

**KOREA BACKGROUNDER:
HOW THE SOUTH VIEWS
ITS BROTHER FROM ANOTHER PLANET**

14 December 2004



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KOREA BACKGROUNDER:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A strong majority of South Koreans agree on the need to engage North Korea but there is no consensus on the most effective means. As the debate over how to deal with the northern brother intensifies, deep fissures are forming among the public. Significant generational and political shifts have transformed views in ways that could undermine U.S. policy in the region unless Washington develops a better understanding of the situation in Seoul.

The generation that lived through the Korean War is being supplanted by the generation that led the fight for democratisation in the 1980s. Younger South Koreans are less easily swayed by appeals to anti-communism and less reflexively pro-American. They are more accustomed to prosperity and less fearful of North Korea, and thus more willing to shake up their country's system in the name of economic and social justice. They are more progressive and nationalistic in their views, although few are true followers of Pyongyang's ideology. This generation, now in its 30s and 40s, will dominate South Korean politics for years to come.

As a result of this generational shift, there has been a change in both the style and substance of South Korea's approach to North Korea. While the vast majority still view the North as a threat, confrontation has been replaced by an emphasis on cooperation and reconciliation. The removal of government restrictions on inter-Korean exchanges has led to an explosion of contacts, helping to demystify the North in South Koreans' eyes. Moreover, students are no longer being taught to fear Pyongyang as their parents were. A majority of citizens now see North Korea more as an object for dialogue and assistance.

While engagement of North Korea remains controversial, there is an emerging consensus that:

- ❑ North-South economic cooperation can be mutually beneficial;
- ❑ gradual reunification is preferable to sudden collapse and absorption;
- ❑ war on the Korean Peninsula is unthinkable;
- ❑ North Korea's nuclear program is undesirable and should be negotiated away if possible, but it is not directed at South Korea and is not in itself reason to end engagement; and
- ❑ it is necessary to help the people of North Korea overcome their economic hardships.

At the same time, there is a growing divergence about:

- ❑ the capacity of the Kim Jong-il regime to change;
- ❑ the desirability of dealing directly with the North Korean government;
- ❑ the proper way to approach North Korean human rights problems;
- ❑ whether to reduce legal restrictions on information about and contact with North Korea; and
- ❑ the degree of reciprocity that should be demanded from North Korea.

The changes in South Korea's perceptions of North Korea intensify the debate about the future of the alliance with the U.S. A clear majority of South Koreans still regard North Korea as a potential threat, even though they consider an invasion unlikely.

Most do not want U.S. troops to leave the peninsula, although some seem to regard the alliance as necessary, as much to restrain Washington as to deter Pyongyang. A clear majority is uneasy with what it sees as the Bush administration's hard-line stance toward the North. Few support regime change. Most instead favour gradual reconciliation and reunification. This split is exacerbated by the lack of close ties between South Korea's new political leadership and the ascendant Republicans in Washington. Two separate U.S.-South Korean dialogues are taking place: the people out of power in Seoul are talking to the people in power in Washington, and vice versa.

It is not true, as alarmists on the right sometimes claim that South Korea is being taken down the path of socialism. Today's young people have a dual mindset about North Korea: they are more accepting of dialogue with the regime but do not embrace the system. However, as moderates are being drowned out by the more vocal extremes, these subtle distinctions are being lost. In a country and culture that has never been adept at accommodating diversity of opinion, the crucial question is whether it will be possible to overcome the "South-South conflict" (*nam-nam galdeung*) and develop a coherent approach to the North Korean problem.

Seoul/Brussels, 14 December 2004

KOREA BACKGROUNDER:

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I. INTRODUCTION

While the Korean Peninsula is at times called the last bastion of the Cold War, profound changes have taken place over the last twenty years. The end of the superpower confrontation had vastly different effects on the two Koreas. In the North, the end of Soviet subsidies led to almost complete economic collapse, but with little discernible change in internal or external politics. During the same period, the South moved from dictatorship to democracy, and from a developing country to the world's twelfth largest trading nation. As a result, there is a newer generation of South Korean leaders with very different ideas than their elders about how to deal with their northern sibling. While North Korea's attempts to open to the outside world have had some impact on attitudes, domestic political and social changes in South Korea play a much greater role in explaining the shift in perspective.

Traditionally, the two Koreas have been locked in a struggle for legitimacy, with each claiming to represent the true government of the peninsula. North Korea based its legitimacy on anti-imperialistic nationalism and a peculiar form of socialism known as *juche* (self-reliance). In South Korea, nationalism was more problematic, given the high percentage of the ruling class that had collaborated with Japanese colonial rule and the country's dependence on its military alliance with the United States. Thus, military dictators -- Park Chung-hee (1961-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1987) -- used economic growth and anti-communism as the pillars to justify their rule. Left-wing nationalism, advocating reunification on North Korean terms, or questioning the U.S. military presence, were strictly forbidden under the National Security Law of this period. The transition to a democratic form of government in 1987 ushered in an

era of greater freedom of speech and assembly, allowing new civil movements to blossom. One result was questioning about whether the life-or-death confrontation with North Korea should be abandoned in favour of a more cooperative relationship.

This re-evaluation was prompted by the thawing of the Cold War. When all the world's communist countries except Cuba refused to honour North Korea's call to boycott the Seoul Olympics in 1988, South Korean President Roh Tae-woo -- the first democratically elected leader since Park's 1961 military coup -- seized on the opening to pursue détente with the Communist Bloc. Roh launched a series of moves collectively known as "Nordpolitik". By the end of his term, he had established diplomatic relations with both the Soviet Union and China, achieved joint admission for both Koreas into the United Nations, and signed the first-ever direct agreement between North and South Korea in 1992, although its terms have never been implemented. The cumulative effect was to make "peaceful coexistence" with the North politically acceptable within South Korea for the first time.

Roh's successor, Kim Young-sam, assumed the presidency in 1993 as revelations of North Korea's nuclear ambitions were coming to the fore. An unprecedented flurry of negotiations between North Korea and the U.S. ensued, in which South Korea pushed hard to be included. Kim agreed to hold a summit with North Korean President Kim Il-sung, but it was cancelled due to the latter's sudden death. He did succeed in bringing about the four-party talks between North Korea, South Korea, the U.S. and China. While they achieved little of substance, they did establish the process of regular dialogue between the two Koreas. In 1995, North Korea revealed that it was suffering from severe food shortages, and the government of South Korea responded with food

aid. Non-governmental contacts, however, remained largely restricted.

By the 1997 presidential election, the foundation had been laid for a restructuring of Seoul's approach to its long-time enemy in Pyongyang. The election gave a narrow victory to Kim Dae-jung, the septuagenarian opposition leader who was running for the fourth time. Throughout his years as a democracy campaigner, Kim had consistently advocated a more open policy toward the North, a stance that during the 1970s and 1980s had him labelled as a communist and made him the target for arrest and assassination attempts by South Korean governments. In power, he set about implementing his long-held dream in hopes of securing a legacy as the man who put Korea on the road to reconciliation and reunification. In doing so, he fundamentally transformed the way South Koreans view their northern counterparts.

II. BREAKTHROUGH AND DISAPPOINTMENT

A. THE SUNSHINE POLICY

Kim Dae-jung's attempt to remake policy toward North Korea was known as the "Sunshine Policy". Kim felt that if North Korea were offered economic incentives to open up to the outside world, it would gradually change its system and take a less belligerent stance. He thus held out a range of benefits,¹ including food aid and economic exchanges, and encouraged friendly nations, such as Australia and European Union (EU) countries, to establish diplomatic relations. Under the stated principle of separating politics from economics, he lifted many of the restrictions that prevented South Korean citizens from dealing directly with North Korea. He helped the Hyundai Corporation to establish tours to scenic Mt. Kumgang in the North and convinced Pyongyang to allow reunions of long separated family members. Most famously, he travelled to Pyongyang and held summit talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, a breakthrough that earned him the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize.

While President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy achieved many of its goals, it failed to build a broad popular consensus in support of the approach. Having waited his whole life for the opportunity, Kim was willing to buck opposition by the National Assembly and conservative public opinion rather than compromise. He believed that the summit meeting, and the accompanying pictures of the leaders of the two long-time enemies warmly embracing, would eventually bring public opinion to support engagement.² Many analysts, like Lee Su-hoon of the Graduate School of North Korean Studies at Kyungnam University, believe the summit did exactly that,³ and polling data is supportive. A survey by the Korean Institute for National Unification⁴ in April 2003, shortly after Kim left office, found broad support for the Sunshine Policy: 64 per cent of respondents approved, and 69 per cent

¹ Kim Jong-Il promised at the time to make a return visit to Seoul but this has not yet happened.

