The United States, North Korea and South Korea

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Abstract

The recent announcement that the US will resume talks with North Korea represents another chapter in the roller-coaster ride of the first two years of the Bush administration. After a bumpy initial summit with President Kim Dae Jung, the completion of the US policy review last June brought a sigh of relief, in part because the summit had drastically lowered expectations that the new administration would even continue a policy of engaging Pyongyang. The outcome was certainly not as bad as some experts expected but pointed to a difficult road ahead. While the administration professed to be willing to meet anywhere, anytime, the president's Axis of Evil speech in January once again heightened fears about America's intentions. So did the administration's refusal to certify that the North Koreans were complying with the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework. But now with the agreement to resume talks, US-North Korean relations may be entering a new phase. Whether these talks show a bottoming out of the relationship or a 'dead cat bounce' remains unclear.

The resumption of these talks at the same time as the two Koreas seem poised to resume contacts makes for a complicated situation. While the recent visit of President Bush to Seoul did much to ease the troubled bilateral relationship, the potential for problems remains, both during the remainder of President Kim Dae Jung's term in office and beyond, as the two allies once again try to reengage Pyongyang. That potential will be acute if North Korea seeks rapid progress in its relationship with Seoul, but the chances of that seem minimal.
American Policy

The Bush administration’s approach to North Korea should have come as no surprise given past Republican attitudes. Criticism of the Clinton administration may have been in part politically motivated, but it is also the result of a more skeptical attitude towards engagement with Pyongyang. Republican skepticism was particularly vehement during the 1994 North Korea nuclear crisis when harsh critics called the administration’s policy appeasement. Other themes expressed during and since the crisis include (1) the Clinton administration did not bargain hard enough with the North; (2) insufficient attention was paid to North-South dialogue; (3) bad behavior was rewarded; (4) North Korea has been secretly continuing its nuclear weapons program; (5) the United States has been willing to pay for process, not results and; 6) the administration rushed recklessly towards agreement with the North. All of these criticisms have been reflected in the Bush administration’s public emphasis on greater “reciprocity” as well as verification with any US-North Korean agreements reached with Pyongyang, and its “go slow” approach leavened with a healthy dose of moral outrage at the North Korean political system.

That does not mean that Republican views have been uniform. Most analysts forget that the policy of engagement with North Korea in fact began under the Reagan administration and was continued under the previous Bush administration. The “Modest Initiative” under President Reagan was the first step towards engagement of North Korea. Under the last Bush administration, various economic sanctions were lifted for humanitarian reasons and plans were in place for improving relations if the North took steps to alleviate international concerns about its nuclear program.

In effect, this administration reflects these two approaches. It has been essentially split between “pragmatists” and “ideologues,” on a range of foreign policy issues, including North Korea. Pragmatists, such as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, are centered in the Department of State. Almost all regional experts on Asia, although Deputy Secretary Armitage has an extensive background on security policy, tend to support more continuity than change in US policy and see the possibility for progress through dialogue. It is worth noting, however,
that these “pragmatists” are still more conservative than moderates in the last administration. All seem to support the “go-slow” approach, share a distaste for the Clinton administration’s efforts, but see some advantage to broadening the security dialogue with the North. For example, Deputy Secretary Armitage is known to be particularly concerned about the North’s threatening conventional forces.

“Ideologues,” located throughout the administration, include regional experts in other bureaucracies but are predominately security experts. Even at the State Department, Undersecretary of State for International Security Affairs John Bolton is decidedly conservative on security issues and senior officials working for him also fit that mold. The White House and Pentagon are dominated by officials who profoundly distrust North Korea or are strong supporters of National Missile Defense (NMD). This camp is much more skeptical about the prospects for diplomatic progress with the North and has supported taking a new, much tougher direction in US policy.

