

*Commentary*

## **South Korean Response to the North Korean Nuclear Test**

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*This should be a moment of joy. But instead, I stand here with a very heavy heart. Despite the concerted warning from the international community, North Korea has gone ahead with a nuclear test.*

(Remarks by H.E. Ban Ki-moon, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Republic of Korea on the 'Results of the Formal Session' of the UN Security Council appointing him Secretary General-Designate of the United Nations)

The testing of a nuclear device by North Korea (hereafter the Democratic People's Republic of Korea – DPRK) on October 9 has brought to the fore South Korea's (hereafter the Republic of Korea – ROK) measured and considered response calibrated in such a manner as to force the DPRK to return to the negotiating table. The DPRK conducted its nuclear test even as the ROK President, Roh Moo-hyun was presiding over an emergency cabinet meeting called to discuss DPRK's preparations for a nuclear test. The ROK's response to the latest crisis illustrates the conundrum that has been confronting Northeast Asia since the days of the Cold War.

The initial official statement following the DPRK nuclear test, stated that the "[ROK] Government will resolutely respond to the situation in accordance with the principle that it will not tolerate North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons." The statement in a strident tone further added that "...through this act, North Korea has unilaterally breached and annulled the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearisation of Korean Peninsula that it signed with the ROK in 1991. We hereby make it clear

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once again that North Korea is solely responsible for any consequences arising from this situation, including impact on inter-Korean relations.”<sup>1</sup>

Attracting widespread condemnation, the DPRK nuclear test led to calls for stringent diplomatic measures and the need for a new round of wide-ranging sanctions authorised by the United Nations. The most extreme demands called for the invocation of Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which provides for mandatory sanctions or even as a last resort military action to ensure compliance with Security Council resolutions in cases of ‘threats to international peace and security.’ At this juncture, in a reflection of the immensity of the latest crisis and with the imperative to strike a cautious note, the Prime Minister of ROK, Han Myung-Sook issued a statement that said the ROK would not support any United Nations resolution containing military measures against the DPRK in retaliation for its nuclear test. To quote Han “...the resolution must not include any military measures because of its possible impact on the Korean peninsula.”<sup>2</sup> Han’s statement if anything, exemplifies the restraint that characterises ROK’s policy towards its belligerent northern neighbour. From the ROK’s perspective there are three fundamental aspects that condition its dealings with the DPRK – the ROK’s foreign policy orientation, the ‘Sunshine Policy’ and lastly, public perceptions in the ROK on the DPRK.

### **ROK’s Foreign Policy**

Since 1998, the ROK has adopted a foreign policy that indicates a small but subtle shift in its security perceptions with regard to the Korean peninsula. Seoul’s re-invigorated foreign policy initiated under Kim Dae-Jung was primarily based on two prongs – a comprehensive political and economic engagement with the DPRK and, the importance of placing the ROK’s bilateral ties with the United States, Japan, Russia and China on a more equal footing. Following the DPRK’s testing of a nuclear device and the imposition of sanctions by the United Nations, the ROK has been hesitant to entirely stop the flow of humanitarian supplies to the DPRK. While such relief has not been embargoed under the Security Council’s Resolution 1718, the ROK is under tremendous pressure to restrict its tourism and slow down industrial estates projects in the DPRK. By adopting a ‘wait and watch’ policy and not ‘shutting all doors’ on the DPRK, the ROK has given a little leeway to the DPRK to resume negotiations under the multilateral framework of the ‘Six-Party Talks.’ It is too early to arrive at a prognosis, but the very confirmation that the DPRK is joining

the 'Six-Party Talks' scheduled for the end of November is a welcome development.

Maintaining the momentum to facilitate and engage the DPRK, the ROK Unification Minister Lee Jong-sook was quoted as having said that he believes a second inter-Korean summit could help ease the tension sparked by DPRK's nuclear test.<sup>33</sup> "Unification minister says inter-Korean summit needed despite nuclear test" Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade,

Lee however, stopped short of saying whether the government was pushing for a meeting between the leaders of the two Koreas. The first and only inter-Korean summit took place in 2000 between Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Jong-Il and did play a significant role in altering the perceptions of the people of ROK towards their immediate northern neighbour.

### **Sunshine Policy**

Officially known as the "Policy of Reconciliation and Cooperation toward North Korea", the 'Sunshine Policy' was announced by Kim Dae-jung when campaigning for the Presidency of ROK in 1997. The 'Sunshine Policy' of engagement with the DPRK remains acceptable to large sections of the ROK's political class despite the failure of DPRK to follow through on its commitments on family reunions and a visit by Kim Jong-il to the ROK. The 'Sunshine Policy' when initiated marked a reversal of several longstanding ROK positions. Essentially the 'Sunshine Policy' promised to stop efforts by the ROK to undermine the regime in Pyongyang or absorb the North; promote efforts by ROK to improve relations with the DPRK; bring about the separation of economic issues from political, and, support of peaceful co-existence rather than a rapid push towards unification. The most visible illustration of the 'Sunshine Policy' has been the Kaesong Industrial Park that is being developed as a collaborative economic development with the DPRK. Located six miles north of the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) with direct road and rail access to South Korea and an hour's drive from Seoul, the Kaesong industrial park is run by a South Korean committee that has a fifty-year lease which began in 2004. It is estimated that the industrial zone could create 725,000 jobs and generate \$500 million in annual wage income for the North Korean economy by 2012. Five years later, another \$1.78 billion would flow from annual corporate taxes levied on South Korean companies participating in the industrial project.