² Crisis Group interview, Philip Won-hyuk Lim, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 7 October 2004.

⁴ The Korean Institute for National Unification is a government-sponsored think tank, under the Prime Minister's office, <http://kinu.or.kr>.

wanted to continue engagement.⁵ However, the failure to include opposition leaders in development of the policy made engagement a partisan issue that their parties were more inclined to fight.

Opponents of the Sunshine Policy felt vindicated by revelations late in Kim's presidency that North Korea had received \$500 million⁶ (\$400 million from Hyundai and \$100 million from the South Korean government) shortly before the summit meeting. Although the scandal resulted in several criminal convictions, it did little to change minds about the need for engagement with the North. Those who were supportive before the scandal broke tended to dismiss the criticisms as overblown. An analyst with close ties to some of the main figures in the case notes that the payment from Hyundai was in exchange for business rights in North Korea and argues that the government payment came about because Hyundai needed a political guarantee for its investment. He sees the prosecutions as a political power play through which the new president was able to purge Kim Dae-jung loyalists from his party.⁷

Sceptics of engagement view the summit payment more cynically. As one elderly man put it, "President Kim Dae-jung gave North Korea money, held a summit meeting, and won the Nobel Prize. We have to wonder, if the money hadn't been paid, would there still have been a summit meeting? Was Kim Dae-jung just trying to buy the Nobel Prize?"⁸ Park Syung-je of the Institute of Peace Affairs, a critic of engagement, argues that Kim Jong-il never used the money to help his people but kept it while continuing to export drugs and counterfeit U.S. currency.⁹ A former Ministry of Unification official, however, argues that the scandal had something of a salutary effect by forcing government officials to be more cautious in their

dealings with the North and to report them more fully to the National Assembly.¹⁰

While time will tell whether the summit marked the "first step to reunification", as was proclaimed at the time, for now it is regarded as more of a symbolic than a substantive breakthrough. Asked to list the primary accomplishment of the Sunshine Policy, more South Koreans cited family reunions (49 per cent) than the summit meeting itself (24 per cent).¹¹ Nonetheless, the Sunshine Policy succeeded in demystifying North Korea and undermining its image as the sworn enemy of the South. The news footage of Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-il vigorously shaking hands at the Pyongyang airport remains an enduring image suggestive of possible reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula.

B. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In an attempt to differentiate himself from his predecessor, President Roh Moo-hyun, elected in 2002, renamed his approach to North Korea the "Peace and Prosperity Policy". By adding the word "prosperity", the new government was responding to criticism that the projects undertaken under the Sunshine Policy have generally been unprofitable. Roh also pledged to do a better job than Kim in building a national consensus on engagement, and to increase involvement of the National Assembly. Under the "peace" part of the policy, the Roh administration put forth goals for solving the nuclear crisis and building a lasting security regime on the peninsula to replace the armistice that ended the 1950-1953 war.¹²

In practice, however, there has been little significant change in the government's approach. Roh has not introduced many new initiatives, focusing instead on implementing the agreements that were reached under the previous administration.¹³ This may be because the major projects agreed to at the 2000 summit -- connecting the railway between the two Koreas and opening an industrial park in Kaesong -- have yet to be completed. Lack of progress in the six-party nuclear

⁵ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", Korea Institute for National Unification, 2003 (in Korean), pp. 125-126. The survey was conducted face-to-face among 1,000 adults nationwide (excluding Cheju Island), chosen according to geographical distribution to match population age and sex ratios based on census data. Results were cross-tabulated to account for demographic data, including income and educational level.

⁶ Figures denoted in dollars (\$) in this report refer to U.S. dollars unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 25 October 2004.

⁹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Jun Bong-geun, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹¹ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 123-124.

¹² Information on the official government policy can be found at the website of the Ministry of Unification, <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/>.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

talks has also impeded the government's ability to introduce any new peace initiatives.¹⁴ Regardless, the government remains committed over the long run to a policy of engagement and cooperation.

Current inter-Korean economic cooperation can be subdivided into three categories: commercial, non-commercial, and humanitarian. Commercial trade includes profit-based enterprises such as the Mt. Kumgang tour project and the Kaesong industrial park, as well as modest import-export activity. Non-commercial trade is focused on infrastructure building, mainly through the provision of materials to North Korea to connect roads and railways across the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). Humanitarian aid consists of direct delivery of food, fertiliser, and other necessities to relieve suffering in North Korea.

The South Korean government has increasingly focused on commercial trade; in 2003 this made up 57 per cent of inter-Korean economic exchanges, with humanitarian aid accounting for 37 per cent and non-commercial trade only 6 per cent. The total for the year was \$720 million, a figure that accounted for only 0.2 per cent of South Korea's total trade volume, but 32 per cent of North Korea's.¹⁵ Supporters of the engagement policy argue that non-commercial trade has not only potential long-term economic benefits by helping to rebuild North Korea's infrastructure, but also security aspects; North Korea has had to remove military personnel and equipment from some parts of the DMZ to allow the building of road and rail lines.¹⁶

Although the nuclear crisis may have slowed engagement somewhat, it has certainly not derailed it. A groundbreaking ceremony was held at the Kaesong industrial park on 20 October 2004, with a bipartisan delegation from the South Korean National Assembly in attendance. The complex is on schedule to open in 2005, with a pilot project of nineteen South Korean companies. South Korea also plans to open a government liaison office in Pyongyang in 2005 to develop joint projects for mineral extraction. South Korean travel is on the rise; nearly 10,000 visited North Korea in the first half of 2004 for tourism or

trade.¹⁷ Around 800,000 South Koreans, one out of every 60, have visited Mt. Kumgang. This increased interaction is helping to change South Koreans' views of North Korea; according to a survey, nearly half of 8,000 Mt. Kumgang tourists said their views toward unification had gone from negative to positive after seeing North Korea with their own eyes. Only 8 per cent had a more negative view after the trip.¹⁸

On the humanitarian side, South Korea has donated \$1.06 billion in food and other assistance to North Korea since June 1995. Nearly two-thirds has come from the government, the rest from private donations.¹⁹ During the Kim Young-sam administration, all South Korean aid was funnelled through the National Committee for the Red Cross, but Kim Dae-jung allowed non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to develop direct contacts with their North Korean counterparts.²⁰ NGOs providing humanitarian aid include Christian and Buddhist groups, as well as secular organisations.

While the idea of helping starving North Koreans is universally popular, the proper method remains highly controversial. For many South Korean NGOs, this humanitarian aid is not only a moral imperative, but also a way to build relationships with North Korean counterparts, something that had previously been restricted by both governments on the peninsula. This desire reflects the long-term goal of reunification. Oh Jae-shik of World Vision Korea,²¹ a leading aid provider to North Korea, admits that unification is too big an issue to resolve via humanitarian aid alone, thinks it can help build relationships of trust that will make it easier to solve the political issues, thus paving the way for eventual unification.

Because of this, South Korean NGOs do not believe that applying the same approach international NGOs use in other humanitarian emergencies is appropriate

¹⁴ For a review of the six-party talks and possible ways forward, see Crisis Group Asia Report N°87, *North Korea: Where Next for the Nuclear Talks?*, 15 November 2004.

¹⁵ Figures provided by Park Jin, Director, Knowledge Partnership Program, Korean Development Institute School of International Management.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Park Jin, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

¹⁷ Figures from Ministry of Unification website, <http://www.unikorea.go.kr/>.

¹⁸ Hwang In-hyuk, "Mt. Kumgang Tours Sow Positive Views of Reunification", *Naeil Shinmun* (in Korean), 7 January 2004.

¹⁹ Figures provided to Crisis Group by Kwon Tae-jin, Director of North Korean Agricultural Affairs, Korea Rural Economic Institute.

²⁰ Chung Ok-nim, "The Role of South Korean NGOs: The Political Context", in L. Gordon Flake and Scott Snyder, ed., *Paved with Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea* (Westport, 2003).

²¹ World Vision Korea is the Seoul affiliate of the U.S.-based Christian aid and development group, World Vision International, <http://www.wvi.org>.

in the North Korean case. They have resisted attempts to coordinate efforts between NGOs and UN agencies, fearing that this would raise North Korean suspicions about their motivations.²² This has led to disagreements with international NGOs, who complain that South Korean NGOs, many of which lack experience in international aid, are overly willing to give in to North Korean requests without proper monitoring procedures.²³ Even some South Korean humanitarian workers, such as Kang Moon-kyu, founder of the Korean Sharing Movement,²⁴ worry that the proliferation of South Korean NGOs allows the North Korean government to promote competition among aid groups to get more assistance.²⁵ South Korean NGOs attempted to address these problems by developing their own code of conduct for dealing with the North but failed to reach an agreement.²⁶

C. CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

Although the Roh government has forged ahead with engagement, all is not rosy in inter-Korean cooperation. Hyundai, one of the largest South Korean conglomerates (*chaebol*), took the lead in developing projects with North Korea during the Kim Dae-jung administration, largely due to the personal interests of the company's founder, Chung Ju-Yung, who was born in the North. Since Chung's death in 2001 at the age of 86, the Hyundai Asan subsidiary, formed in 1999 to manage inter-Korean cooperation, has sustained large losses on those projects, and is backing off from making major new investments in the North. Other large corporations have been reluctant to step into the breach; having largely moved beyond labour-intensive manufacturing, they see little benefit from the availability of cheap, unskilled workers in North Korea. Government attempts to court the Samsung Corporation, which has emerged from the recent economic downturn as the largest and healthiest of the *chaebol*, have been unsuccessful.