While “pragmatists” in the Bush administration may be experienced, a number of factors work to limit their influence. First, Washington is mainly concerned about security issues including North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missiles and conventional forces. These are issues that most regional experts know little about. In the State Department, there is almost no expertise on security issues in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the home of the Department’s regional experts. Consequently, the Bureau’s of Non-Proliferation Affairs and Arms Control as well as the undersecretary in charge of them, John Bolton, are important players when these issues are discussed. In short, given the centrality of security issues to US–North Korean affairs and the lack of expertise among most regional experts, the ideologues will have a lot of say about US policy.

Second, senior pragmatists may be unwilling to play an active, ongoing and positive role in the formulation of North Korea policy. Decision-makers deal with a broad range of foreign policy concerns. In an essentially conservative administration where the policy struggle may take place daily on a variety of issues, pragmatists will be forced to pick and choose those where they will fight for their views and others where they will live to fight another day. The Bush administration’s North Korea policy may not be an issue where pragmatists are willing to carry on a
constant struggle, particularly given the predominately skeptical Republican view of North Korea. One caveat is they may be energized through outside interventions, for example, when they believe that alliance relationships are at risk or their perspective is actively supported by close allies, in this case South Korea and to a lesser degree Japan.

Finally, the administration is not structured to insure that the pragmatists can assert tighter control over policy. Assistant Secretary Kelly has been the administration’s point person on North Korea but that does not mean his views will prevail. He is one of many assistant secretaries in the US government who have an interest in North Korea. Moreover, there are other officials senior to him but below the Cabinet level who are likely to be involved in policy-making. Finally, as Assistant Secretary in charge of East Asian affairs, he is also responsible for US policy towards China, Japan and Indonesia and that requires his close attention. In short, like assistant secretaries in the Clinton administration, he may find that he has neither the time nor the bureaucratic energy to push his own views on North Korea. Ambassador Pritchard, the chief US negotiator, is even more junior than Kelly and less likely to fill that role although the resumption of talks with Pyongyang may bolster his bureaucratic influence.

The terrorist attacks in New York and Washington have done little to alter these fundamental facts. They certainly have worked to undermine the trend towards “unilateralism” in the administration’s foreign policy that has been championed by the ideologue camp. In that sense, pragmatic views inside the administration may become stronger. However, this trend is unlikely to be translated into a more pragmatic approach towards North Korea given its continued status as a “terrorist state” and the administration’s skeptical views towards Pyongyang. Rather, administration policy will continue to represent a combination of bluster and moderation, the result of compromises between bureaucratic entities as well as a reflection of previous Republican attitudes.

Given this prevailing situation, the Bush review should be seen as an attempt to meld together the pragmatist and ideologue perspectives. The outcome does not include some of the more extreme positions, such as not restarting talks with the North or dumping the KEDO nuclear reactors in favor of conventional power plants. But it also does not represent just a continuation of the Clinton administration policy. Rather, it repre-
sents a significant toughening of that policy.\footnote{For a more detailed examination of the Bush administration's policy, see Victor Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis," \textit{Foreign Affairs}, Vol. 81, No. 3 (May/June 2002).}

This situation has been reflected time and time again in the administration's approach to North Korea. The Bush policy review did not decide to scrap the Agreed Framework as some ideologues would have liked. However, the administration has made the acceleration of key provisions in the agreement related to the IAEA examination of North Korea's nuclear program a key component of its policy. Second, the administration's emphasis on verification will likely be translated into a tough position on monitoring any comprehensive missile deal, probably based on past US-Soviet arms control agreements that require extremely intrusive measures. Third, it has emphasized the need to actively address a wide-ranging agenda in dealing with North Korea, not just conventional weapons but also other non-security issues such as human rights. Finally, the administration's recent decision not to certify North Korean compliance with the Agreed Framework but also to exercise the presidential waiver in order to allow funding to continue represents a classic bureaucratic compromise between ideologues and pragmatists.

