

“Although Kim Dae-jung’s sunshine policy has been buffeted by political turbulence, it is not dead; his successor can only modify his policy, not abandon it altogether.”

## Sunset for Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy?

MANWOO LEE

On June 13, 2000, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung arrived at Pyongyang’s Sunan Airport, where North Korean strongman Kim Jong-il personally greeted him. It was a historic moment. Kim Dae-jung’s trip to the North was the first by a South Korean president since the peninsula was divided by the former Soviet Union and the United States at the end of World War II. In both Koreas euphoria ruled. Kim Jong-il accepted an invitation to make a return trip to the South “at an appropriate time.” Kim Dae-jung returned home to a tumultuous welcome.

The two Koreas began holding bilateral ministerial conferences, and several hundred separated families were reunited for a few days. South and North Korean athletes marched together in the opening ceremony at the Sydney Olympics in September 2000. It appeared that Kim’s “sunshine policy” of engagement with North Korea was working; for the first time Koreans were determining their own fate without interference from the major powers.

Kim Dae-jung’s sunshine policy was inspired by Aesop’s fable “The Sun and the Wind,” the moral of which is that gentle and warm persuasion is often more effective than brute force. For his effort Kim Dae-jung received the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize. Nev-

ertheless, his sunshine policy is in trouble today in both South Korea and the United States. The euphoria following the historic summit has dissipated. The two Koreas seem to have retreated to their previous postures and appear to be back to square one, as if the June 2000 summit had never happened. What went wrong with the sunshine policy?

First, South Korea’s ability to help North Korea economically was extremely limited; South Korea could not solve North Korea’s dire economic problems (some suspected that the sunshine policy was basically a policy of bribing the North). Second, Kim Dae-jung initiated his sunshine policy without building a sufficient consensus at home. His liberal-leftist political credentials were ill suited to the task of engaging North Korea, and many South Koreans suspected Kim was a North Korean sympathizer. Third, the new Bush administration’s hostile attitude toward North Korea had a devastating effect on Kim’s sunshine policy. Finally, North Korea itself was an extremely difficult country to deal with because of its rigid ideology and its hostile attitude toward South Korea and the United States. Thus, Kim Dae-jung’s ability to achieve his goal of engagement with North Korea was extremely limited from the start.

### ENTICING NORTH KOREA

It is generally believed that Kim Jong-il accepted Kim Dae-jung’s summit proposal because of North Korea’s dire economic conditions. Since 1994 several million North Koreans may have perished from starvation caused by systemic failure and bad weather. North Korea needed an opening with the South; its pride alone could not feed the country’s 21 million people. Kim Jong-il may also have believed that engagement with the South would give him the chance to present himself as leader of both Koreas and improve diplomatic relations with the West and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kim Jong-il’s cooperation may have had other causes. His father, the late Kim Il-sung, and former South Korean President Kim Young-sam planned to hold a summit in 1994 but Kim Il-sung’s sudden death that year prevented it. It was thus easy for Kim Jong-il to restart a summit process his father had planned.

North Korea also viewed Kim Dae-jung in a positive light because of his credentials as a champion of democracy and his long struggle against the successive dictators in South Korea. Kim's Berlin Declaration of March 9, 2000 had impressed North Korea. It guaranteed North Korea's security, promised assistance to North Korea's economic recovery efforts, and supported North Korea's inroad into international arenas.

What made the Berlin Declaration credible to Kim Jong-il, however, was the ongoing joint venture between the Koreas known as the Mount Kumgang tourism project (Mount Kumgang resort is in North Korea, a few miles north of the thirty-eighth parallel). The project, which began when Kim Dae-jung became president in 1998, had been initiated in 1989 by Hyundai Company owner Chung Ju-yung. This billion-dollar venture was a lucrative deal for Kim Jong-il but economically unsound for South Korea. In any case Chung Ju-yung and Kim Dae-jung became partners for the sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea. Chung promised to pay North Korea \$900 million over seven years for the right to run the first tourist service in North Korean territory. This venture was bound to fail from the very beginning because its goal was unrealistic and the tour was too expensive. Chung anticipated attracting over 500,000 visitors a year from the South, each paying about \$1,000 (now reduced to about \$300). Moreover, tourists were not allowed to visit any other part of North Korea or have any contact with local North Koreans. South Koreans soon began to lose interest in the tour and complained that the entire scheme was designed to subsidize North Korea.

People knew that Chung Ju-yung was a risk taker all his life who had built a vast economic empire in South Korea. The \$12-million monthly fee to Kim Jong-il, however, was clearly a money-losing proposition: only North Korea would gain at the expense of Hyundai.

