

No More Sunshine: The Limits of Engagement with North Korea

Washington watched the rise of Moon Jae-in with concern this spring. Throughout his campaign to be the new president of South Korea, he pledged to revive the sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea, championed by former liberal presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Rho Moo-hyun (2003-04, 2004-08). Moon also vowed to restore economic cooperation with North Korea, which the impeached president Park Geun-hye severed in early 2016 after Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test and missile launch. Moon surprised many by remarking, "I would consider visiting Pyongyang first before Washington if elected president," a very controversial statement, given the U.S.-South Korea alliance.¹ If Seoul shifted to engagement, it could undermine U.S. strategy, relieving pressure Washington has been applying against Pyongyang's weapons programs. During the campaign, Moon even criticized the United States' deployment of a missile defense system (known as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense or THAAD) in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula, calling it "very regrettable."² In the months following his May 9 election, President Moon has certainly appeared to moderate his campaign rhetoric: Washington was the first stop for his official visit; the first THAAD deployment became complete in early September; and he has called for stronger international sanctions against North Korea's missile launches and nuclear test. Is President Moon departing from his campaign promise to revive the sunshine policy with Pyongyang? Or is he still looking for an opportunity to adopt and pursue that policy?

Inhan Kim is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. He can be reached at ikim@uccs.edu. The author gives special thanks to In-taek Hyun for his valuable comments on an earlier draft.

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This paper calls for caution against Seoul's potential engagement toward Pyongyang by examining North Korean policies from 1998-2008, during the South Korean sunshine policy under presidents Kim and Roh. My claims are, first, that engagement policies by the two liberal administrations in Seoul failed to induce meaningful changes in North Korea's domestic politics and foreign policy; and, second, that these policies were based on tenuous assumptions and were mismanaged. The false promise of engagement policy should not be surprising, as its underlying assumptions violate findings and wisdom accumulated from well-established theories of international relations on economic interdependence, engagement, and aid. Economic interdependence does not automatically and necessarily pacify the interacting partners, and does not in itself translate into political reconciliation or integration. Furthermore, engagement is less successful when it is initiated by a small power. Finally, economic aid is squandered when its recipient lacks receptive domestic institutions and a record of sensible developmental strategies. The paper concludes with policy suggestions for both Seoul and Washington.

Sunshine's Rise in Seoul

As President Kim Dae-jung assumed the presidency of South Korea in February 1998, he carried out his own vision of peaceful coexistence and phased unification between the two Koreas. His peace initiative has been better known as the sunshine policy, deriving its name from Aesop's fable in which sun and wind competed to strip off a gentleman's coat (he took off the coat in response to warm sunshine rather than strong wind). President Kim firmly believed that in order to reduce tension on the peninsula and induce behavioral changes in the North, the first task should be to convince the regime that its external environment was benign.

For this purpose, President Kim declared in his inauguration speech that South Korea had no intention of harming or absorbing North Korea.³ For the first two years of Kim's presidency, North Korea tested this pledge by infiltrating a submarine into the East Sea and opening fire on a South Korean naval vessel in the Yellow Sea. Despite such military provocations, President Kim remained steadfast in pursuing a warm relationship with Pyongyang, sustaining shipments of rice and fertilizers to the north, and endorsing South Korean conglomerate Hyundai's business projects inside North Korea, including North-South tourism at Mount Kumgang. President Kim's sunshine policy enjoyed full support from Washington. For example, a State Department review of U.S. policy directed by Dr. William Perry and sponsored by then-President Bill Clinton was in line with Kim's sunshine philosophy, recommending U.S. normalization of relations with North Korea and the relaxation of sanctions in exchange for elimination of its nuclear and missile programs.⁴

President Kim's patient and tenacious pursuit of the sunshine policy eventually paid off. To present some notable examples: cruise ships carrying South Korean tourists set sail toward Mount Kumgang in November 1998, the leaders of the two Koreas met in June 2000 for the first time in history, a few hundred families separated since the 1953 Korean War cease-fire were united in August 2000, and the two Korean governments agreed to create an industrial complex in Kaesong combining the South's capital and the North's workforce just a few miles north of the demarcation line.