The Negotiation Wild Card

Does the recent agreement to resume talks represent the beginning of a new phase in the US-North Korean relationship? The answer is arguably yes but the key question is what will be the exact nature of that new phase. Is it an important turning point that might lead to further progress in the future or what Americans call a “dead cat bounce,” namely a relationship that is only momentarily improving after reaching new lows. Much depends on the two actors entering this brave new world.

There are three possible explanations why North Korea decided to restart negotiations. As always, it is difficult to tell whether one explanation is better than the other. The real answer may be a combination of all three. They are:

- Pyongyng was reacting to the pressure generated by Washington’s “hard line” policies. The theory is that the Bush
administration’s tough posture towards Pyongyang, including the President’s Axis of Evil speech, worked. Contrary to blocking any chance of diplomatic progress, the administration’s approach—particularly its reaction to 9/11, the war in Afghanistan and the dramatic precision of its modern weapons—has worried Kim Jong-il. This theory was reinforced by the South Korean Foreign Minister, who is reported to have said during a recent trip to Washington, “sometimes carrying a big stick works in forcing North Korea to come forward.” As a result, the North Koreans moved quickly to restart talks with the Bush administration. There also seems to be ample historical precedent that North Korea, when faced with strong external pressures, often seeks to squirm out of difficult spots by rapidly switching from “tough” approach to “soft.”

• **Pyongyang restarted talks with the United States, South Korea and Japan to gain further economic/food benefits in anticipation of a difficult year ahead.** The “big stick” may have convinced North Korea to seek a resumption of talks. But, according to this view, Pyongyang probably would have resumed talks anyway given its economic difficulties, particularly its food shortage. While the United States continues to provide food aid for North Korea on a humanitarian basis, donor fatigue has clearly set in. Moreover, Washington can no longer be counted on to make active diplomatic presentations to other countries to contribute. As a result, this year’s World Food Program appeal for North Korea will fall some 300,000 tons short of its targets and distributions will end in June. Under these circumstances, the wise move for Pyongyang would be to “open the spigot.” That requires restarting talks with South Korea and Japan—two potential sources of further assistance—and the United States whose political acquiescence is seen by Pyongyang as key to allowing these discussions to move forward.

• **North Korea had its own internal strategy for resuming talks not dependent on external events.** According to this view, North Korea has been trying to reengage the United States for some time, even before 9/11 and the Axis of Evil speech, perhaps dating back to the

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announcement that the Bush administration’s policy review was completed in June. In this context, it can be argued that the Axis of Evil speech was a momentary setback for rather than a cause of its recent overture. While the North Koreans certainly have substantive differences with Washington, the June announcement created a significant problem for Pyongyang. From its perspective, the announcement had the appearance of Washington’s summoning North Korea to talks. Since that was unacceptable, the North Koreans have been looking for a bridging mechanism to save face and resume discussions. One idea that would have made this possible was a reprise of something like Secretary Perry’s trip to Pyongyang in June 1999. The planned visit to North Korea of four American ex-ambassadors to South Korea seemed designed to fulfill this function. However, the “Axis of Evil” speech made it impossible for Pyongyang to move in its immediate aftermath and resulted in the cancellation of that trip. The recent visit of the South Korean special envoy to Pyongyang has evidently served as a substitute for the visit of the Americans.

While it is difficult to judge which one of these theories was the prime motivation for North Korea’s recent moves, each one has implications for the new phase in US-North Korean relations. The first two see North Korean foreign policy as purely tactical. When faced with pressure and adverse circumstances, Pyongyang will take whatever actions may be necessary to deal with the immediate situation. In this case, the right tactical move was to take positive steps designed to relieve the outside pressure and, as a by-product of that move, hopefully to gain outside assistance. This approach has already gained positive results in the form of additional South Korean assistance for Pyongyang as the quid for reinvigorating North-South contacts.

