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No More South Korean Appeasement

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North Korea has fallen out of the news, but remains the most destabilizing factor in East Asia. Pyongyang recently demanded that South Korea abandon its “confrontational policies” ^[3]—or else.

The Republic of Korea can best respond by offering peaceful cooperation, but no benefits without reciprocity. And Seoul should match North Korean threats with strength. Seoul has tried appeasement, without good result.

Today, appeasement is one of the worst epitaphs, even though pre-Adolf Hitler addressing grievances often helped prevent conflict. Unfortunately, Hitler was not the typical European statesman and could not be appeased: he wanted war.

He remains *sui generis*, and appeasement remains a worthwhile strategy in many cases. But North Korea’s Kim Jong-il may fall into the same category as Hitler. There is no evidence that Kim desires war—by all accounts he wants to enjoy his virgins in this life, not the next—but he likely wants to develop a nuclear arsenal and views brinkmanship as the best strategy to gain geopolitical advantage.

Under Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun the ROK followed a policy of appeasement. Seoul essentially paid for a bilateral summit meeting, tossed aid and investment at Pyongyang, and downplayed humanitarian issues. Kim Jong-il pocketed the cash and carried on as before, developing nuclear weapons and issuing military threats.

President Lee Myung-bak ended many of the financial transfers, which enraged the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. However, the embers of appeasement still glow. President Lee refused to close the Kaesong industrial park even after the North Koreans sank an ROK warship and bombarded an ROK island last year. Moreover, the South recently sent a delegation to discuss the status of a South Korean tour operation confiscated by Pyongyang.

Even more appeasement minded is former President Jimmy Carter who earlier this month urged Seoul and the United States to offer unconditional food aid to the North. To not do so, he contended, was “really a human rights violation.” ^[4]

The hardship of the North Korean people is perhaps the greatest tragedy of the North Korean issue. But official aid, no less than government-sanctioned investment, is seen in Pyongyang as a political concession and strengthens the very system that has caused mass misery. Aid is best left to humanitarian groups.

Seoul should encourage peaceful change in the DPRK whenever possible, but the possibilities look minimal in the midst of a potentially destabilizing leadership transition in the North. Neither a physically weak Kim Jong-il nor a politically weak successor is likely to abandon North Korea's "military first" policy, which makes peaceful coexistence so difficult. As long as Kim regime emphasizes military bluster, the South should emphasize military strength—as when it recently redeployed ^[5] its surface-to-surface missiles capable of targeting Pyongyang.

At the same time, Washington should withdraw militarily from the peninsula. The South is capable of defending itself, while the United States gains nothing from remaining entangled in the one Cold War conflict which has survived the end of the Cold War.

There are no good answers in Korea. Obviously, Seoul cannot help but be involved, but appeasement has failed as a strategy. Thankfully, the United States doesn't have to be involved. For America, disengagement is the answer.

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