The next president of South Korea, Roh Moo-hyun, continued in the spirit of Kim's sunshine policy. However, less favorable conditions confronted his engagement policy. Seoul was losing support for engagement from Washington. The new George W. Bush administration had little trust in North Korea. He went to the extent of pointing North Korea out as a part of the "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq in his State of the Union Address in 2002. Months before president Roh took office, North Korea admitted its clandestine uranium enrichment program for nuclear weapons, threatened to end its moratorium on ballistic missile tests, and declared withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In August 2003, a multilateral diplomatic effort to resolve the new North Korean nuclear crisis among China, Japan, Russia, the United States and the two Koreas, known as the Six-Party talks, started in Beijing. However, the talks achieved no significant breakthroughs.

Nevertheless, President Roh expanded economic ties with Pyongyang. The industrial complex in Kaesong opened in December 2004 and began to churn out a wide range of products. Furthermore, throughout his tenure, he consistently opposed George W. Bush's hardline policies in dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear program and insisted on resolving crises through dialogue. In some cases, Seoul was willing to serve as devil's advocate on behalf of Pyongyang, at the expense of the cherished decades-long U.S.-South Korea security partnership. Roh's remark during his visit to Los Angeles in fall 2004 that Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons was a reasonable course of action in terms of self-defense is a good example.⁵ Roh also endeavored to advance his predecessor's engagement policy by initiating political and military talks beyond the burgeoning economic cooperation. The Peace Declaration of October 4, 2007, signed by Kim Jong-il and Roh Moo-hyun during the second inter-Korean summit, indicated that they agreed to create another economic cooperation zone north of the demarcation line and open high-level military talks to support expanding economic cooperation between the two states.

Today, President Moon's North Korea policy has been to support both sanctions and dialogues. He supports sanctions against Pyongyang, so long as they are aimed at bringing North Korea to the negotiating table. He also is willing to pursue inter-Korean dialogues and projects under the right circumstances or in

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response to a shift in North Korea's attitude. Moon has emphasized that there is considerable overlap between his approach and President Trump's strategy of "maximum pressure first, engagement second."⁶ However, major episodes in

Moon's first months in office provide strong evidence that Moon seeks Seoul's return to the sunshine era.

At a press conference weeks before the presidential election this May, Moon outlined his North Korean policy during the campaign. His policy includes restarting the six-party talks, increasing economic cooperation between the two Koreas, and a plan to set inter-Korean

policy in stone through legislation that can be ratified by both the South's National Assembly and the North's Supreme People's Assembly. In his words, "inheriting the sunshine policy and the engagement policy toward North Korea, we will strategically push North Korea towards change."⁷

President Moon's first five months in office are full of signs that Seoul is pursuing engagement toward Pyongyang. First, through his remarks at the opening ceremony of the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity on June 1, he affirmed his commitment to both persuading and pressuring Pyongyang to come back to dialogue. He also presented his vision of helping North Korea duplicate the economic success of South Korea and, ultimately, creating an economic community on the peninsula.⁸ Second, in May the Ministry of Unification relaxed the former government's tight restrictions on private South Korean groups and citizens from traveling to North Korea and working with North Koreans.⁹ Third, upon his return from the June 2017 summit with Trump, he declared that "Washington allowed Seoul to be a driver in inter-Korean affairs."¹⁰ In July, he made a formal offer to start talks with North Korea for military affairs and the reunion of families separated during the Korean War despite Pyongyang's missile test on July 4.¹¹ The joint statement after the summit of Moon and Trump states that President Trump supported "Seoul's leading role in fostering an environment for peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula."¹² However, it is noteworthy that the statement also emphasizes that "the door to dialogue with the DPRK remains open under the right circumstances."¹³ Fourth, during the visit to the G-20 meeting in Berlin in July, President Moon pledged that Seoul would not pursue the collapse of Pyongyang or German-style unification and displayed again the willingness to resume joint economic projects between two Koreas.¹⁴ And on September 21, Seoul decided to provide Pyongyang with US\$800 million through the World Food Program and UNICEF.¹⁵ It was a reversal of former president Park Geun-hye's decision in early 2016 to stop all types of humanitarian aid to Pyongyang.

Results and Reality Checks

The proponents of engagement have condemned the nine-year-long conservative rule in Seoul on the grounds that it led to the worst period in North-South relations.¹⁶ Selling the engagement policy vigorously, they claim that throughout the sunshine period, economic and social exchanges expanded, the heads of the two adversaries agreed to take necessary measures to ease political and military tension, and the North did not provoke the South militarily in any serious manner after the summer of 2002. Simply put, they argue that engagement worked in the past and it will work again. This section, however, scrutinizes this optimistic “return-to-the-sunshine” claim.