The continuance of the 'Sunshine policy' depends on the view that providing assurances of economic, political and military survival will eventually enhance North Korean dependence on the outside world, create a sense of security, and thereby modify its behaviour. For ROK President Roh Moo-hyun, the 'Sunshine Policy' is an approach that he has labelled "a policy for peace and prosperity" emphasising international cooperation based on Korean initiatives, trust and reciprocity, dialogue and public participation in the process.<sup>4</sup>

### **ROK Public Perception on the DPRK**

Perhaps the best indicator of ROK's policy and approach towards its northern neighbour is 'public perception' on the DPRK and the pervasive influence it has on a divided people. For most people in the ROK the prime concern is the impact a prolonged crisis might have on the ROK's economy and not the threat of a nuclear armed DPRK. A common view in the South is that the North would never use the weapons on fellow Koreans and that it would be wary of using such weapons so close to its own territory. Many in the ROK feel that the Bush Administration has been unnecessarily bellicose in its rhetoric and has pushed the DPRK into a corner.

Due to the inherent plurality of views in a democracy, there is no unanimity in ROK on how best to deal with the DPRK. Opinion effectively falls into three camps: those who believe the DPRK should be left to collapse and the ROK should maintain a tough defensive policy; those who believe in a form of critical engagement with reciprocal action demanded for each step taken forward by the ROK; and those who wish to follow through with the Sunshine Policy. Many in the ROK believe that the DPRK's bellicosity is essentially a survival strategy and that providing it with guarantees of survival will modify that behaviour. Those who follow this line have opposed the tougher position of the United States and have urged bilateral negotiations. There are of course apocalyptic concerns in the ROK of unilateral US military action. In such an eventuality, Seoul would be devastated and any conflict and all out war could erase the immense economic achievements of the past 50 years. The government of President Roh Moo-hyun has all but ruled out any military strike against the DPRK, saying it would be "very, very dangerous."

## Conclusion

In the recriminations and denunciations that followed North Korea's testing of a nuclear device the emerging scenario hints at the possibilities of a new challenge facing ROK-US relations. The reluctance on the part of ROK to actively associate itself with the Proliferations Security Initiative (PSI) and growing domestic calls for an inter-Korean summit are the beginnings of a new round of evolving postures that seek to address the problems on the Korean peninsula.

Anxieties over security developments, particularly in the context of the rapidly crumbling military alliance with the U.S., are becoming more profound. The ROK - US Combined Forces Command, is set to be dismantled in 2012 with no alternative in sight. The ROK Defence Minister Yoon Kwan-gung and his US counterpart Donald Rumsfeld met in Washington for the annual Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) on October 22, 2006 and reached an agreement to complete the transfer of wartime operational control of ROK's military to Seoul between Oct. 15, 2009 and March 15, 2012. It took some seven hours for the two ministers to provide a 14-point joint communiqué after their meeting because of differences of opinion on some key issues. Because of the recent nuclear test by DPRK, Yoon wanted to get a more specific US affirmation regarding its nuclear umbrella for the South and managed to include the phrase "extended deterrence" in the communiqué in the hope of easing public fears about a possible nuclear attack from the North.

Some members of the ROK security establishment fear that the ROK has no way of properly confronting DPRK's nuclear provocation, and there is no guarantee that Pyongyang will succumb to the pressure of the international community and dismantle its nuclear weapons in the near future.

Lastly, the glaring lacunae in Northeast Asia's security architecture is the lack of any multilateral framework or institution that binds the DPRK with its immediate neighbours. The Six-Party Talks are the only multilateral security process in Northeast Asia that brings together the DPRK and other major regional players to discuss a range of important issues. To cite the ROK Foreign Minister and UN Secretary General-Designate Ban Ki-moon "the (Six-Party) talks may yet provide an essential foundation for the establishment of a permanent multilateral security cooperation mechanism

in Northeast Asia.”<sup>5</sup> The coming months will reveal new scenario’s following the DPRK nuclear test of October 9.

### References/End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Statement of the Government of the Republic of Korea on the North Korean Nuclear Test”, October 9, 2006, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade at [http://www.mofat.go.kr/me/me\\_a002/me\\_b004/1211900\\_971.html](http://www.mofat.go.kr/me/me_a002/me_b004/1211900_971.html). (Accessed on November 2, 2006)
- <sup>2</sup> “South Korea opposes any UN military measures against North” at [http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp\\_asiapacific/view/234718/1/.html](http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/afp_asiapacific/view/234718/1/.html). (Accessed on November 2, 2006).
- <sup>3</sup> “Unification minister says inter-Korean summit needed despite nuclear test” Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, November 1, 2006 at <http://www.mofat.gov.kr/statements>. (Accessed on November 2, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> In opinion polls conducted after the DPRK’s nuclear test most respondents find Roh’s DPRK policy still acceptable and felt that although it is necessary to review and modify ROK’s policy towards its neighbour, the basic principles should remain untouched. See Park Song-wu, “Sunshine Policy Survives Uncertain Times” *Korea Times* (Seoul), October 31, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Ban Ki-moon, “For Permanent Peace – Beyond the Nuclear Challenge and the Cold War”, *Harvard International Review*, Cambridge, MA, 27 (3) 2006 at <http://hir.harvard.edu/articles/1436/>. (Accessed on November 5, 2006).

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