For the immediate future, therefore, small- and medium-sized firms will take the lead in economic

projects with North Korea.²⁷ Their success or failure will go a long way to determining the future of inter-Korean economic cooperation. The Korea Land Corporation,²⁸ which is in charge of administrating the Kaesong complex, has enough funding to operate as long as political support remains.²⁹ Because of the political importance placed on the project by both governments, it is likely that South Korea will subsidise the pilot project as much as necessary to ensure the firms make a profit.³⁰

While economic progress has been slow but steady, the security situation has arguably taken a turn for the worse. North Korean violations of the Northern Limit Line separating the territorial waters of the two Koreas in the Yellow Sea increased to fifteen incidents in 2004, up from six in 2003, despite a June agreement to prevent naval clashes.³¹ Most problematically, the six-party talks have failed to make any progress toward inducing North Korea to give up its nuclear programs.³² Although a survey showed that 71 per cent of South Koreans do not favour linking economic engagement with security issues,³³ experts broadly agree that any move by Pyongyang toward becoming an open nuclear power could lead to the cessation of South Korean engagement.³⁴ While many observers feel that the current nuclear ambiguity can continue indefinitely, Hyun In-taek, a political scientist at Korea University, argues that the nuclear issue will need to be resolved within a year or two to prevent the breakdown of engagement.³⁵

²² Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 22 November 2004.

²³ Crisis Group meeting, Seoul, 15 November 2004.

²⁴ The Korean Sharing Movement is a South Korean non-governmental organisation founded to provide humanitarian assistance to North Korea, <http://www.ksm.or.kr>.

²⁵ Crisis Group interview, 17 November 2004.

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Oh Jae-shik, Seoul, 22 November 2004. Humanitarian aid to North Korea will be the subject of a future Crisis Group report.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

²⁸ The Korea Land Corporation is a state-run company that carries out government-sponsored development projects.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Park Jin, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, October 2004.

³¹ The Northern Limit Line, an extension of the 1953 Armistice Line, has never been accepted by North Korea as a legal border.

³² Crisis Group Report, *North Korea: Where Next for the Nuclear Talks?*, op. cit.

³³ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 117-118.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Seoul, 5-6 October, 2004.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, 6 October 2004.

III. CHANGING VIEWS OF THE NORTH

The South Korean government's policy is both a cause and effect of a general change in attitude toward North Korea. Fifteen years after the Berlin Wall fell and Germany reunited, South Koreans no longer see reunification as right around the corner and are consequently re-evaluating their relationship with the North. As the debate on how to deal with North Korea intensifies, fissures along ideological and generational lines are widening.

A. THE POLITICAL ESTABLISHMENT

South Korea's political establishment has undergone a transformation over the past ten years. After decades of dominance by conservatives, the last two presidential elections have resulted in victories for the progressive forces. Unprecedented turnover in the legislative branch during the 2004 National Assembly elections, resulting in more than 60 per cent of current legislators serving their first term, confirmed the progressives' gains. The result is a younger, more liberal political establishment that largely backs engagement with North Korea.

As the nuclear crisis drags on, however, there are signs of a split within the government bureaucracy over how to deal with North Korea. A recent survey of officials found a distinct gap between the Ministry of Unification (MOU) and the National Security Agency (NSA). While 54 per cent of MOU officials favoured increasing aid to North Korea, 45 per cent of NSA officials want to reduce it, and an additional 10 per cent to end it altogether. A majority (74 per cent) of NSA officials believe that aid to North Korea should be linked to solution of the nuclear issue, while a plurality (42 per cent) in the MOU believe the two should be kept distinct.³⁶

Even within the Ministry of Unification there is some disagreement over how to approach North Korea. For example, according to a former MOU official, a split arose between working-level officials and political

appointees over whether South Korea should have supported a UN resolution condemning North Korea's human rights record. The former felt that since the resolution did not arise in the context of bilateral relations, there was no reason not to vote for it. While they realised that North Korea would be angry, they felt its dependence on South Korean aid meant that there would be no lasting damage to engagement efforts. The political appointees, fearful of offending Pyongyang, chose abstention.³⁷

This split reflects frustration at the working level with North Korea's failure to be more responsive to overtures. The careerists who occupy the higher levels of the government bureaucracy are mostly holdovers from earlier, more conservative administrations, and thus less inclined to be patient with Pyongyang. "Changing the bureaucracy's views of North Korea will require generational change, not just regime change" in South Korea, argues Chang Ho-soon, professor of mass communications at Soonchunghyang University.³⁸ Most government officials remain reluctant to criticise engagement publicly, however, lest they be accused of supporting the collapse of the North Korean regime.³⁹

B. PUBLIC OPINION

Overall, there has been a slow but steady improvement in South Korean views of the North in recent years, despite occasional downward blips in response to specific events.⁴⁰ The biggest fault lines are along age and ideological orientation. Older people and those who identify themselves as conservative are more likely to view North Korea with fear and suspicion and be sceptical of engagement. The younger generation, and those who consider themselves more liberal, are more likely to view North Korea as a brother in need of help and to support government's efforts at engagement.

Various polls bear out these trends. In 2003, the Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU) found 55 per cent of respondents positive when asked how North Korea should be viewed (either as "an object for aid" or as "an object for cooperation"). This was almost a complete reversal of a similar poll five years

³⁶ "54 per cent of Unification Ministry says, 'North Korean Aid Must be Increased'; 45 per cent of National Security Agency says, 'Aid Must be Reduced More'", *Hankyoreh Shinmun* (in Korean), 21 October 2004, p. 5. The survey was conducted over three days by two legislators from the ruling party among 208 individuals at the level of second secretary (*samugwan*) and above along with 55 academics or civil society activists.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Jun Bong-geun, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Chang Ho-soon, Seoul, 19 November 2004.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 7 October 2004.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

earlier, when 54 per cent responded negatively ("a country to guard against" or "a hostile country"). Age is increasingly a defining factor. In the more recent poll, a majority of respondents over 50 gave negative answers, while a majority of those under 40 responded positively.⁴¹ In a 2004 poll by *Sisa Journal*, a leading weekly news magazine, 11 per cent listed North Korea as their favourite country,⁴² the same percentage that cited it as the most disliked in another poll.⁴³ A plurality in only two groups listed North Korea as their favourite country: former student activists in the 1980s democracy movement (39 per cent),⁴⁴ and middle and high school students (26 per cent).⁴⁵ On average, when asked to rate their warmth toward North Korea on a temperature scale of 0 (very cold) to 100 (very warm), South Korean views came to a "slightly cool" 46 degrees.⁴⁶

1. The North Korean threat

South Koreans hold a nuanced view of the threat posed by North Korea, seeing the country as still dangerous but less capable than before. Most polls have found that more than 60 per cent see North Korea as continuing to pose a threat.⁴⁷ The number is considerably lower among former student activist leaders, only 14 per cent of whom view it as a threat.⁴⁸ But the perceived threat does not translate

into much concern about a new war any time soon. In most polls, about half of adults say war is possible.⁴⁹ When asked about its likelihood, however, the numbers went down. The daily newspaper *Dong-a Ilbo* found that 59 per cent considered war impossible in October 2000; a Gallup poll found that 58 per cent thought war was very or somewhat unlikely in November 2002.⁵⁰

Fear of war has steadily dropped.⁵¹ From 1988 to 1999, the U.S. Department of State asked South Koreans whether they feared a North Korean attack within the next three years. Affirmative responses peaked at nearly 80 per cent in 1991. By 1997 as many people saw an attack as unlikely as those who considered it likely, and by 1999 most saw it as unlikely.⁵² A poll conducted by *Joongang Ilbo* and the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies in September 2003 asked the same question and found that only 36 per cent considered a North Korean invasion possible within the next three years.⁵³

This reflects a widespread belief that North Korea no longer has the power to take over South Korea, even though it may retain such a desire. In a survey by the Korean Institute of National Unification, 52 per cent of respondents said that while they did not believe Pyongyang has abandoned its policy of communising the peninsula, it lacks the power to do so.⁵⁴ The South Korean defence minister reinforced this view when, during a National Assembly hearing, he dismissed the possibility of a North Korean artillery attack, arguing that the South Korean military could destroy North

⁴¹ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 61-62.