During the sunshine period of 1998–2007, the volume of inter-Korean economic exchange grew by a factor of more than eight times.¹⁷ After the Kaesong industrial complex began to operate, its production output increased by a factor of more than twelve times until 2007, from US\$1.4 billion to US\$18.5 billion, and the number of North Korean workers multiplied by four during the same time span.¹⁸ Humanitarian aid also expanded. Governmental and civilian aid from the South to the North increased more than tenfold over the Kim and Roh administrations.¹⁹ Greater social interactions followed suit as economic exchanges grew dynamically. Even though the interaction was one-way traffic, as South Koreans account for most of the people going back and forth across the border, the annual number of people crossing the border increased from 26,534 in 2004 to 159,214 in 2007, a figure that excludes tourists going to Kaesong and Mount Kumgang.²⁰

Politically, North and South Korean officials met more frequently than ever before. Summits in 2000 and 2007 contributed to opening channels for political communication between the two former adversaries. Throughout the sunshine period, conferences took place on issues ranging from political to economic to social and cultural. Military officials also met to discuss measures to ease tension. Furthermore, the first summit helped Kim Jong-il host the visit of Madeleine Albright, then U.S. Secretary of State, and send his right-hand military adviser, Vice Marshall Jo Myong-rok, as an envoy to President Clinton. Another breakthrough summit occurred between Kim Jong-il and then-Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi in 2002. For advocates of engagement, these events have constituted strong evidence that North Korea was coming out of its shell, seeking a new relationship with states it had previously demonized.²¹

In July 2002, North Korea announced the most significant capitalist-style economic reforms in its history. These included a price system determined by market forces, the decentralization of economic decisions to local production units, and an opening to foreign investment.²² Donald Gregg, former U.S. ambassador to Seoul, proclaimed that these reforms demonstrated the North Korean leader’s acute

reform-mindedness and the DPRK's desire to emulate South Korea's state-led capitalist model under Park Chung-hee.²³

Lastly, proponents point to relative peace on the Korean peninsula as a virtue of the policy. The two states did not exchange fire for more than seven years after June 2002. Hostility resumed in November 2009—according to sunshine proponents, only when conservative President Lee Myung-bak returned to hardline policies reminiscent of the Cold War, abrogating agreements made under two inter-Korean summits.

This article puts the positive verdicts of engagement advocates under scrutiny. First, economic and social interactions did indeed expand dramatically during the sunshine period. However, some cautionary words are in order. The terms for economic exchanges were favorable to North Korea. For example, wages South Korean companies pay for the workforce in the Kaesong industrial complex go to the North Korean government, which in turn pays individual laborers. Due to this arrangement, the North Korean government has had more than US\$100 million extra in foreign credits annually according to Mr. Hong Yong-pyo, the latest Minister of Unification under former president Park Geun-hye.²⁴ The same mechanism is utilized for tourism at Mount Kumgang. Given the shortage of foreign credit due to the limited access to foreign markets and the absence of revenue sources as a result of economic stagnation, getting involved in such profitable economic activities with few conditions attached was a no-brainer for North Korea.

Furthermore, we should not confuse ends with means. The ultimate goal of the sunshine policy was to help Pyongyang launch domestic reforms to boost its lethargic economy, to pacify the North Korean leadership by exposing it to the benefits of economic exchanges, and to bring about political reconciliation between North

and South. In that light, a more representative surrogate for determining the success or failure of the sunshine policy would be to see whether it induced any meaningful changes in North Korea's domestic policies or significant modifications in its belligerent foreign policies. In these two respects, the sunshine policy fell far short of fulfilling its promises.

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The July 2002 economic reform plans, in fact, created rather than solved problems. Lifting price controls in North Korea led to skyrocketing inflation. For example, after the reforms the price of rice went up by at least 550 percent.²⁵ Pyongyang had to address this inflation pressure with either increased production or increased imports. As the first option was not feasible, the growth of imports was largely financed by aid flows from Seoul and Beijing. The reforms ultimately failed, and North Korea turned into a totally

aid-dependent country. Disappointingly, North Korea remained content with being heavily reliant on aid, without any serious will to stand on its own feet.