As of November 30, 2001, 427,363 people had visited Mount Kumgang, but this number did not meet expectations and Hyundai was unable to pay the monthly fee to North Korea. The tourism project that had been initially hailed as a tangible sign of the thawing relations between the Koreas remains in deep trouble as the number of tourists continues to dwindle due to an economic slump in South Korea, a loss of interest in tours, and stalemate between the Koreas. Beginning last year the Kim Dae-jung government initiated the idea of lending millions of dollars from the Inter-Korean

Cooperation Fund to subsidize the tour business, but South Korea's opposition politicians have been vehemently opposed to this idea.

This venture's possible failure is a nightmare for Kim Dae-jung, who staked his presidency on the sunshine policy. Pyongyang began to accuse the South of reneging on the Mount Kumgang tourism contract. In January 2002 the South Korean government panicked and decided to give subsidies to students and family members who have relatives in North Korea visiting Mount Kumgang. North Korea has reciprocated by asking South Korean tourists to visit Pyongyang between April 29 and June 29, 2002 for the Arirang Festival, which is designed to prop up Kim Jong-il's image. North Korea also talked about opening an overland tour route from Mount Kumgang to Pyongyang.

### KIM'S IMAGE BURNISHED . . .

South Korea is essentially a conservative nation and does not tolerate sympathy for North Korea. For this reason many Koreans judged that Kim Dae-jung would never be president of South Korea. President Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) nearly killed Kim, and President Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) sentenced him to death. (Kim, a pro-democracy activist, had incurred the ire of these two generals when they had ruled the country under martial law.) In the 1997 presidential election Kim barely won, taking only 40.3 percent of the vote to his opponent's 38.6 percent. His mandate was extremely weak. Nevertheless, once in office, Kim enjoyed the blessing of the people and won international recognition as Korea's Nelson Mandela. South Korea in 1997 was in the midst of an economic crisis. South Koreans looked to the new president to solve the country's economic problems, including paralyzing labor unrest due to the restructuring of the South Korean economy (Kim, however, has achieved only mixed results in dealing with these problems).

As for his sunshine policy toward the North, South Koreans have been closely watching Kim Dae-jung. Those who are familiar with Korean politics know that regional antipathy between inhabitants of Kyungsang and Cholla provinces complicates matters. Kim Dae-jung, who hails from Cholla, is distrusted by those in Kyungsang, who charge that Kim "gives, gives, and gives" and gets nothing in return from North Korea. Yet many South Koreans throughout the country were furious when President Kim permitted the unconditional return to the North of those North Koreans jailed in South Korea who refused to accept the South Korean constitution and

### SEPTEMBER 11 AND NORTH KOREA

NORTH KOREA HAS JOINED the worldwide condemnation of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. It has since pledged to sign United Nations–sponsored antiterrorist treaties—the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the International Convention Against the Taking of Hostages. At the same time it has occasionally condemned the United States for its hostile policy toward North Korea. But North Korea generally has maintained a low profile and has deliberately avoided provoking the United States since the Afghan war started in October 2001. Although North Korea has complained that Bush's January 2002 "axis of evil" speech promotes instability on the Korean peninsula, it has maintained a peaceful façade thus

far. This restraint can be viewed as a demonstration of North Korea's desire to keep its door open to restart a dialogue with the United States. And Bush himself has already indicated his intention to talk to North Korea.

North Korea did dramatically curtail its interaction with South Korea and the United States after Kim Dae-jung's meeting with President Bush in March 2001, but it also expanded its contact in the international arena. North Korea has established diplomatic relations with a number of European nations, including Germany. Kim Jong-il has visited China several times and went to Moscow for a summit with President Vladimir Putin in the summer of 2001. Kim has sent over 500 North Koreans abroad, mostly to Europe and Canada, to receive technical training in promoting economic growth. *M.L.*

authority while thousands of South Koreans—kidnapped fishermen and prisoners of the Korean War—still remain in North Korean jails. The mass media in general have not been very kind to Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy. The *Choson Daily*, one of the most influential conservative papers in South Korea, has been outwardly hostile to the president, and the *Daily* and the government have been at war for the past four years.