⁴² "Views of North Korea Tend Toward Extremes", *Sisa Journal* (in Korean), 30 September-7 October 2004, p. 32.

⁴³ "Things that Roh Moo-hyun Has Done Well Since His Inauguration", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 22 September 2004. The survey was conducted nationwide (excluding Cheju Island) between 19 August and 10 September 2004 with 1,200 adults over twenty and using multi-stage area random sampling. The margin of error was plus or minus 2.8 per cent within a 95 per cent confidence interval.

⁴⁴ *Sisa Journal*, op. cit. The role of the democracy movement in shaping attitudes toward North Korea is discussed in Section IV.

⁴⁵ "26 per cent of Youths Say, 'The Most Friendly Neighbouring Country is North Korea'", *Munwha Ilbo* (in Korean), 7 June 2004.

⁴⁶ Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, "Comparing South Korean and American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy", 2004, p. 16.

⁴⁷ *Sisa Journal*, op. cit., 70 per cent; Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 71-72, 60 per cent see the possibility of a North Korean military provocation; Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies? South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.", Rand Corporation, March 2004, p. 72, 69 per cent view North Korea as a danger.

⁴⁸ *Sisa Journal*, op. cit.

⁴⁹ "Things that Roh Moo-hyun Has Done Well Since His Inauguration", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 22 September 2004; Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 75-76.

⁵⁰ All polls cited in Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., p. 83. This study compared public opinion data from a wide variety of sources and chose the best available data based on a "weight of evidence" approach.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

⁵² Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., pp. 81-82.

⁵³ Cited in Derek Mitchell, ed., "Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance", CSIS Working Group Report, June 2004, p. 139. *Joongang Ilbo* conducted two separate face-to-face nationwide polls of adults from 15-17 September 2003, the first asking fifteen questions of 1,000 respondents, the second seventeen of 710.

⁵⁴ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 73-74.

Korea's artillery in six to eleven minutes.⁵⁵ Only among those old enough to have personal memories of the Korean War, the less educated, and low income respondents do a plurality believe that Pyongyang's communisation policy remains completely unchanged.⁵⁶ Several elderly retirees interviewed by Crisis Group, all of whom personally experienced the war, firmly believed that North Korea remained intent on communisation of the South.⁵⁷

North Korea's famine during the 1990s played a role in this reduced threat perception. Since the images of starvation began appearing, South Koreans have come to see North Koreans more as poor, starving brothers in need of help than as bloodthirsty communists.⁵⁸ In the KINU poll, 16 per cent cited aid as the main aspect of inter-Korean relations, while only 13 per cent cited hostility.⁵⁹ Hyun In-taek of Korea University, a leading conservative security specialist, agrees that during the height of the famine in 1997-1998, the threat was reduced as the military could not train due to food shortages. He believes the situation has changed since 2000, however, and that the North Korean military is again a serious threat.⁶⁰

The view that North Korea is incapable of conquering South Korea helps explain why, when asked which country poses the greatest threat to South Korea, as many people in their twenties answered the U.S. as North Korea (38 per cent). Not seeing a North Korean attack as realistic, the younger generation views the pre-emptive policy of the Bush administration as more likely to lead to war. Among the Korean War generation, however, the difference is much sharper -- 64 per cent see North Korea as the greatest threat, only 10 per cent cite the U.S.⁶¹ A 62-year old man said, "We older folks are very grateful to the U.S., because they saved us during the war. But these young people don't know anything, because they never experienced the war".⁶²

2. North Korean nuclear weapons

South Koreans are concerned about North Korean nuclear weapons development, even though they do not view the weapons as aimed at them. One poll showed that 75 per cent believed North Korea has nuclear weapons, and 88 per cent felt either 'very' or 'a bit' threatened by them. In the same poll, 59 per cent included North Korea becoming a nuclear power as a "critical threat" to their country's interests -- the second most common response after international terrorism (61 per cent).⁶³ Still, according to an April 2003 poll, only 12 per cent of respondents believed North Korea's main goal was to build nuclear weapons. The rest thought the nuclear program was designed either as a bargaining chip with the U.S. (42 per cent) or to distract attention from domestic problems (47 per cent).⁶⁴ While these responses may appear contradictory, they make sense considering that South Koreans have been living in the shadow of North Korea's conventional threat for over 50 years. A Gallup poll in December 2002, shortly after the second nuclear crisis arose, reported that only 28 per cent of South Koreans thought North Korean nuclear weapons were designed to attack Seoul.⁶⁵ "It would be good if North Korea stopped developing nuclear weapons, but there's no chance they'll use them against us, because we're too close geographically", argued a business major at Korea University.⁶⁶

Given that most South Koreans do not believe North Korea is hell-bent on building nuclear weapons, it is not surprising that they are also fairly optimistic about negotiating a peaceful solution to the crisis. According to one poll, half of all South Koreans thought the nuclear issue should be solved through U.S.-North Korean dialogue, 26 per cent through diplomatic pressure against North Korea, 21 per cent by economic sanctions, and only 3 per cent through military action.⁶⁷ While 52 per cent were optimistic

⁵⁵ "Allies Could Destroy N. Korean Artillery in 6-11 Minutes", *Chosun Ilbo* (in Korean), 18 October 2004.

⁵⁶ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., p. 74.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, 25 October 2004.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, 6 and 7 October 2004.

⁵⁹ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., p. 62.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, 6 October 2004.

⁶¹ Cited in Derek Mitchell, ed., "Strategy and Sentiment", op. cit., p. 143.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, 25 October 2004.

⁶³ Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit., p. 21. The study was based on a commissioned survey by Media Research of Seoul, consisting of face-to-face interviews, approximately 30 minutes each, with a representative sample of 1,000 adults, chosen for sex and age by geographic region, 5-16 July 2004. It had a 3 per cent margin-of-error at a 95 per cent confidence level.

⁶⁴ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 67-68.

⁶⁵ Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., p. 85.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, 1 November 2004.

⁶⁷ The South Korean government is highly unlikely to support use of sanctions against North Korea with respect to its nuclear program except in a situation where it appeared there

that North Korea will eventually give up its nuclear weapons through dialogue, only 9 per cent expected this soon.⁶⁸

3. U.S.-North Korean dialogue

In the past, when relations on the Korean Peninsula were still considered a zero-sum game, South Koreans were wary that U.S.-North Korean dialogue would result in abandonment of Seoul. As relations between the two Koreas have improved, South Koreans have become more concerned that U.S. intransigence could derail inter-Korean reconciliation. In March 1995, 57 per cent of South Koreans said they felt that the Agreed Framework negotiated between North Korea and the U.S. (Clinton administration) did not adequately take into consideration South Korea's position.⁶⁹ After the Bush administration scuttled the Agreed Framework in late 2002, however, 41 per cent said they preferred the Clinton policy on North Korea, to only 32 per cent who preferred Bush's policy.⁷⁰

South Korean desire to take the lead in dealing with Pyongyang is seen in the consistent preference for inter-Korean dialogue over U.S.-North Korean talks. The 1995 poll on attitudes toward the Agreed Framework found that a majority (59 per cent) felt that document would be meaningless in the absence of inter-Korean talks.⁷¹ A poll in April 2003 found that 63 per cent thought North-South cooperation should take priority over U.S.-North Korea cooperation in solving the nuclear issue.⁷² This broad interest in inter-Korean dialogue may help explain why the 2000 summit has had such a lasting effect on South Korean attitudes, despite the surrounding criticism.

4. Reunification

South Koreans remain overwhelmingly committed to reunification on an emotional level, while taking a sober view of the enormous economic and social costs involved. One poll in 2002 showed that 70 per

cent wanted to reunify.⁷³ Surveys consistently show that slightly more than half are willing to pay somewhat higher taxes to support North Korean reconstruction after reunification,⁷⁴ but only about one in five view reunification as something that must be accomplished at all costs.⁷⁵ A mere 9 per cent view it as so costly as to be undesirable.⁷⁶

Expectations for a rapid, German-style unification have been reduced. In 1994, 60 per cent of respondents expected reunification within ten years or less; by 2002 only 34 per cent expected it to happen that quickly. The number of South Koreans who view reunification as impossible is also growing: from just under 20 per cent in a 2002 poll to 37 per cent the following year.⁷⁷ Along with lowered expectations has come reduced enthusiasm for absorption of North Korea, in light of the continuing disparities between eastern and western Germany, North Korean economic difficulties, and the problems encountered by North Korean defectors assimilating to life in South Korea. Asked to assess the likely effects of reunification on different aspects of life, the most negative views were expressed about wealth disparity (72 per cent negative), inflation (66 per cent), regionalism (63 per cent), and unemployment (57 per cent).⁷⁸ Nam Kwang-kyu of Korea University noted that South Koreans have difficulty imagining what reunification will look like. "North Koreans 'know' how to get reunification; they've been taught that by the government. South Koreans think reunification would be natural, but they don't know how to do it".⁷⁹

was irrefutable evidence North Korea was planning to use or proliferate nuclear weapons. See Crisis Group Report, *North Korea: Where Next for the Nuclear Talks?*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁶⁸ Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit., p. 21.