The same skepticism is needed when evaluating the alleged modifications in North Korean foreign policy behavior. The sunshine supporters' claim that engagement contributed to the relative peace between the two Koreas is somewhat overstated. First of all, there is still good reason to believe that the lack of military provocation against Seoul was the result of Pyongyang's deceptive strategic calculation for profit rather than being thawed by sunshine. The North Korean economy was virtually collapsed and ridden with famine, without any sign of foreign aid throughout the mid-1990s. North Korean leaders had no reason to reject a generous offer from South Korea for aid and hard currency in 1998. In exchange, they invited Kim Dae-jung to Pyongyang in 2000 and temporarily refrained from hostility. Yet, they continued to advance their weapon programs behind the scenes. This was recently illustrated by Russian President Vladimir Putin's remark that "In 2001, when I made a stop in North Korea on my way to Japan, Kim Jong-il told me that they had a nuclear bomb ... Seoul was within the hitting range of their standard artillery systems at that time."²⁶ North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons despite the warm sunshine policy is a strong manifestation of its persistent belligerence and the irrelevance of South Korea's sunshine policy.

Some experts in North Korean affairs argue that North Korea's ambitions for nuclear weapons and long-range missiles express its concern for survival as a result of growing, irreversible inferiority to its enemy in the South and Seoul's allies.²⁷ But, North Korea has continued its nuclear programs even after the United States promised nonaggression on two separate occasions: the Agreed Framework in Geneva in October 1994, which ended the first North Korean nuclear crisis, and the Joint Statement during the Six-Party Talks in Beijing in September 2005.²⁸ The Agreed Framework stated that the United States would provide formal assurance to the DPRK against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States. The Joint Statement went further than this, stipulating that the United States had no intention of invading the DPRK with either nuclear or conventional weapons. These are both examples of what is called a negative security assurance. North Korea obtained what it wanted. But the very next year after the Joint Statement, Pyongyang launched its first nuclear test. All evidence points to North Korea's unwavering aspiration to be a nuclear power and its unyielding audacity to violate the nonproliferation regime despite engagement and security guarantees.

Fragile Assumptions and Mismanagement

Engagement policies by the two liberal presidents in Seoul could not deliver what they promised, failing to pacify North Korea's leadership or induce a meaningful

change in its domestic politics and foreign policy. The false promise of engagement should not be surprising. Engagement policies under Presidents Kim and Roh stood on tenuous assumptions and were mismanaged, overlooking serious conditions that impeded their successful implementation.

The Limits of Economic Interdependence

Seoul's engagement policies aimed at laying the foundation for peaceful coexistence and, ultimately, political integration of the two Koreas through a patient pursuit and gradual expansion of mutual economic and social exchange. In this regard, the policies have many parallels with the functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches to political integration.²⁹ David Mitrany, the pioneer of the functionalist theory of political integration, once wrote that cooperation between and among states on a small issue cutting across national boundaries can provide an opportune moment for a big positive step forward toward forming a political community.³⁰ Sovereignty and nationalism are hurdles to political integration. Thus, functionalism recommends the logical course of taking up a less difficult job first before tackling harder ones, and shifting emphasis from political issues, which are divisive, to social issues in which the interests of states are plainly aligned.

Mitrany's notion that economic and social interactions can develop into political ones over time was revised and refined by Ernest Haas. His theory, known as neofunctionalism, stresses rather than avoids the role of politics in the process of integration. According to Haas, the spillover effect from social issues takes place only if political actors *desire* to adapt integrative lessons learned in one context to a new situation.³¹ Seoul's sunshine policy toward Pyongyang was indeed consistent with functionalist and neofunctionalist approaches. Explanations for South Korean policies provided almost 20 years ago by Moon Chung-in, who

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served both Kim Dae-jung as well as Roh Moo-hyun and now is serving President Moon as a key foreign policy advisor, confirm the point. According to him, the key traits of the sunshine policy are *flexible dualism*, defined in several ways: (1) "Easy tasks first, and difficult tasks later"; (2) "Economy first, politics later"; (3) "Nongovernmental organizations first, government later"; and (4) "Give first, and take later."³²