Many South Koreans charged that the June 2000 summit between the two leaders diminished South Korea's sense of national security because it provided an opportunity for Kim Jong-il to "de-demonize" himself. Until June 12, 2000, Seoul and Washington viewed Kim Jong-il as a reclusive madman, but on June 13, 2000 he became a respected, affable, and able leader with a great sense of humor. The summit was a smashing success in shoring up the image of Kim Jong-il. This abrupt change of attitude bewildered older South Koreans, who still see the North as a threat. Koreans momentarily forgot about the Korean War and the many atrocities committed by North Korean terrorist agents in the past, such as the 1969 raid on the Blue House (the South Korean White House); the 1983 massacre in Rangoon, Burma of the entire South Korean cabinet; the 1987 downing of a civilian airliner; and the frequent intrusions of North Korean submarines into South Korean waters.

Conservative South Koreans argued that basically nothing has been achieved by the sunshine policy, and complain that the June summit was a big show that enabled Kim Dae-jung to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The two Koreas are still enemies and

maintain their offensive deployments along the demilitarized zone dividing the two countries. They also maintain that what's really important has never been discussed between the two, such as confidence-building measures, the four-power talks (the two Koreas, the United States, and China) to guarantee peace on the Korean peninsula, and a new peace treaty. Trips, drinking toasts, and photo opportunities have nothing to do with the real issues: missiles, North Korea's nuclear program, and tension reduction.

### ... ONLY TO BE DISCREDITED

Every South Korean president since 1948 has been discredited in South Korea. Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) was overthrown by students. General Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) was assassinated. Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) and Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993) were jailed. Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) was disgraced by the 1997 economic crisis. Kim Dae-jung is no exception. In his January 2002 New Year's press conference, Kim Dae-jung apologized to the nation for the successive scandals that had occurred during his tenure. Officials at the Blue House, the National Intelligence Agency, the Public Prosecution, and the National Police Agency have been charged with corruption. The president's own son was implicated as well. The coverage of corruption charges involving high officials has appeared daily in the South Korean newspapers, with thugs, gangsters, prosecutors, politicians, and Blue House officials tangled in a web of corruption scandals. South Korea's prosecutor general resigned in January, greatly tarnishing the president and the ruling Millennium

Democratic Party (MDP). A leading national newspaper wrote recently, "Our state is in a state of civil war, only without guns and swords."

This will be a volatile year for South Korea. Mayoral and gubernatorial elections will be held in April, a dress rehearsal for the December presidential election. The party convention to be held by the MDP on April 20 to nominate its presidential candidate is expected to be a cantankerous and messy affair; since President Kim—citing a desire to rise above partisan politics—resigned from the presidency of the MDP last year, there has been a vacuum of power, policy, and vision. The party is torn by factions. The opposition Grand National Party (GNP), headed by Lee Hoi-chang, is also faction ridden and is expected to hold its nominating convention soon after the MDP's convention.

### THE COLD WAR COMES TO THE BLUE HOUSE

The Blue House was alarmed when George W. Bush won the presidency in 2001. The Kim government worried that Bush, who in its view knew nothing about North Korea, might undermine the progress the two Koreas had made so far. Bush's national security team included many hawkish cold war warriors: Dick Cheney (vice president), Donald Rumsfeld (defense secretary), Condoleezza Rice (national security adviser), Richard Armitage (deputy secretary of state), and Paul Wolfowitz (deputy secretary of defense), to mention a few. The Bush team and the Republican leadership in general had been deeply suspicious of the Clinton administration's efforts to seek a broader settlement embracing nuclear- and missile-related issues with North Korea.

During the Clinton years, North Korea and the United States held a number of important meetings. In 1994 the two countries negotiated an Agreed Framework proposal to freeze North Korea's nuclear program and establish a United States–led international consortium known as KEDO (Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization) to finance a \$4.6-billion light-water-reactors project for North Korea. President Clinton's Korean emissary, former Defense Secretary William Perry, successfully negotiated a temporary freeze on North Korean missile testing. Perry's 1999 mission to North Korea also saw the United States relax most economic sanctions against North Korea. On October 9–12, 2000, Jo Myung Rok, first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission and head of the Political Bureau of the Korean People's Army of North Korea, visited Clinton at the White House as a special envoy of Kim Jong-il. The visit was followed by Sec-

retary of State Madeleine Albright's historic visit to Pyongyang on October 25, 2000. Albright and the North Korean leader discussed missile testing and a host of bilateral issues. From Pyongyang, she went directly to Seoul, where she immediately briefed Kim Dae-jung on the results of her visit to North Korea. Toward the end of the Clinton term, President Clinton himself entertained the idea of going to North Korea, but the trip never took place.