The third theory adds an additional layer. It recognizes that North Korean foreign policy is driven by an underlying strategy—the same strategy Pyongyang has been pursuing since the late 1980’s and the collapse of the Soviet Union—of improving its relationship with the United States. The objectives of this strategy have been well known, to guarantee the transition from Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong-il, and since the Great Leader’s death, to sustain the North Korean way of life. But this theory also recognizes a critical fact of life in understanding North Korean policy, that it is both strategic and tactical at the same time. It is
not just the pursuit of better relations with the United States that is important. The terms of engagement, not only solutions to specific issues, are just as important for a small country in what it believes is a life and death struggle with the world’s only superpower. That explains why Pyongyang often seems to be keeping Washington at arm’s length. If the terms of engagement are not right and may put Pyongyang at a disadvantage, then North Korea will not play ball.

This view also offers some hope for the future. From North Korea’s perspective, the Bush administration represents both dangers and opportunities. The danger is that the administration is not really serious about engagement. It has a hidden, hostile agenda reflected in remarks by US officials starting with President Bush at the March 2001 summit and continuing through his Axis of Evil speech, as well as in actions such as not certifying compliance with the Agreed Framework. The opportunity is that, if the administration is serious, new demands by the United States may open the door for further demands by Pyongyang and that might lead to new benefits. The North’s initially cautious reaction to the Bush administration and its agenda was predictable. Pyongyang can often move quickly when it is ready but frequently takes months to mull over new strategic developments that may or may not require important policy shifts.

In this context, negotiations can potentially serve to further Pyongyang’s education. While North Korea has agreed to restart talks with Washington, it will be looking to broaden its database on whether this administration represents a danger or an opportunity through these negotiations. Up until now, Pyongyang has had to rely on US public statements, infrequent low-level contacts in the New York channel, observations from afar about the general course of the administration’s foreign policy and whatever other sources of information it might have to arrive at tentative conclusions. The result has been a set of mixed signals about American intentions that have only reinforced different views in Pyongyang. Negotiations will provide North Korea with a new, more intense and regular source of information to help it better understand the administration’s intentions. In short, they could prove critical in shaping its future course of action.

Negotiations can also serve an educational function for the Bush administration. Ideologues and “moderates” have their own core beliefs
about North Korea that the administration’s policy has sought to encompass in a series of moves. Those core beliefs may be based on many factors—ideology, dislike of the Clinton administration, recognition of the importance of South Korea and Japan—but direct contact with Pyongyang is not one. While many current officials previously worked in the Reagan and Bush-I administrations, both responsible for the first tentative steps in improving relations with the North Koreans, those steps did not include sustained contacts. The core beliefs of administration officials may be difficult to change but the start of negotiations with North Korea will at least provide American decision-makers with a new and potentially valuable source of data that they can use to further evaluate Pyongyang.

However, besides preconceived notions about Pyongyang, the United States will have a practical problem in evaluating the new negotiating data. The Bush administration has sought to cast off not only any public semblance between its policies and the Clinton administration but has also literally stripped the American government of eight years of experience in dealing with Pyongyang. While that may have been unavoidable, even in the best of times understanding North Korea has been akin to speaking some rare ancient dialect. That experience resided in a small core group of experts who had spent hundreds of hours negotiating and working with the North Koreans for almost a decade. Ambassador Pritchard is perhaps the only US official left with such experience through his stint on the National Security Council during the Clinton administration’s second term. At the very least, redeveloping this expertise will take time, effort and constant contact with the North Koreans.

The “educational” value of talks may also be limited by the lack of a direct transmission belt to senior American officials. One lesson of the Clinton administration was that policy functioned best when the lead official dealing with North Korea had access to the most senior policy-making officials in Washington. For example, during the 1994 nuclear crisis, Ambassador Robert Gallucci—the administration point man—regularly attended Cabinet-level meetings where he could bring his experience to bare. The same was true at the end of the administration for Secretary Perry and Wendy Sherman, the US policy coordinator. While negotiations may enhance Ambassador Pritchard’s bureaucratic
status, he is a much lower-level official than his predecessors. His access may remain limited and, therefore, so may the impact of the negotiations on the administration's overall perceptions of North Korea.