⁶⁹ Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., pp. 73-74.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 72, fn. 7.

⁷¹ Ibid, pp. 73-74.

⁷² Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 119-120.

⁷³ "South Korean Politics: Exploring the New Generation in Power", CLSA Asia-Pacific Markets, September 2004, p. 10. No citation for the survey was given.

⁷⁴ Ibid; Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit., p. 23, 54 per cent; *Joongang Ilbo*, 22 September 2004, 56 per cent; Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 111-112, 58.6 per cent.

⁷⁵ "Things that Roh Moo-hyun Has Done Well Since His Inauguration", *Joongang Ilbo*, op. cit. See also, Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit., p. 23.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 23.

⁷⁷ Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., pp. 86-87.

⁷⁸ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 95-108.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

IV. WHY HAVE THESE CHANGES COME ABOUT?

A. POLITICAL CHANGE

The two most recent election cycles profoundly shifted the political dynamic in South Korea. The advent of democratic elections in 1987 did not immediately lead to radical changes in the distribution of political power. The first democratically elected president, Roh Tae-woo, was the hand-picked successor of the military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan, and had taken part in the military coup that brought Chun to power in 1980. The first two democratically elected presidents were conservatives, who took a cautious attitude toward North Korea.

This all changed in 1997 with the election of Kim Dae-jung and his progressive⁸⁰ approach to the North under the Sunshine Policy. Korean politics moved further to the left with the election of outsider Roh Moo-hyun in 2002, who openly campaigned for making South Korea less dependant on the U.S. His administration is a very different type from the "imperial presidency" of his predecessors. Roh, who never attended college, lacked the network of loyal supporters that formed the backbone of previous administrations. When Hyundai scion Chung Mong-joon pulled out of his coalition two days before the election, Roh was able to take office without having to answer to a more conservative partner. While this freed him to pursue a more progressive agenda, it also deprived him of a ready cadre with government experience. Instead, he formed his government by bringing in people from outside the establishment: from academia, think tanks, and civil society groups.⁸¹

Roh's status as an outsider makes him a lightning rod for criticism from the recently deposed ruling class. When in February 2004 he expressed his hope that the progressive Uri Party would prevail in the upcoming parliamentary elections, opponents accused him of violating a law that requires presidential neutrality during the election period. The National Assembly

voted to impeach him, only to have its action overturned by the Constitutional Court. The impeachment attempt backfired, as the public perceived it to be a cynical power play. Voters responded by giving the Uri Party a resounding victory in the National Assembly elections.

Progressives also benefited from a change in the proportional representation system. Under the old election laws, voters cast a single ballot for their local representative, and the parties divided a number of national seats based on their proportion of the overall vote tally. In the 2004 elections, voters could cast two ballots -- one for their local representative and one for their party of choice. This allowed them to remain loyal to a politician who had effectively represented local interests and at the same time support another party.⁸² As a result, the Uri Party won 152 seats, a majority in the 300-seat Assembly, with the leftist Democratic Labour Party picking up ten seats, mostly proportional. The conservative Grand National Party (GNP) dropped from 138 seats to 121.

The outcome of all this is that both the legislative and executive branches comprise the youngest, most progressive, least experienced, and least pro-American government in South Korea's history. Nearly half of all legislators are under 50, only 13 per cent over 60 -- a drop from 28 per cent before the last election. A full 63 per cent are serving their first term.⁸³ *Joongang Ilbo* classified 45 per cent of the current National Assembly as progressives and only 20 per cent as conservatives, with the rest being moderates.⁸⁴ This is a fundamental break from South Korea's tradition of conservative-dominated politics.

B. CHANGES IN THE MEDIA

During the decades of dictatorship, the South Korean media was heavily censored under the National Security Law. The newspapers that thrived were thus conservative, pro-government organs. Even after democratisation removed many of the barriers to freedom of the press, these publications retained their

⁸⁰ In the South Korean political context, the term "progressive" is used broadly to refer to any person or position that could be considered left-of-centre. Most Koreans prefer the term to "liberal", because conservatives often conflated "liberals" with "pro-communists" during the Cold War.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, Secretary-General, Korea Peace Forum, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

⁸² Lee Sook-jong, "The Transformation of South Korean Politics: Implications for U.S.-Korea Relations", Brookings Institution, Centre for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, September 2004, p. 4.

⁸³ CLSA, op. cit., p. 4.

⁸⁴ "Progressives 44.5 per cent, Conservatives 20 per cent", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 31 August 2004, p. 4. The categorisation was based on answers to a survey conducted among 229 of 299 National Assembly members.

conservative, anti-communist tendencies. In response, newer information sources have sprung up to provide a more progressive perspective. The result is that all South Korean media tend to lean heavily in one political direction or the other, with no widely respected organs in the middle to provide a unifying voice for the country. "The division between right and left in the media is so wide", argues Professor Chang Ho-soon of Soonchunhyang University, a media expert, "that it will take a while to find common ground".⁸⁵

Newspapers do not release circulation figures, making it difficult to determine exactly how many readers they reach. Generally it is assumed that around 80 per cent of daily circulation goes to the "big three" -- *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-a Ilbo*, and *Joongang Ilbo* -- all with conservative orientations to varying degrees.⁸⁶ An "authoritative" study by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism put the figure at only 44 per cent, but this discrepancy is likely due to the inclusion of sports, economic, and local dailies in the study.⁸⁷ Like the older generation of South Koreans who read them, the major newspapers have an ingrained distrust of North Korea and are vocal critics of engagement. Invariably pro-government during previous administrations, they have engaged in often bitter clashes with the governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. By contrast, the left-leaning *Hankyoreh* (One Nation), which as its name implies has been a strong advocate of reconciliation with the North since its founding in 1988, has switched from a consistent critic of earlier governments to a vigorous defender of the last two administrations.

If South Korea's newspapers remain mostly conservative, they are losing their influence to other forms of media where more progressive views hold sway. According to a 2003 poll, 79 per cent of South Koreans get their news primarily through television.⁸⁸ That also happens to be the form of media over which the government exerts most influence, as it owns large portions of some major broadcasting stations, including KBS and MBC. The president appoints the KBS board of directors, which in turn picks the chairman. President Roh's influence thus resulted in the hiring of Chung Yun-ju, a former Washington

correspondent for *Hankyoreh*, as KBS chairman.⁸⁹ Even at the working level, broadcast employees tend to line up close to the current government politically, largely due to the influence of their powerful labour unions. This is another contrast to the privately-owned newspapers, which have been able to maintain a degree of ideological unity within workforces that are largely non-unionised.⁹⁰

Broadcasting stations now project more progressive views, particularly with regard to North Korea.⁹¹ In recent years, South Koreans have been able to watch previously banned documentaries and news footage of North Korea, further contributing to the demystification of the country. Professor Chang Ho-soon of Soonchunhyang University notes, however, that programs about North Korea are not shown in prime time and have a relatively small audience. They have recently generated controversy because of North Korean military songs playing in the background or the visibility of propaganda. "Most broadcasters are very inexperienced in dealing with North Korea, so they occasionally make a mistake. Conservatives make a fuss about it, but most people don't care", argues Professor Chang.

The newest media outlet, the Internet, is having profound social effects. South Korea is the most wired country in the world; 70 per cent of households have high-speed Internet access,⁹² while ubiquitous Internet cafes ("*PC bang*") allow cyber addicts to remain online for the paltry sum of 1,000 won (\$0.85) per hour. Activists utilise the Internet heavily for organising. After Internet users played a major role in selecting Roh as the MDP candidate in the 2002 primary, a website dubbed *nosamo* ("people who love Roh Moo-hyun") helped to mobilise supporters to get out the vote on election day.⁹³ Young people especially have been mobilised by the Internet to take part in protests on behalf of progressive causes.⁹⁴ NGOs make heavy use of the Internet to disseminate their work, helping them to influence public opinion on North Korea.⁹⁵ Three times as many people in their twenties (17 per cent) get their news primarily through the Internet as from newspapers (6 per cent).

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 19 November 2004.

⁸⁶ Scott Snyder, "The Role of the Media and the U.S.-ROK Relationship", in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 75.