The thesis that cooperation in nonpolitical areas would contribute to political reconciliation and integration is based on the assumption that economic cooperation would launch states on a virtuous cycle leading to greater prosperity and more peaceful relations. However, another group of scholars have long pointed out

the shortcomings of such optimistic promises about peaceful relations among states. In the transition, increasing economic interdependence does not prevent conflict, as vulnerability and dependence grow correspondingly, and states have concerns about how the gains from economic exchange will be distributed and used in the future.³³

The prolonged debate has prompted extensive research investigating the conditions under which economic interdependence fosters improved economic and political relations among states. For example, political scientists Edward Mansfield of University of Pennsylvania and Jon Pevehouse of University of Wisconsin have proposed that trade's moderating effect depends on the presence of regional trade institutions.³⁴ Both Professors Erik Gartzke and Michael Mousseau have separately pointed out that pacifying effects of economic interdependence are conditioned on the degree of capitalist development. Gartzke of University of California, San Diego, states that economic interdependence dampens militarized disputes between advanced capitalist states as they share a common interest in maintaining stable financial and trade flows.³⁵ From a somewhat different angle, Mousseau of University of Central Florida suggests that developed states' contract-intensive economics backed by effective legal systems foster peace.³⁶ Professors Christopher Gelpi of Ohio State University and Joseph Grieco of Duke University also assert that economic interdependence has pacifying effects only among democracies.³⁷ Why? To survive in democracies, leaders must win in elections where all citizens equally exercise one vote. Thus, democratic leaders must provide broader policy successes that are enjoyed by their large constituency. Economic growth is one type of such policy success. Therefore, foreign economic relations such as trade and investment are of great importance to political leaders in democracies. By contrast, different political dynamics confront autocratic leaders. Whether and how long they can retain office hinges on their ability to keep their loyal coalitions satisfied with the provision of private goods. As long as they can feed their loyal supporters, they are less sensitive to opportunity costs of disrupted foreign economic relations and hence less constrained from initiating crises and conflicts. In a recent seminal work, Professor Dale Copeland of the University of Virginia proposes that what matters is expectations for future trade.³⁸ When a state expects mutually beneficial trade to continue, it tends to favor maintaining or expanding trade. On the other hand, when it cannot anticipate the future trend of trade, it may adopt a self-help posture.

These findings from notable works on the impact of economic interdependence indicate that there is little chance for it to enhance the prospect for inter-Korean reconciliation. The Korean Peninsula lacks regional trade institutions, and while South Korea has a high degree of capitalist development, North Korea does not. Pyongyang has been and is under authoritarian rule. And it has experienced dramatic turns of policies from democratic Seoul and Washington, depending on who

takes power and which political party controls the legislature.³⁹ This inconsistency from democracies shortens the time horizon for its expectation of future economic exchanges.

Notable works on interdependence indicate little chance to enhance inter-Korean reconciliation.

The Limits of Small Power Engagement

Another critical limitation of South Korea's sunshine policy results from the fact that it is a small power in regional and world politics. Therefore, the degree to which it formulates and pursues an outcome in accordance with its own will is constrained by larger structural forces such as the capabilities and preferences of great powers.⁴⁰ South Korea's North Korea policy will gain momentum when it is squarely aligned with that of the United States, while its

room for action is compromised when the United States disagrees with a Korean plan.⁴¹ The headwind that the sunshine policy faced during the George W. Bush administration demonstrates how Koreans' own initiatives met setbacks when they ran contrary to U.S. preferences.⁴²

Furthermore, as a small power, South Korea is not Pyongyang's primary target of concern: the United States is. With its preponderant military capabilities and hostile view of Pyongyang, the United States is the primary threat to the North Korean regime. U.S.-led sanctions on North Korea are seen as imperial efforts to render the country defenseless and impoverished. Pyongyang maintains that nuclear weapons and long-range missiles are its last remaining option to deter the United States from waging attacks. And South Korea, in its view, is simply a puppet of American imperialists. South Korea's engagement cannot significantly moderate North Korean behavior absent a fundamental shift of U.S. policy toward Pyongyang.

The Limited Effect of Aid: It's All About the Recipient

Generous economic aid constitutes an integral part of economic engagement with North Korea. According to government statistics, South Korea's aid to North Korea amounted to US\$3 billion in cash and US\$4 billion in goods throughout the decade of sunshine.⁴³ Critics of sunshine worried that cash and goods generously given without strings attached to prevent misuse could be easily diverted to develop nuclear weapons and consolidate the rule of the Kim family by enriching its loyal supporters. Their nightmare scenario came true with the first nuclear test in 2006.