At this stage, it is hard to predict whether the new ingredient of face-to-face negotiations will eventually fuel an improvement in US-North Korean relations. Difficult differences remain over substance and form. For example, the Bush administration seems intent on accelerating inspection provisions of the 1994 Agreed Framework in a unilateral reinterpretation of that arrangement. Certifying that North Korea is a non-nuclear state sooner than might happen under the terms of that agreement has a certain logic. But at some point the administration will have to confront reality and be willing to provide inducements to secure Pyongyang's agreement. The administration is also determined to seek a comprehensive agreement covering its political, security and economic concerns in an effort to avoid North Korea's "cherry picking." The theory is that Pyongyang should not be allowed to secure greater benefits through a series of piecemeal agreements. But once again, in reality from a practical perspective, the administration may have to acquiesce in a series of practical agreements that in substance if not in appearance fall short of comprehensive. For example, the 1994 agreement focuses on the nuclear issue but also includes less well-developed clauses covering a broad range of political, economic and security matters.

On top of the difficult issues that must be addressed, it will take time and a great deal of effort for each government to process the "signals" sent by the other side. In part this is because of different perspectives on the bilateral relationship in Pyongyang and Washington. Also, the danger of miscommunication and misunderstanding is still acute. While North Korea has built up a group of seasoned diplomats experienced in dealing with the United States, the lack of experience on the American side in dealing directly with Pyongyang could prove to be an added complication. At the very least, patient efforts will be needed to clear away the existing underbrush built up over the past year in order to build a foundation for moving forward. Actually making the compromises that will eventually be necessary for progress will prove more difficult.

As a result, the danger that US-North Korean negotiations will lead nowhere is real. For the outside observer, one important indicator in
discerning the seriousness of the discussion will be the pace of talks. Ambassador Pritchard’s initial visit to Pyongyang will essentially serve the same function as Secretary Perry’s visit in June 1999, to educate North Korean leaders on US policy. But the follow up discussions will prove critical. Past negotiations fall into different categories. At one end of the spectrum, the US-North Korean missile talks, at least until the end of the Clinton administration, took place at a rate of approximately one meeting per year, hardly sufficient to result in any serious progress. At the other end of the spectrum, negotiations leading up to the Agreed Framework in 1994 and the 1999 agreement on access to the suspected underground nuclear site at Kumchang-ri took place at a rate of almost one meeting per month.

The Triangular Relationship

How will the recent turn of events affect US-South Korean relations as the two allies enter the brave new world of simultaneous engagement with Pyongyang? The history of US-South Korean relations on North Korea can be essentially boiled down to four logical models.

- **Seoul Encourages Washington:** This has been the approach by the current South Korean administration in dealing with the Clinton and Bush administrations. Even the Kim Young-sam administration took this posture at times, most importantly when Seoul strongly encouraged Washington to begin talks with North Korea after Pyongyang announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT in March 1993.

- **Seoul Restrains Washington:** More the norm than the exception under President Kim Young-sam, it was certainly the case at different junctures during the crisis over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. But it was also true in the aftermath of the 1994 showdown when President Kim did everything possible to slow what might have been a trend towards better relations between Washington and Pyongyang. Given concerns about US-South Korean relations in the wake of the difficulties in getting President Kim to go along with the 1994 accord and the subsequent Kuala Lumpur agreement on reactor supply, American officials were particularly sensitive to his efforts.
• United States Restrains Seoul: At the end of the Roh administration, as South-North relations gained momentum and the nuclear issue began to emerge, the last Bush administration leaned on Seoul to give priority to the implementation of an extensive inspection regime for the 1991 denuclearization declaration. The Roh administration did not conceal its resentment, prompting Foreign Minister Lee Sang-ok to complain that “forestalling dialogue over the nuclear controversy is not an effective method.”