⁸⁷ "Joongang, Chosun, Dong-a's Market Share 44 per cent", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 6 November 2004, p. 2.

⁸⁸ Cited in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 131.

⁸⁹ Scott Snyder, in Mitchell, op. cit., pp. 74-75.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Chang Ho-Soon, Seoul, 19 November 2004.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Hyun In-taek, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

⁹² CLSA, op. cit., p. 15.

⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Oh Yeon-ho, Seoul 4 October 2004.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

For those over 50, however, the ratio is 34:1 in the opposite direction (17 per cent to 0.5 per cent).⁹⁶ This means that younger people are being exposed to sources of information and opinions regarding North Korea that tend to be more progressive than those accessed by their elders.

The vanguard of Internet-based journalism is *OhmyNews* (<http://www.ohmynews.com>). The founder, Oh Yeon-ho, was a student democracy activist who spent a year in jail under the Chun Doo-hwan regime. He later became a journalist for the liberal monthly magazine *Mal*. "I saw that the South Korean news media was 80 per cent conservative. I wanted to find a way to make it 50-50", he said.⁹⁷ Lacking the funds to start a traditional print publication, Oh began *OhmyNews* in February 2000. It functions on the principle of "every citizen a reporter", allowing registrants to write articles for a small fee. Professional reporters on the "guerrilla news desk" check the articles for facts and style. Articles by citizen journalists cover a wide range of topics, but tend to focus on cultural issues, while the *OhmyNews* staff concentrates on "harder" political and economic news.⁹⁸

A number of factors contribute to the success of *Ohmynews*. One is the small size of the country, which allows such fact-checking to be done with relative ease.⁹⁹ Another is the dominance of national news media in the market, which has created a pent-up demand for more regional coverage about things that affect people's everyday lives.¹⁰⁰ Even opposition politicians have been known to grant interviews to *OhmyNews* as a means of reaching their local constituents, without having to adhere to the space restrictions of print media.¹⁰¹ The restricted media market is also responsible for an oversupply of journalists. Only one out of every 100 college journalism graduates finds a job in a major news outlet, and the "press room" system, although recently

loosened, restricts access to government officials and businessmen by non-credentialed journalists.¹⁰²

As a participatory news source, *OhmyNews* both appeals to and is influenced by younger, more progressive, and more Internet-savvy readers. Its coverage of North Korea thus tends to be somewhat emotional and romanticised. Examples of article titles include "In 2004, North Korea is Now Just a 'Companion of Reunification'" (7 July 2004), and "Breaking the Ice in North-South Military Relations" (27 May 2004). *OhmyNews* is also quick to criticise its rivals as overly pro-American, as in an article entitled "The *Chosun Ilbo* Has No Complaints About the United States" (18 November 2004). Progressive NGOs, such as Good Friends, Unification Solidarity, and Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea, are regular contributors to *OhmyNews*.

With so many new sources of information, it is becoming increasingly clear that despite their widespread circulation, the conservative print media can no longer set the agenda in South Korea.¹⁰³ A recent survey by the monthly *Sisa Journal* rated *OhmyNews* as the country's sixth most influential news source, passing *Hankyoreh*. Only one daily, the conservative *Chosun Ilbo*, made it into the top three, sandwiched between KBS and MBC.¹⁰⁴ "No one in Chongwadae even reads the papers", argues one analyst with close ties to the administration. "They just use *OhmyNews*".¹⁰⁵

But if coverage of North Korea is becoming more progressive, it is not improving, according to Chang Ho-soon of Soonchunhyang University. "Coverage of North Korea is very selective, inaccurate, and inadequate compared to the importance of the issue", he argues. "Unless the United States or Japan says something about North Korea, the South Korean press doesn't cover it. They treat North Korea as foreign news". Professor Chang attributes this inadequacy to the National Security Law, which still limits the amount of information that is available on North Korea, so that broadcasters "have to rely on foreign media or the South Korean intelligence services".¹⁰⁶

⁹⁶ Cited in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 131.

⁹⁷ Presentation by Oh Yeon-ho, Founder & CEO of *OhmyNews*, Seoul, 4 October 2004.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Chang Ho-soon, Department of Mass Communications, Soonchunhyang University, 19 November 2004.

¹⁰¹ Presentation by Oh Yeon-ho, Founder & CEO of *OhmyNews*, Seoul, 4 October 2004.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Chang Ho-soon, Department of Mass Communications, Soonchunhyang University, 19 November 2004.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Lee Su-hoon, 7 October 2004.

¹⁰⁴ Shin Mi-hee, "The Most Influential Media, in Order: KBS-Chosun-MBC", *OhmyNews* (in Korean), 21 October 2003. Based on a survey of 1,040 experts in ten fields.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 7 October 2004.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 19 November 2004.

The images of inter-Korean exchanges, such as the 2000 summit meeting and the joint entry to the opening ceremony of the Sydney Olympics, have become indelible within South Korean culture. When North Korea sent a team to the 2002 Asian Games in Pusan, more attention was given to the female supporters who accompanied them than to the on-the-field accomplishments of the athletes, suggesting the degree to which North Korea is becoming more of a curiosity than a threat in the South Korean mind. At the same time, South Korea has been experiencing a cultural resurgence, spurred by its success as co-host of the 2002 World Cup and the so-called "Korean Wave" of movies, television shows, and video games sweeping over Asia. This is helping to create a degree of cultural confidence for South Koreans that is allowing them to develop a global identity beyond their status as a divided country. This tends to reduce the overall focus on the North Korean problem. "Younger people have less interest in North Korea, because they have so many other things to do".¹⁰⁷

C. GENERATIONAL CHANGE

Due to dramatic changes in South Korea over the last half-century, the various generations have had widely different life experiences. Koreans over 60 have personal memories of the Korean War, while those in their 50s can remember its aftershocks.¹⁰⁸ Not surprisingly, when queried about their attitudes toward North Korea, the older generation expresses a deep distrust of the Pyongyang leadership. "Nothing will change there until you get rid of the Reds", a 71-year old man whose home town lies near the DMZ stated.¹⁰⁹ This generation is also reflexively pro-American, crediting U.S. military intervention for saving South Korea from communism and making possible its subsequent economic development.¹¹⁰

The formative experience of the so-called "386" generation -- those in their 30s (or early 40s), who went to college in the 1980s and were born in the 1960s -- was radically different. From early youth, they experienced continued economic growth, but under a military dictatorship. Rising income eventually led to demands for greater political freedom, with the 386

generation as the catalyst for change. Increasing protests thus marked the last years of President Park Chung-hee's reign. After Park's assassination, a small group of generals led by Chun Doo-Hwan seized power in a coup d'état in December 1979.

For anyone who attended school in South Korea during the Chun Doo-hwan period, loud and often violent demonstrations were a nearly constant part of campus life. This legacy of campus activism and clashes with the police led one publication to dub the 386ers the "tear-gassed generation".¹¹¹ The student movement was led by a small core of activists, who were more politically radical than the general population. Their demands for democratisation had wide support among the middle class and many Christian groups, instilling in them a sense of moral superiority. Beyond the inner core, however, there was little support for North Korean ideology and socialist revolution.¹¹² Park Jin, an economist at the Korea Development Institute's School of International Management, recalls that while he was in college, "I supported the democracy demands of the protestors, but I never joined them because I believed in free market capitalism".¹¹³ Not even all core activists supported radical ideology. Yi Kiho, the Secretary General of the Korea Peace Forum,¹¹⁴ says that while he was active in the student movement, he resisted joining the "underground" group of leaders because he found them undemocratic.¹¹⁵

The group that followed the 386ers, the so-called 'X' and 'Y' generations, are considerably less politicised. Having lived their entire adult lives in a democratic society, they have little interest in the social activism of their elders. With South Korea's period of rapid growth giving way to economic uncertainty, today's college students are more concerned with their financial future than with North Korea or politics in general. Political activist groups (*dongari*, or circles) are closing down due to an inability to recruit new members, while enrolment in economics courses is

¹⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Chang Ho-soon, Department of Mass Communications, Soonchunhyang University, 19 November 2004.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Park Jin, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 25 October 2004.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Seoul, 25 October 2004.

¹¹¹ CLSA, op. cit., p. 3.