Of course, it is difficult to prove that cash from Seoul facilitated Pyongyang's nuclear armament. However, even the advocates of U.S. engagement with

rogue states would conclude that Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun were ignoring the basic safeguards of engagement policies. For example, according to Richard Haass, president of the Council of Foreign Relations, and Meghan O'Sullivan, professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Harvard University, economic aid without a modicum of monitoring enhances the foreign-exchange supply of an unsavory target, freeing up other reserves which enables them to conduct undesirable activities. Aid, especially in the form of material goods and cash, has had a limited ability to help modify the target state's behaviors.⁴⁴

Existing studies of the relationship between aid recipients and economic growth indicate flaws in the sunshine policy's assumptions and management. Whether economic aid generates a positive outcome in a target state depends on the quality of the target state's domestic institutions and record of pragmatic developmental policies.⁴⁵ North Korea has neither the quality of government nor the past record of sensible developmental strategies for economic aid to trigger growth. Its domestic institutions have discouraged rather than encouraged economic growth, as they are designed to serve the political goal of consolidating the Kim dynasty's rule rather than the economic goal of promoting wealth across the society. To name just a few examples, its *juche* (self-reliant) ideology and decades long *songun* (military-first) policy have given priority in allocating resources to the military, inhibiting the growth of value-added industry; the government is always eager to root out market forces.⁴⁶ Under these conditions, the belief that economic assistance would help leaders contemplate economic reforms for growth, much less political reconciliation, was and is too idealistic.

Whether aid generates a positive outcome depends on the target state's domestic institutions.

Implications

The new president in Seoul is certainly seeking to engage Pyongyang. However, he must learn from the mistakes made by the blind pursuit of engagement over a decade by his liberal predecessors. The sunshine policy brought about a brief inter-Korean reconciliation, but the *détente* soon vanished. This should not be a surprise, since the policy was based on tenuous assumptions and mismanaged. First, economic interdependence does not always pacify partners' foreign policy behaviors. And the conditions that permit interdependence to function as a pacifier do not exist, or at best exist weakly, on the Korean Peninsula. Second, engagement works best when the policy has support from powerful states concerned with the regime being engaged. For the sunshine policy to work, backup from the

United States was and is indispensable. Finally, the generous aid to North Korea neither inspired Pyongyang to undertake economic reforms nor pacified its belligerence. The aid was given in the forms of cash and goods with little monitoring of the distribution. And economic assistance was directed at a country without growth-friendly institutions or records of past developmental policies.

This paper carries sober implications for the potential future of Seoul's engagement policy toward Pyongyang. The Moon administration should understand that the grounds for the sunshine policy are weaker than they seem. Even beyond all of the concerns stated to this point, the North Korea of 2017 is very different from 2000. The DPRK is a nuclear power. Given all the attention Kim Jong-un is receiving from Washington due to his weapons programs, he is unlikely to respond to any diplomatic overtures from President Moon. There is no benefit for him to engage or negotiate with Seoul.

Second, restarting inter-Korean economic projects could compromise international sanctions regimes against North Korea. As a response to Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, the international community has ratcheted up sanctions designed to cut the inflow of hard currency to the North Korean leadership. Re-initiating economic projects with Pyongyang will invite opposition, or, at the very least, worry from many countries including the United States. In response to Seoul's decision in this September to resume humanitarian aid to Pyongyang, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe suggested that President Moon reconsider the timing of the aid. Similarly, Katina Adams, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs at the U.S. State Department, responded with uneasiness, saying "this is an ROK decision ... However, we urge countries to take additional steps to apply maximum pressure on the DPRK including by cutting their economic and diplomatic ties."⁴⁷

With the fast advance of Pyongyang's weapon programs and the return of the left-leaning president in Seoul, proponents of the sunshine policy call for a bolder turn to engaging the North. For example, Jong-kun Choi, a professor of Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea, and now serving as a foreign policy staff for President Moon's office, asserts that engagement with Pyongyang is the only remaining option for Seoul and Washington. According to him, sanctions have failed to break North Korea's determination to be a nuclear weapon state and, furthermore, Washington has no tool to penetrate into Kim Jong-un's strategic mind-set because of the lack of communication channel.⁴⁸