• United States Encourages Seoul: With the exception of President Kim Young-sam’s first few months in office when he tried to establish his own “sunshine policy,” this was the case for much of his administration. During the nuclear crisis, Washington consistently tried to get Seoul to be flexible in its periodic attempts to restart North-South dialogue and, afterwards, tried to encourage it to loosen requirements for strict reciprocity in the North-South relationship. The election of President Kim Dae-Jung and the emergence of his “sunshine policy” brought this problem to an end.

Obviously, the best model for alliance relations is when Washington and Seoul are like-minded in their approach to Pyongyang. For example, in the wake of North Korea’s 1998 Taepodong missile test, both the Kim and Clinton administrations were encouraging each other to improve relations with the North. The appointment of former Secretary of Defense William Perry and his subsequent review of US policy restored regular, high-level coordination between Washington and Seoul that had been allowed to lapse in the years after the Agreed Framework. More importantly, the “Perry process” produced a fairly smooth working relationship between two like-minded administrations.

Conversely, the worst situation occurs when the two are taking different approaches to the North, namely Washington wants to move forward and Seoul does not or Seoul wants to move forward and Washington does not. This certainly characterized much of the US-South Korean relationship under the Kim Young-sam administration.

What is the prognosis for US-South Korean relations given the direction of the Bush administration’s policy and the likely continuation of President Kim’s engagement policy? For the past year, a clear characteristic of the US-South Korean relationship has been Seoul’s pushing Washington to be more forthcoming with Pyongyang, both in diplomatic
channels and in senior contacts such as President Kim’s visit to Washington. Indeed, Seoul’s encouragement has been and will probably continue to be useful for Bush administration moderates who can actively use its support in the struggle with the ideologues. Under those circumstances, the key question was whether Washington would actively restrain Seoul in its dealings with Pyongyang, particularly given President Kim’s level of commitment to engagement. That issue never had to be addressed because of North Korea’s unwillingness to pursue the opening created by the June 2000 inter-Korean summit.

The key issue now is, in the remaining months of the Kim administration and beyond, can Washington and Seoul adjust to the brave new world of simultaneous engagement with Pyongyang. Given the level of President Kim’s commitment to engagement, he will almost certainly press ahead with Pyongyang in spite of the upcoming South Korean elections. However, President Kim’s pursuit of engagement as his term runs out will likely be limited by both practical domestic political circumstances and the general view that his policy has only achieved rather limited results. Potential moves that might have crossed Washington’s “redlines,” i.e. providing electricity to Pyongyang in a way that could undermine the leverage provided by the Agreed Framework or undermining the US–South Korean security relationship through considering replacing or undermining the Armistice, now seem impractical under the present circumstances.

North Korea will not be an innocent bystander as events unfold. While cooperation between Washington and Seoul seems to be good at the moment, the fact that each has different inclinations towards North Korea has not been lost on Kim Jong-il and could create opportunities for him to promote tensions in the US–South Korean relationship. For example, Pyongyang could decide to charge forward with the South while not moving forward on the US agenda dominated by security issues. That, in turn, might provide President Kim with one last chance to press ahead, a chance he might not be able to resist.

Under this scenario, Washington could face the danger that it was hindering the positive development of North-South relations. On the one hand, it is no secret that South Koreans, while supporting the overall concept of improved relations with the North, have mixed feelings about the sunshine policy. As a result, many may applaud, although not too
loudly, any effort by the Bush administration to act as a reality check on what may be viewed as the excesses of that policy. But the possibility of a corrosive affect on the overall relationship remains if Washington is seen as sacrificing Seoul’s interests in favor of its own. In the past, that perception has flared up periodically, resulting in tensions between the two allies. While it has always been kept in check because of the overriding need to maintain close military relations, that might prove more difficult in the context of a regional security environment that seems to be evolving away from Cold War confrontation because of improving North-South relations. The problem would only be compounded if that process of evolution seemed to be supported by all the major actors except the United States.

