
South Korean Leaders: Repeating the Mistakes of the Past

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Barack Obama has given hope to progressives and despair to conservatives in the United States and South Korea. Yet, in the United States, the Republican Party failed in its reelection bid, while in South Korea, the neoconservative New Right Party is gaining in power. This convergence of events suggests that the U.S. approach to North Korea could soon conflict with the major policy line on the North held by the current South Korean administration. As things evolve, the United States could eventually develop a closer relationship with North Korea, while coming into conflict with the concerns of the South.

The Roh Tae-woo Administration's Active Diplomacy

After the United States had its first talks with North Korea in January 1992 in New York, a triad consisting of the North, the South and the United States began to take shape. The Roh Tae-woo administration led an active diplomatic policy toward North Korea, one aspect of which involved a high-level summit between North and South in September 1990 that allowed South Korea to assert its leadership in inter-Korean affairs, including the North Korean nuclear issue.

When U.S. Secretary of State James Baker suggested a "two plus four" conference, in which the countries of South and North Korea plus China, Japan, Russia and the United States would be involved, South Korea refused for fear of losing its leading role. The United States also requested that South Korea commit to being a non-nuclear state. In response, however, the Roh administration proclaimed the Korean Peninsula would denuclearize of its own accord and established the Nuclear Control Committee.

The Roh Tae-woo administration took a leading role in North Korea policy in that South Korea was not passively acquiescent to U.S. diplomacy. At the end of his administration, however, hard-liners close to Kim Young-sam, who was the leading presidential candidate at the time, objected to the Roh administration's independent stance on North Korea policy. After Kim took office, Roh's diplomatic achievements ultimately came to nothing.

Kim Young-sam's Unexpected Statement Touches Off a Firestorm in the United States

President Lee Myung-bak's current inconsistent strategy for the North Korean nuclear issue is reminiscent of President Kim Young-sam's confused policy toward North Korea. In November 1993, an episode occurred at the U.S.-South Korea summit. When President Bill Clinton tried to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea, the Kim Young-sam administration politicized the issue, resulting in a political and philosophical clash with the United States.

In an effort to negotiate with North Korea, the United States was pursuing a "comprehensive" approach to its North Korea policy that called for resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and normalization of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The United States would cease participation in its annual Team Spirit military training exercises in exchange for a "package deal" in which North Korea would allow for inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

At the U.S.–South Korea summit in November 1993, however, Kim said that he disagreed with the comprehensive approach despite the success of working–level negotiations leading up to the summit that had involved a great deal of diplomatic maneuvering between the U.S. National Security Council, the Department of State and the South Korean negotiators. Kim's unexpected objections to the policy upset Clinton, and South Korean and U.S. representatives were forced to make amends with language describing the policy as a "thorough and broad approach."

The Reason for U.S Secretary's Phone Call at 2 o'clock in the Morning

Why did Kim violate the diplomatic code of conduct? When Foreign Minister Han Seung–joo explained the comprehensive approach at a meeting of Korean officials prior to the summit, South Korea's UN Ambassador Yoo Chong–ha, who had been invited by Chief Presidential Secretary Park Kwan–yong, voiced his opposition to the idea of IAEA inspections and instead insisted on an investigation conducted by both North and South. Robert Gallucci, who was the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State at the time, said in his book "Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis" that Yoo had secretly conveyed his hard–line opinion on North Korea to President Kim before the summit meeting (2004: 134–135), a fact that became apparent at the summit, when his behavior demonstrated that he had accepted Yoo's advice completely. As Yoo is now one of President Lee's top foreign policy advisers, Lee can be expected to follow President Kim's unexpected erratic behavior.

Kim resisted Clinton's offers during the first Korea–U.S summit. Until then, Korean presidents had never shown any signs of disobeying a U.S. president. Kim was satisfied with, and proud of, the summit's results. However, high–ranking U.S.

officials were disappointed by the unexpected behavior of the South Korean government. Following the summit, the U.S.–South Korea relationship grew discordant.