As the Kim Dae-jung administration suspected, once the Bush foreign policy team was assembled in January 2001, a hostile attitude toward North Korea surfaced immediately. When the politically moderate Colin Powell indicated that the Bush administration would follow the Clinton policy line toward North Korea, he was silenced at once by his hawkish colleagues in the White House. In early March 2001, Powell went out of his way to denounce North Korea as a threat and called Kim Jong-il a despot.

Later in March, Kim Dae-jung became the first foreign leader to visit the Bush White House. But Kim's meeting with Bush dealt a blow to his sunshine policy. In a joint press conference with Kim, Bush embarrassed the South Korean president by saying that he did not trust Kim Jong-il; Bush's characterization of Kim Jong-il was taken to indicate strong disapproval of Kim Dae-jung's engagement policy toward North Korea.

Bush's remarks had three immediate consequences. First, it refroze Washington–Pyongyang relations, which had been carefully nurtured during the Clinton presidency. Second, it resulted in the cancellation of high-level talks between the two Koreas as contacts between them were halted. North Korea reacted angrily, branding Kim Dae-jung a "running dog of the United States" for his attempt to get Washington's endorsement of his policy. Third, the Bush administration's hawkish attitude toward North Korea became the prime source of deep disagreement between President Kim Dae-jung and the major opposition leader, Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party, who openly sided with President Bush. President Kim's aides began to blame Bush's remarks about North Korea for the deterioration in the sunshine policy and the lack of movement toward reconciliation between the two Koreas since Bush's inauguration (the former unification minister told this author that if Al Gore had been elected president, none of this would have happened). Then, in his State of the Union address on January 29, 2002, President Bush singled out North Korea, along with Iran and Iraq,

as a member of an “axis of evil.” Many American and Korean experts on North Korea have called Bush’s rhetoric “risky and ineffective,” believing that it needlessly antagonized North Korea and widened a split in the South Korean–American alliance.

Bush’s hostile attitude toward North Korea has had other negative consequences for South Korea’s domestic politics. Liberals and leftists who have expressed anti-American views have become even more convinced that the Bush team’s reluctance to endorse the sunshine policy was dictated by America’s vested interests. Defense contractors and conservative political leaders in the United States who push for a United States missile defense system must, they believe, exaggerate North Korean threats. Demonizing North Korea by constantly citing criminal enterprises in that country—such as drug trafficking, terrorism, and nuclear programs—is in this group’s interests.

South Korean leftists are convinced that the Defense Department fears that the normalization of North and South Korean relations and United States–North Korea relations could threaten the future of the United States military presence in Korea. Accordingly, the Bush administration has no immediate plans to change the status quo on the Korean peninsula and finds it useful to keep the North Korean threat alive to justify America’s military presence in Korea.

### NORTH KOREA’S SPOKESMAN?

Kim Dae-jung’s sunshine policy contains built-in weaknesses. Kim Dae-jung cannot afford to criticize Kim Jong-il because of his fear of antagonizing him. Kim Dae-jung has been trapped by this logic. Thus, his sunshine policy is built on the premise that North Korea will behave reasonably. But that cannot be guaranteed. Kim Dae-jung has taken on the job of point man for North Korea to make his sunshine policy successful. This automatically

<sup>2</sup>Kim Dae-jung has been telling the world that North Korea is serious about reform and openness, as shown by Kim Jong-il’s frequent trips to China, which indicate that he plans to embrace economic reform and an open-door policy. President Kim has also emphasized the importance of Kim Jong-il’s recent reference to a new way of thinking, which echoes Mikhail Gorbachev’s. Kim Dae-jung perhaps feels that he is required to say that North Korea is changing its Stalinist system to a market-centered system as in China, Vietnam, and Laos and that North Korea is following a route similar to China’s road to a market economy.

makes conservative South Koreans suspicious of Kim (in conversations with this author, many South Koreans in Seoul recently expressed the belief that Kim Dae-jung is being manipulated by North Korea). Kim Jong-il, they believe, has an outstanding public relations salesman: the president of South Korea.<sup>2</sup>

Kim Dae-jung is also obsessed with the fear of provoking North Korea. A good example is the case of Hwang Jang Yop. Hwang, the creator of North Korea’s *juche* (self-reliance) ideology and one of the most powerful men in North Korea, defected to South Korea in 1997. Hwang told South Korea that Kim Jong-il is a dangerous man and that North Korea is poised to invade South Korea. The North’s most senior defector, once highly publicized and even lionized in South Korea, is now an embarrassment for the Kim Dae-jung government because Kim Jong-il

denounces Hwang as a traitor. Hwang at the moment undermines the sunshine policy (the Seoul government has also refused to send Hwang

to the United States, which has expressed interest in learning about possible North Korean connections to international terrorist groups).