There is also the danger that the old debate in South Korea about whether Washington’s policies have undermined North-South rapprochement will be rekindled. That debate emerged during the first year of the Bush administration with one camp’s blaming administration policies for the slowdown in the improvement of South-North relations. The other camp believed the Bush administration’s policies had no effect on North Korea’s approach towards the South. Rather, the slowdown began before it entered office and was a sign that Pyongyang was less than serious about the process of rapprochement that had gathered steam with the June 2000 summit. While the truth was probably not so simple—the slowdown was a combination of external and domestic developments—the overall affect on US-South Korean relations could be corrosive.

If history is any guide, Washington and Seoul may not have to confront these problems during the remainder of the Kim administration. Pyongyang seems to have great difficulty in charging too far ahead with the South too quickly. Its stop-and-go forward movement in the past, particularly after the June 2000 summit, probably reflects Pyongyang’s own internal politics where North-South relations have always been the province of more conservative groups who are less inclined towards practical results and more inclined towards winning the political struggle. Kim Jong-il’s summit meeting with Kim Dae-jung did not erase this dynamic. Two other scenarios seem more likely over the remainder of President Kim’s term in office. They are: (1) limited progress on the humanitarian and economic issues raised during Special
Envoy Lim’s recent visit to Pyongyang, or (2) North-South relations stall once again in the aftermath of what may seem to be the promising opening. Under these circumstances, US-South Korean coordination using existing mechanisms such as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) should be sufficient in the near-term.

As for beyond the Kim administration, the situation remains murky at this early stage in the South Korean presidential election process. The two candidates will pursue engagement with Pyongyang if elected but their tactics will probably differ. Lee Hoi-chang, the Grand National Party candidate, will almost certainly place greater emphasis on reciprocity than did the sunshine policy, an approach that will appeal to the Bush administration. Roh Moo-hyun, the ruling party candidate, will probably try to distance himself from the unpopular approach President Kim has taken. But exactly how his approach will differ from his predecessors or his opponent remains unclear. Perhaps even more interesting from the American perspective is Roh’s emphasis on a more equal footing in the US-South Korean relationship. Once again, exactly how that will translate into policy and dealing with Pyongyang is unclear. But Roh’s stance, combined with concerns about anti-Americanism in South Korea, may argue for a much more nuanced American policy than this administration has been able to practice up until now.

Conclusion

For the moment, relations between Washington and Seoul on the one hand, and with Pyongyang on the other hand, seem to have reached a state of equilibrium. The potential for disruption is present, particularly if Pyongyang accelerates its efforts to engage South Korea while little progress is made in talks with the Bush administration. Moreover, the upcoming South Korean presidential election also creates additional uncertainties about the future, not just about approaches to the North but also the handling of the US-South Korean relationship. In particular, it is too soon in the electoral process to discern the approach likely to be taken by Roh Moo-hyun, the ruling party candidate, on both counts.

The current equilibrium may be temporary or the beginning of a positive trend. The new factor in the mix is negotiations between
Washington and Pyongyang. Negotiations can both educate uninformed decision-makers and influence the positions of both countries but it is by no means certain that they will play either of those positive roles. A number of other important factors need to be considered; the Bush administration’s core views of North Korea and American inexperience in dealing with Pyongyang face-to-face may prove critical. At best, it will take time and sustained contacts for the administration and North Korea to arrive at the point in time when compromise and progress are possible. At worst, negotiations could turn into a stale exercise that achieves few results.

The failure of US-North Korean negotiations could create new tensions on the peninsula. Many analysts have already predicted that 2003 is potentially a year of crisis, citing the possible end of the North’s moratorium on missile tests and the inability of the United States, South Korea and Japan to deliver new reactors under the terms of the Agreed Framework. The failure of negotiations would certainly be a disconcerting development. But these claims are probably exaggerated; a strong case can be made that the Korean peninsula is more stable today than at any time during the past decade as a result of the Clinton administration’s policy of engagement, President Kim’s sunshine policy and Pyongyang’s continuing economic and food problems. Unless either party takes drastic measures, both sides will probably find a way to muddle through.