¹¹² Vincent Brandt, "The Student Movement in South Korea", U.S. State Department study, 30 July 1987, pp. 24-27. Brandt cited estimates that the percentage of activist students was around 3 to 5 per cent.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

¹¹⁴ Korea Peace Forum is a non-profit organisation that works for peaceful reunification by building bipartisan support among political parties and private citizens, <http://www.peaceforum.or.kr>.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

increasing.¹¹⁶ Even Hanchongryon, the leftist federation of student governments traditionally at the forefront of campus activism, has turned its attention to holding job fairs.¹¹⁷ According to one poll, only 34 per cent of people in their 20s "often" or "sometimes" discuss North Korea with those close to them, the lowest percentage of any age group.¹¹⁸

When polled on their attitudes toward North Korea, people in their 20s generally showed a benign view of Pyongyang -- more so than those over 40 but less than the 386 generation. In Crisis Group interviews, almost all college students expressed interest in reunification but worried about the costs. As Park Gil-sung, a sociologist at Korea University, explains it, today's young people have a dual mindset. They may be more accepting of dialogue with the North Korean regime but they do not embrace its system. This attitude is sometimes difficult to understand for the older generation, who tend to be much more single-minded in their views toward the North.¹¹⁹

At the same time, there are signs younger people are growing more conservative. A recent survey of college students found that, in only two years, the percentage describing themselves as progressive dropped from 57 per cent to 41 per cent, while self-described moderates jumped from 25 per cent to 40 per cent.¹²⁰ A Gallup poll found voters in their 20s split almost evenly between the Uri Party (41 per cent) and the GNP (39 per cent) in the 2004 parliamentary elections.¹²¹ Said an English literature major handing out fliers for a bible study meeting at Korea University, "I'm for reunification, but the current South Korean government is too closely aligned with the communists. We need to reunify under democracy".¹²²

Due to a baby boom from the 1960s until the early 1970s, the largest demographic segment of the population is the 386 generation. People between

30 and 45 comprise approximately 27 per cent of the total population. Those in their 20s make up an additional 16 per cent. Those over 50 are a mere 23 per cent. With the fertility rate at only 1.19 births per woman in 2003, one of the lowest in the world, it is clear that the 386 generation will continue to dominate South Korea demographically in the coming decades.¹²³

At the beginning of the Roh administration, 236 of 281 high-ranking presidential staff were from the 386 generation.¹²⁴ This created unprecedented access for activists to the halls of power. A knowledgeable observer estimated that about 10 per cent of Blue House officials are former student activists, but that their influence is larger than their numbers.¹²⁵ In the new National Assembly, fourteen members are former student leaders, including eleven former presidents of university student associations.¹²⁶

This generational shift in political institutions and society as a whole is leading to increasingly heated battles over the country's political agenda. The left, after being on the outside for so long, has set out to dismantle the edifice upon which the traditional elite built its power.¹²⁷ In contrast to North Korea, where a purge of Japanese collaborators took place following liberation, the U.S. chose to work through the established elites in the South, who thus developed close ties with Washington. As they built up the South Korean economy, they developed closed networks based largely on personal ties -- family, regional, and school chief among them. Many liberals view the system they built up as anti-nationalistic, elitist, and undemocratic -- an essentially illegitimate legacy of the Cold War that should be swept aside to clear the path for reunification.¹²⁸

This attitude can be seen in Uri Party attempts to dismantle the National Security Law (under which many of them were formerly imprisoned) and to re-open debates on history, such as the role of

¹¹⁶ "Today's College Students: 44.7 per cent Have Progressive Inclinations, a 19 per cent Decrease in 2 Years", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 25 October 2004.

¹¹⁷ "Forget North Korea, the campus focus is on jobs", *Joongang Daily*, 28 October 2004, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 63-64.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 1 November 2004.

¹²⁰ "Today's College Students", *Joongang Ilbo*, op. cit, based on a survey of 2,075 college students in June, 2004. Answers were compared to a similar survey in 2002 of 1,719 students.

¹²¹ Cited in Lee Sook-jong, "The Transformation of South Korean Politics", op. cit., p. 7.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, 1 November 2004.

¹²³ Statistics from the Korean National Statistics Office, <http://www.nso.go.kr>.

¹²⁴ Lee Jung-hoon, "The Emergence of 'New Elites' in South Korea and its Implications for Popular Sentiment Toward the United States", in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 62.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹²⁶ Lee Jung-hoon, "The Emergence of 'New Elites'", in Mitchell, op. cit., p. 62.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Lee Su-hoon, Seoul, 7 October 2004.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Choi Jin-wook, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

collaborators during the Japanese colonial period, or the suppression of human rights under the military dictatorships. For conservatives such as the Korea Freedom League,¹²⁹ the Cold War has not yet ended, and will not as long as the Kim Jong-il regime remains in power.¹³⁰ As Lee Sook-jong, Senior Fellow at the Sejong Institute, argues, the older generation considers security a necessary precondition for economic growth and generally accepts some restrictions on personal freedom as necessary to guard against the communist threat from the North. The younger generation is more accustomed to prosperity, less fearful of North Korea, and thus more willing to shake up the system in the name of economic and social justice.¹³¹

This generational shift is not, contrary to some reports, leading South Korea toward socialism. While conservative opponents tend to view all former student activists as followers of Kim Il-sung,¹³² more neutral observers suggest the number of true South Korean adherents to North Korean ideology is quite small.¹³³ Park Gil-sung of Korea University sees the current ideological battle in South Korea as one not between communism and capitalism, but rather between a European social democracy model and American-style *laissez-faire*.¹³⁴ One American expert on Korea views South Korean conservatives as more analogous to European Catholic conservatives of past generations. "They like industrial conglomerates and oligopolies, they like the traditional patriarchal family, they are ambivalent about economic liberalisation".¹³⁵ A poll by the Korean Institute for National Unification found that only 7 per cent of respondents wanted a socialist system in a unified Korea, while 66 per cent preferred capitalism and 27 per cent a mixed system.¹³⁶

¹²⁹ The Korea Freedom League was founded in 1954 as the Asian People's Anti-Communist League. It is a membership, non-governmental organisation that describes its goal as "conservative progress", <http://kfl.or.kr>.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Jang Soo-keun, Seoul, 28 October 2004.

¹³¹ Lee Sook-jong, "Transformation of South Korean Politics", *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 18 October 2004. See also, Huh Hyun-jun, "386 Generation Must Not Ignore North Korean Human Rights", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 21 October 2004.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Choi Jin-wook, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 1 November 2004.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group email exchange, 2 December 2004.

¹³⁶ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", *op. cit.*, pp. 113-114.

D. EDUCATIONAL CHANGES

More liberalised education since democratisation has changed the way children are learning about North Korea. During the military dictatorships, anti-Communism was a major part of the curriculum.¹³⁷ People who grew up from the 1960s to the 1980s can still recall how they had anti-North Korean views drummed into them by their teachers, until they came to regard North Koreans almost as a separate species. "We thought they had red faces".¹³⁸ "Sometimes we were told North Koreans had tails".¹³⁹

Ethics textbooks from the period contained demonised portrayals of North Koreans. The country was portrayed as destroying traditional Korean values, particularly family loyalty, in the name of communism, and as a puppet state of the Soviet Union. Children were taught how to recognise North Korean spies. Textbooks through the 1980s included the story of a boy who had been killed and mutilated by North Korean infiltrators as punishment for saying he did not like the Communist Party, a story which was later revealed to be false. The high school entry exam in the 1980s included multiple-choice questions about North Korean policy, such as why North Korea would build a dam on Mt. Kungang (the correct answer being "to use it as a military facility").¹⁴⁰

With democratisation, textbooks began moving toward more neutral portrayals of North Korea, which downplayed the tyrannical nature of the regime. "Reunification education" has replaced anti-communist education as part of the required curriculum for ethics courses. Students study reunification issues during the last year of middle school and first year of high school, using a textbook provided by the Ministry of Education,¹⁴¹ which emphasises the necessity of reunification to realise Korean aspirations to full global citizenship. Under the Kim Dae-jung government, teachers were allowed to unionise for the first time, leading to the rise of a powerful teacher's

¹³⁷ Vincent Brandt, "The Student Movement in South Korea", *op. cit.*, pp. 7-10.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Oh Byung-hoon, National Human Rights Commission, Seoul, 1 October 2004.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Lee Hyun-sook, National Committee for the Red Cross, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹⁴⁰ Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War*, (New York, 1998), pp. 127-159.

¹⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Choi Hwa-seon, Korean Teacher's Association Committee for Reunification Education, Seoul, 18 November 2004.

union. According to Hyun In-taek of Korea University, members of the union teach progressive views on North Korea.¹⁴² However, Choi Hwa-seon, a member of the Teacher's Union Committee for Reunification Education, and a junior high school ethics teacher, says that the complexity of the subject prevents the teachers from straying far from the textbook.¹⁴³

The change in education about North Korea has prompted a backlash. Conservative lawmakers in October 2004 complained about allegedly pro-North Korean -- or at least overly neutral -- views about the Korean War in the most widely used history textbook.¹⁴⁴ A year earlier, conservatives raised alarm over inclusion in history textbooks for the first time of the information that Kim Il-sung had led anti-Japanese guerrillas in Manchuria during the late 1930s. Even though conservatives admit this fact, they felt that teaching it to students opened the door to North Korean propaganda¹⁴⁵ and seemed more concerned with erasing any information that might put the North Korean leadership in a favourable light than with historical accuracy.

