THE DISPARITY BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA’S ENGAGEMENT AND SECURITY POLICIES TOWARDS NORTH KOREA: THE REALIST-LIBERAL PENDULUM

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the Sunshine Policy, South Korea has pursued a flexible and moderate engagement and economic policy towards North Korea, even at the cost of increased tensions with Washington. But while South Korea’s policy on inter-Korean relations has undergone a fundamental change, its security policy continues to be rather conservative, firmly grounded in Cold War parameters. This disparity between South Korea’s foreign and security policies forms the theme of this paper. The paper argues that the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun era should be regarded as a hedging period during which South Korea has sought to change the North’s behaviour and interests, while at the same time it has continued with its conservative security policy. It concludes that unless North Korean relations with South Korea and with other regional states, including security relations, undergo some fundamental transformation, the disparity between South Korea’s engagement and security policies will continue.

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1 The disparity between South Korea’s engagement\textsuperscript{2} and security policies

The election of Kim Dae-jung as president of the Republic of Korea (ROK—South Korea) in 1997 raised hopes for a change in inter-Korean relations. Expectations (and conservative doubts) were reinforced once Kim presented his new ‘Sunshine Policy’, which marked a redirection in South Korea’s policy towards the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea) from containment to engagement (Son 2006). The philosophy behind this policy was to engage with the DPRK in order to convince it to change incrementally, and to avoid hostility and antagonism between the two states (Kwon and Lim 2006: 134).

Roh Moo-hyun was seen as Kim Dae-jung’s political heir, and his election as president in 2002 was expected to lead to a continuation of Kim’s Sunshine Policy and once again raised hopes in the liberal camp and doubts in the conservative camp. Roh Moo-hyun added a regional perspective to the Sunshine Policy with his ‘Policy of Peace and Prosperity’, conceived to create a balance between peace and prosperity in the Korean peninsula and the Northeast Asian region (Kim Choong Nam 2007: 376-80).

The implementation of the Sunshine Policy from 1998 brought many changes to the Korean peninsula but it did not solve the inter-Korean conflict. In fact, from a military and security point of view, the two countries remained in a state of war. Both continued their military build-up and improvements in their strength and technology, although South Korea, with its economic supremacy over the impoverished North, had the clear advantage. South Korea also had the benefit of the continued presence of United States (US) forces, stationed in Korea since the Korean War (1950-53).

The Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun North Korean policy raises a puzzle. How was the ROK able to pursue a liberal-oriented engage-

\textsuperscript{2} Neither North nor South Korea views relations between them as ‘foreign affairs’ but as ‘inter-Korean relations’, hence the use of the term ‘engagement’ in this paper. This is symbolised by the fact that in both, their mutual relations are not handled by the Foreign Ministry but by other bodies. Hence the North Korean concern early in 2008 when the incoming South Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, announced that he intended to abolish the Ministry of Unification and give its remit to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The decision was later overturned.