Even as the sunshine policy dims, the frail 78-year-old Kim Dae-jung continues to speak out for it. He tells audiences that he “will relentlessly push for the sunshine policy” and issues appeals to the United States that the “engagement policy offers the best hope for peace between the two Koreas.” In his January 2002 New Year’s press conference, Kim warned Bush not to say anything that might upset the North during his visit to South Korea on February 19–21, 2002. Bush toned down his harsh rhetoric about North Korea while visiting South Korea and China and expressed desire to restart talks with North Korea. In China, Bush solicited China’s help to begin a dialogue with North Korea. Perhaps Bush’s “axis of evil” speech will help the world understand the Korean situation better. His visit to Seoul was undoubtedly a good learning experience for him.

### DIVISION WITHIN THE SOUTH

Korea is not only divided between north and south: South Korea itself is deeply divided ideologically between supporters and opponents of the sunshine policy. Some South Koreans believe that the Kim Dae-jung government has better relations

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with North Korea than it does with the opposition party in South Korea. President Kim possibly did not anticipate this. Many conservative South Koreans (including former President Kim Young-sam) have accused Kim of appeasing North Korea. Lee Hoi-chang, the Grand National Party leader and a possible presidential candidate, never endorsed the sunshine policy. During a visit to the United States this January, Lee criticized Kim's focus on the sunshine policy. Lee's politically motivated remarks and Bush's reference to North Korea as "evil" effectively sabotaged Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy—at least for the moment.

Those who support President Kim are convinced more than ever that Washington—and the Bush administration in particular—are the biggest obstacles to peace on the Korean peninsula. For them, the United States is a trouble maker in East Asia. It sells weapons to Taiwan to provoke China and exaggerates North Korean threats. Although some may dismiss such arguments as a minority view, South Korean society has changed considerably since the 1950–1953 Korean War. Only the generation that remembers the Korean War openly supports the United States and appreciates its role in South Korea. But the majority of South Koreans were born after the war and have a limited understanding of why the United States fought in Korea. For this younger generation, North Korea's Kim Jong-il looks like a dynamic leader. They root for him, not George W. Bush. They promote the North's version of the war and politicize the allegation that United States army commanders ordered the killings of hundreds of civilians during the war.

This generation is convinced that the United States does not want the two Koreas to grow closer. Recent public opinion surveys by Sogang University suggest that South Koreans believe the security threat to South Korea comes from Japan, North Korea, and the United States almost equally. Many South Koreans fear that the United States might bomb North Korea. An overwhelming majority feel that when unification is achieved, the United States should withdraw its troops from South Korea if Korea's defense capability is adequate.

Many South Koreans now believe that the United States and Japan are less cooperative and that China and Russia are more cooperative on the promotion

of peace in the Korean peninsula. Only a decade ago, China and Russia were intensely disliked by South Koreans (the recent Sogang University polls showed that China and Russia were not considered a threat to South Korea). Today, the situation has reversed itself. Younger-generation Koreans believe that America's prolonged stay in Korea could stimulate more anti-American sentiment in the long run.

#### INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS IN PERSPECTIVE

Monitoring inter-Korean relations is like watching the stock market. When the leaders of the two Koreas met in 2000, it was like the Nasdaq index at its peak at 5,000—a magnificent bubble. Today, the two Koreas' peace index is sharply down compared to the high it reached in 2000. But one must not forget that the Nasdaq index today at 1,750 is much higher and therefore better than at 800. Likewise, until very recently contacts between the two Koreas hardly existed. No one can deny that the summit meeting, ministerial talks, exchanges of separated families, promotion of tourism, and a host of other meaningful transactions between the people of the two Koreas were due to the sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea. One cannot ignore that since the initiation of the sunshine policy in 1998, harsh North Korean propaganda attacking South Korea and broadcast across the thirty-eighth parallel has ceased. Military provocations virtually disappeared. Meetings between officials of the two Koreas have become routine. Many Western nations have expanded diplomatic ties with North Korea. Although Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy has been buffeted by political turbulence, it is not dead; his successor can only modify his policy, not abandon it altogether.

When Kim Dae-jung steps down as president in February 2003, as required by the constitution, Koreans will have learned many lessons from his sunshine policy. One is that the United States holds the key to the Korean question, although it denies it and is not quite ready to revamp or restructure the status quo on the Korean peninsula. Another lesson is that as long as South Koreans are deeply divided among themselves over what to do with North Korea and as long as the two Koreas have irreconcilable differences, it will be difficult for Koreans to decide their own fate. ■