On October 8, 1994, The New York Times conducted an interview with Kim in which he addressed the possibility of North Korea's early collapse, his opposition to the U.S.–North Korea negotiations, and extension of North Korea's regime as effected by the U.S. policy of appeasement. Kim also said that the United States had been deceived by North Korea and in so doing took direct aim at the Clinton administration. As soon as the interview appeared, U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher called South Korean presidential chief of staff Han Seung–su at 2:00 a.m. (KST) to say that Clinton and other government officials were infuriated by Kim's remarks.

In a few days, James T. Laney, then U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, met secretly with Kim. Laney entreated Kim to show a consistent attitude as a leader that was not influenced by the media. However, Kim told Laney that he was worried about South Korea's isolation relative to the progress supposedly being made between the United States and North Korea. South Korea had made a great deal of effort to participate in the 1994 Agreed Framework signed between the United States and North Korea in Geneva in 1994 and revive the dialogue between North and South by offering to provide the bulk of the funds for construction of two light–water reactors.

A History of U.S.–South Korea Conflict

The United States employed a strategy of brinkmanship to broker the deal because it saw South Korean cooperation as essential to its being signed. Kang Suk–ju, North Korea's envoy to the talks, insisted stubbornly that there was no room for inter–Korean relations in the U.S.–North Korea agreement. This confused U.S. negotiators, who could not understand both North Korea's antagonism toward the South and South Korea's request for the addition of an article on inter–Korean dialogue. The United States thought that the South Korean president had easy access to North Korea just as Roh Tae–woo had. In the end, after the United States broke off the agreement, taking a resolute stand, an

ambiguous sentence was inserted into the agreement that said that if the Agreed Framework brought about an atmosphere in which dialogue between North and South became possible, North Korea would participate in inter-Korean talks. However, South Korea did not arrange any meetings with the North for the next five years and its conflicts with the United States became more frequent.

After President Kim Dae-jung took office, South Korea made a significant effort to improve its relationship with the United States. At that time, the U.S. Congress, dominated by the Republican Party, requested that the Clinton administration reconsider the U.S. policy on North Korea and sliced its contribution to the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization budget for fiscal year 1999. This effectively stopped shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea, as promised under the accord, which meant the Geneva agreement came close to being annulled.

President Clinton then appointed U.S. Secretary of Defense William James Perry, who was trusted by Republican hard-liners, to negotiate for the United States in its policy on North Korea. In his first meeting with South Korean Unification Minister Lim Dong-won and President Kim in Seoul, Perry, who believed that the North Korean nuclear issue, would not be resolved unless the Cold War ended on the Korea Peninsula, found himself disagreeing with the South Koreans. After seven meetings with Lim, however, Perry submitted a report to the Congress in which he advocated for Korea's stance on the issue.

At the U.S.-South Korea summit in June 1998, Clinton asserted that the United States had given the authority to handle the North Korean nuclear issue to South Korea. Nevertheless, the United States could not keep that promise and develop a relationship with North Korea at the same time. U.S.-North Korea relations have been tense since Al Gore, the U.S. Democratic presidential candidate, failed to win election in 2000.

A Decisive Obstacle to the Comprehensive Approach

The Obama administration plans to take a comprehensive approach to U.S. policy on North Korea. The apparent willingness of Obama's foreign policy team to

negotiate with North Korea is linked to the current situation in the United States. With the world having moved away from U.S. unilateralism, and toward a more multilateral approach to world affairs, one of the primary roles for the United States in the areas of diplomacy and security in the interim will be to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Obama's foreign policy team appears to regard the North Korean nuclear issue as the front line for nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East and the third world. Realists in the Republican Party, such as Henry Kissinger, also agree that resolving the North Korean nuclear issue could have a positive influence on non-proliferation efforts in the rest of the world. Thus, it seems as though the major political parties would be in agreement with the comprehensive approach Obama is likely to employ with regard to North Korea.

A decisive obstacle is South Korean conservative government. There are still some Korean officials who are insisting that the Lee administration follow Kim Young-sam's hard-line policy. However, Obama's North Korea policy is certain to differ from that of the Clinton administration, which was heavily dependant on South Korean cooperation, even if Clinton ultimately became frustrated with, and disappointed by, the Korean government's actions. It is for this reason that the Lee administration should not try to follow Kim Young-sam's policy line on North Korea, which is largely regarded as an outdated paradigm.