested that the United States

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22 Scott Snyder, "A Coming Crisis on the Korean Peninsula? The Food Crisis, Economic Decline, and Political Considerations," USIP Special Report, October 1996.

23 Selig S. Harrison, "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea," *Foreign Policy*, Number 106, Spring 1997, pp. 57-76.

has failed to meet its commitments to lessen the economic embargo against North Korea in the Geneva Agreed Framework, that the United States should take more seriously North Korean proposals for an interim peace arrangement, that the United States establish a date certain for US troop withdrawal from South Korea within ten years, and that the United States play an "honest broker" role in negotiating a peace between North and South Korea. Assessing the utility of each of these recommendations requires an examination of US interests in the context of US-South Korean relations; while such an approach shows due appreciation for shared interests and values developed over five decades between Washington and Seoul, such a perspective should not be construed as meaning that Seoul holds a veto over US policy toward the Korean peninsula.

The Clinton administration appears to have overestimated the extent to which lessening of the economic embargo under the Agreed Framework would be sensitive on Capitol Hill or in Seoul; however, a complete lifting of the economic embargo is clearly politically impossible without major changes in the security environment on the peninsula. It may also be a miscalculation to believe that the possibility of lifting the economic embargo is a strong inducement for positive action to a North Korean leadership which believes that political benefits must accrue before economic changes are possible.

An honest broker role for the United States is not necessarily helpful in establishing North-South dialogue if the United States is perceived as "standing between" Seoul and Pyongyang; rather, the United States must stand aside and push both parties toward each other if the necessary political conditions are to be created for real progress in tension reduction between the two Koreas that is necessary for improved US-DPRK relations.

The four-party talks proposal by President Clinton and President Kim Young Sam has provided a useful political context for US-South Korean consultation on how to engage Pyongyang in a substantive dialogue on security issues; it also provides the

North with an opportunity to present its concerns regarding security issues to both Washington and Seoul. If the four-party talks are realized, the danger is that tactical differences between the United States and South Korea in negotiating with North Korea might provide additional challenges for US-ROK coordination. Such challenges will require political attention at the highest levels if the four-party talks are to move forward substantively.

Finally, the issue of troop reductions is an important one for the United States and South Korea, but it is a future issue that must be evaluated in the context of reduced tensions on the Korean peninsula and pragmatic assessments of how respective national interests are affected by changes in the regional security environment in Northeast Asia following a successful management of the North Korean threat, not as the result of an artificial deadline. The process of tension reduction and possible reunification will shape the context for a debate on the future of the US-ROK security alliance in Northeast Asia; it is difficult to imagine that given the possibility of tensions among other powers in the region that Korea will want to terminate a security alliance with the United States following reunification, though the structure of such a relationship remains difficult to predict without a clearer picture of specific circumstances.

The immediate challenge of managing US-South Korean relations and of insulating shared core interests from the effects of potential crisis in the North will be even more important given the political competition in the South Korean presidential campaign during the rest of 1997. During the political season in Seoul, the best that policy makers can hope is that it will be possible to contain fallout from the presidential campaign and prevent the possibility of a negative cycle or downward spiral in inter-Korean relations and in US-South Korean relations in the event of renewed crisis on the Korean peninsula.

Coordination between the United States and South Korea on a long-term basis is necessary in order to manage the process of

tension reduction and peaceful Korean reunification. The quality and nature of US-South Korean consultation to manage periods of crisis on the Korean peninsula in the coming years will be the major determinant in shaping the nature and basis for a continuing relationship consistent with shared national interests in the post-reunification era.

## Conclusions

The task of managing US policy toward the Korean peninsula has been full of "drama and catastrophe"<sup>24</sup> as the United States and South Korea have seemingly moved from crisis to crisis in dealings with North Korea in recent years. In fact, the periodic escalation and management of crisis turns out to be characteristic of a regular state of affairs in dealing with North Korea. As such, "crisis" is a necessary and even integral part of US-Korean relations, and can even be constructive if it is anticipated and carefully managed. Although the opaque nature of North Korean society increases the uncertainty of policy makers and induces a greater sense of crisis in responding to North Korean actions, there is sufficient information available from the experience of dealing with the DPRK in crisis situations to draw some preliminary conclusions regarding crisis and North Korean behavior.

The North Korean leadership has used crisis diplomacy as an instrument of negotiation in order to limit the perceived alternatives of the negotiating counterpart and to force the counterpart to give in to its own demands. A proper response to North Korea's crisis-driven policies requires a forward-looking, proactive policy and the foresight to take the initiative rather than simply to be reactive. Unexpected changes or crises have also brought North Korea to the negotiating table and have created, at least temporarily, an atmosphere in which North Korean concessions or agreements are possible; however, once the atmo-

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24 Author interview with a US government official, December 1996.

sphere has stabilized North Korea may return to an uncompromising political stance. As conditions in North Korea continue to decline, the possibility grows that it may for the first time face a crisis that is beyond the capability of the leadership to manage, possibly resulting in the disintegration or destabilization of the leadership's ability to meet the difficult challenges it faces, resulting in regime transition and even the possibility of a collapse of the DPRK system.

The prospects of instability resulting from such a collapse are a relatively new factor for consideration in American policy toward Korea, which for almost five decades has focused primarily on deterrence to prevent instability resulting from North Korean aggression. Such a possibility requires contingency planning on a wide variety of fronts. The rhythms and rituals of a crisis-driven process on the Korean peninsula carry a major risk: they may lull policy makers into a sense of false comfort, requiring parties that apparently need a sense of crisis in order to engage in diplomatic efforts to take even more dangerous risks before coming to grips with problems. The dilemmas of setting the relative priorities of maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula versus achieving reunification, managing the North Korean food crisis, and maintaining US-ROK relations are the primary areas in which a crisis might force American policy makers to face up to difficult choices.

In the meantime, the DPRK government remains as the primary authority in North Korea and the entity with which the United States and South Korea must work to manage tensions and reduce the risk of war. The job of mixed strategy of diplomacy and military deterrence—if properly implemented—is to influence the process of change where possible by making the choices of the North Korean leadership more complex. This can be done by fashioning both a more strict as well as more generous policy. Such US-South Korean joint policy might explicitly embrace simultaneous steps toward cooperation on fundamental issues such as the need to promote inter-Korean



reconciliation and exchange in return for economic transparency and conventional arms drawdowns. At the same time, the United States and South Korea must maintain deterrence and prepare for contingencies resulting from crises that are beyond the control of the North Korean leadership.