The Moon administration, however, would be better advised to align with the Trump administration's "maximum pressure first" approach. Any voice from Seoul for re-initiating economic interaction with Pyongyang is likely to be perceived as making cracks in international sanction regimes. The Moon administration would not want to undermine the U.S.-South Korea alliance, which is a lynchpin of its defense from North Korean hostilities. Furthermore, President Moon should

respond to South Koreans' reservations about engagement policy. Recent polls by Gallup Korea have indicated that about 60 percent of South Koreans have consistently opposed the resumption of humanitarian aid to North Korea, much less deeper economic engagement, without Pyongyang's genuine moves for denuclearization.⁴⁹ The majority of South Koreans understand that economic engagement with the North for the past two decades has failed to deter its nuclear ambition. They are skeptical that Pyongyang will come out of its shell with economic engagement.

For the Trump administration, the rise of a pro-engagement leader in Seoul is certainly unwelcome. The left-leaning government in Seoul will not see eye-to-eye with the Trump administration on North Korean issues. That said, the Trump administration should encourage its counterpart in Seoul to form a united front in applying strong pressure against Pyongyang. Washington should make it clear that it opposes the return to sunshine-style engagement and that such engagement would give Pyongyang time and resources to master already advanced weapon programs. President Trump should continue to urge President Moon to be patient in approaching North Korea. At the same time, Washington should seek to strengthen U.S.-South Korea coordination in dealing with North Korea, not treat President Moon as a liberal annoyance undermining its efforts to denuclearize North Korea. President Trump needs to understand that impetuous remarks from his Twitter account and phrases in speeches such as "complete destruction" and "calm before the storm" are not helpful. They only serve to stir up Seoul's fear of military conflict with the North and fuel skepticism and antipathy toward the US-South Korea alliance. That is exactly what North Korea wants. Washington's close consultation with Seoul for options in handling North Korea will contribute to alleviating South Korea's concerns about unilateral U.S. military actions and will help maintain a robust alliance against North Korea.

Washington should not treat Moon as a liberal annoyance and fuel antipathy toward the US-ROK alliance.

So far, the partnership between Trump and Moon looks strong. Before his visit to Seoul early this November, President Trump called his South Korean counterpart a "fine gentleman." President Moon confirmed his support for Washington's lead in dealing with North Korean nuclear provocations, stating that "we must focus on sanctions and pressure now."⁵⁰ Despite the friendly atmosphere after a series of summit meetings between Moon and Trump, some work remains to be done. Most importantly, the two leaders need to develop a consensus about mutually acceptable progress in the long road for denuclearizing North Korea and stabilizing the Korean Peninsula. Particularly, they should come to an

agreement on what constitutes the “right circumstances” for engaging North Korea. Washington and Seoul should make it clear that engagement should start when the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of Pyongyang’s nuclear program occurs. That is the only way to prevent engagement toward North Korea from falling trap to the criticisms this article has raised.

A nuclear-free North Korea would create favorable conditions for economic engagement to start and expand. First of all, the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization would mute skepticism and pessimism of Pyongyang by conservative elements in Seoul and Washington. South Korea and the United States would no longer fear North Korea funneling the revenue generated through economic interactions into threatening weapon programs. Future leaders of Seoul and Washington, whether conservative or liberal, would be able to stay the course of engagement.

Second, it would be easier for South Korea to pursue engagement with a nuclear-free North Korea than a nuclear-obsessed DPRK. Without threats from Pyongyang, Washington has little reason for meddling into inter-Korean relations. The United States would be less likely to hit the brakes on the pace for Seoul’s engagement with Pyongyang.

Finally, denuclearization would provide North Korea with greater opportunities for foreign economic interactions and aid. The North Korean leadership should understand that its weapons programs have repelled foreign investment and aid. For North Korea’s economy to survive, foreign aid, capital and technologies are indispensable. However, North Korea has been a very hostile ground for sustained economic partnership with other countries. Pyongyang’s weapons programs and international sanctions simply illustrate how precarious the business atmosphere is within North Korea.

The end of the nuclear crisis would invite more foreign visits for business opportunities in Pyongyang, and help facilitate the flow of foreign aid into North Korea. Nothing could be a greater sign of Pyongyang’s genuine interest in and commitment to economic development than the bold decision to declare the end of nuclear standoff with the world. Seoul and Washington should stand firm and united for the goal of the denuclearization of North Korea. Until then, it is time for pressure.

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