In addition to students being exposed to more liberal views within the formal education system, some activists are proactively trying to change children's views of North Korea. The NGO "Okedongmu" (literally "friends shoulder-to-shoulder") has been promoting "peace education", with the stated goal of preparing children for reunification. It takes them on trips to North Korea, promotes letter-writing exchanges between Northern and Southern children, and sends lecturers into schools to discuss North Korea. Around 5,000 elementary school children have taken part in its activities.¹⁴⁶ While it is impossible to predict the effect such activities will have on their beliefs, it is clear that today's children are not being taught to fear North Korea the way their parents were.

E. IMPACT OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Democratisation opened space for civil society to flourish. While the largest and most well-known NGOs

(People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy and Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice) are almost exclusively focused on domestic reform, civic groups are playing a greater role in shaping attitudes toward North Korea.¹⁴⁷ Due to the restrictions of the National Security Law, the only civic groups that existed during dictatorial rule were generally supportive of government policy, such as the Korea Veteran's Association and the Korean Freedom League. Most of the more prominent progressive NGOs active today emerged during the first half of the 1990s.¹⁴⁸ Former student activists in particular were drawn into civil society groups.¹⁴⁹ In the beginning, however, advocating improved relations with North Korea remained taboo. It was left to Christian groups, whose political leanings were less suspect than some secular organisations, to take the lead in pushing for engagement. The National Council of Churches Korea was the first to issue a statement in 1988 in favour of negotiated, peaceful unification.¹⁵⁰ Once the Christians had made such discussion politically acceptable, more ideologically liberal groups could follow.¹⁵¹

Civil society groups have exercised an increasing influence on government policy in recent years. Starting with the Kim Young-sam administration, some former activists began to move into government. When Kim Dae-jung entered office in 1998, he set out to build direct ties with civil society groups through the creation of the Council on Reconciliation and Cooperation (Minhwahyup), which brought together unification activists, government, and religious groups.¹⁵² Starting in 2001, it began organising exchange programs with North Korean counterparts. Many of the more conservative participants, especially among the Christian groups, were sceptical at first about the value of these exchanges but exposure to North Koreans gradually changed their minds. One regular participant recalled a woman from the Methodist Church warning fellow delegates before a trip not to listen to anything the North Koreans said, as it would all be lies. After the trip, however, the delegates began to see North Koreans as real people

¹⁴² Crisis Group interview, Hyun In-taek, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 18 November 2004.

¹⁴⁴ Brian Lee & Ha Hyeon-ok, "Uri Party on Offensive in New Textbook Flap", *Joongang Daily*, 6 October 2004.

¹⁴⁵ Howard W. French, "Clouds Slowly Lift in South Korea", *The New York Times*, 3 February 2003.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Yi Hyun, Seoul, 21 October 2004.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, 5 October 2004.

¹⁴⁸ Katherine Moon, "South Korean Civil Society and Alliance Politics", in Mitchell, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, 5 October 2004.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Park Jong-hwa, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Lee Hyun-sook, Vice President, South Korean National Committee of the Red Cross, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

and were surprised at the warmth with which they were received.¹⁵³

The exchange program suffered a setback when a group of more leftist delegates made a pilgrimage to the Monument to the Four Principles of Unification in defiance of government warnings. The incident was widely denounced by conservatives in South Korea, who used it to force the resignation of Unification Minister Lim Dong-won. Lee Hyun-sook, who participated in the exchange program as the representative of Women Making Peace, believes however that the incident ultimately aided the non-governmental exchanges by drawing the general public's attention to them.¹⁵⁴

Under the current administration of President Roh Moo-hyun, many members of progressive NGOs have joined the government in one capacity or another. While this has afforded them unprecedented access and influence on policy making, it has also generated a conservative backlash.¹⁵⁵ Newspapers like the *Chosun Ilbo* have criticised the government for giving 40 billion won (\$38 million) to "pro-government civic groups".¹⁵⁶ Conservatives have also begun to adopt some of the left's tactics. This is evident in the street demonstrations that remain a frequent feature of life in Seoul. In the candlelight vigils held in 2002 to protest the deaths of two schoolgirls accidentally killed by a U.S. military vehicle, the crowd was predominantly made up of younger people in their 20s and 30s. At the protest in October 2004 against the abolition of the National Security Law, by way of contrast, the vast majority of participants were over 50 -- many wearing hats identifying them as veterans and waving U.S. and South Korean flags.¹⁵⁷ "A few years ago, anti-North Korea sentiment was almost dead", notes Choi Jin-wook of the Korean Institute of National Unification. "The polarisation under the Roh government is strengthening the right".¹⁵⁸

This split among civic organisations is especially pronounced among Christian groups. Christians make up around 25 per cent of the population by most

estimates and tend to come from the upper-middle class. From the beginning, the religion attracted the upwardly mobile, and the American missionary influence helped to inculcate conservative, pro-American values among Christians. Historically, before division, Pyongyang was the most heavily christianised part of Korea, and many Christians fled to the South, bringing strong anti-communist sentiments with them.¹⁵⁹ Among the conservative Christians are a significant number on the far right, who are driven by a combination of ideological anti-communism and theological fundamentalism. These were the Christian groups who participated in the rallies protesting the abolition of the National Security Law, led by the Kumnan Methodist Church and the Yoido Full Gospel Church (Pentecostal).¹⁶⁰

At the same time, there is a strong tradition of progressive Christianity, with Catholics and Presbyterians at the forefront.¹⁶¹ Kang Moon-kyu, the founder of the Korean Sharing Movement and one of the leading progressive Christians, estimates that around one third of Christians are progressive and two thirds conservative.¹⁶² Among the former are some radical, pro-North Korean elements but these are small in number and not closely aligned with the main progressive groups.¹⁶³ The progressive Christians remain a formidable force due to their long history of activism, but the resurgence of the Christian right is fostering a sense of crisis among them.¹⁶⁴

One area of dispute among Christians is over whether it is worthwhile to maintain ties with Christian groups within North Korea, which operate under the tight control of the government. "It's not up to us to determine whether they are true Christians or not", argues Park Jong-hwa. "They are the only ones we're allowed contact with, and through meeting with us they may slowly change".¹⁶⁵ Progressive Christians also have doubts about the effectiveness of pressuring North Korea on religious freedom, fearing that it will be seen by Pyongyang as an attempt to destroy its

¹⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Lee Hyun-sook, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Yi Kiho, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Lee Jae-hwan, "Only Lip-Service Given to Participatory Government in Shameful Speech", *NGO Times*, 29 September 2004.

¹⁵⁷ Personal observations by Crisis Group researchers.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Kim Sung-jae, Professor of Christian Studies, Hanshin University, Seoul, 17 November 2004.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Lee Hyun-sook, South Korean National Committee for the Red Cross, Seoul, 5 October 2004.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 17 November 2004.

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Park Jong-hwa, National Council of Churches, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

¹⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 17 November 2004.

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

system. "When the United States talks about freedom of religion, other people understand them to mean Christianisation. If we really want to open up North Korean society, we need to reckon with a diversity of views within a religious context".¹⁶⁶

The country's other major religion, Buddhism, has less of a tradition of social activism. According to Erica Kang of the Good Friends Society, historically in South Korea, Christianity has been identified with modernisation and development, whereas Buddhism is more closely identified with the preservation of cultural traditions. The Good Friends Society has been a leader in providing food aid both inside North Korea and to North Korean refugees in China, but there is no religious or ideological imperative that drives the Buddhist community into either the pro- or anti-engagement camp.¹⁶⁷

V. IMPACT ON SOUTH KOREAN POLICY

A. TOWARD NORTH KOREA

As progressives take over the levers of power, conservatives are starting to fight back. South Koreans these days talk about the old "North-South conflict" being replaced by a new "South-South conflict" (*nam-nam gadteung*) over the proper policy toward North Korea. The debate is not simply over engagement versus confrontation. The idea that South Korea should pursue some kind of engagement with the North enjoys broad support. An American Asian specialist compares the position of South Korean conservatives to that of Christian Democrats in West Germany, who opposed Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* but then adopted many of its tenets.¹⁶⁸ A recent study found that only 19 per cent support a harder line policy toward North Korea, while 52 per cent want to continue engagement as it is and 29 per cent to strengthen it.¹⁶⁹ The questions are what kind of engagement, how much, and with whom.

Progressives believe that the best course is to continue engagement with the current government of North Korea. They believe that Kim Jong-il is serious about wanting to reform his country's economy, and engagement is necessary to bring North Korea's economic and political development up gradually to a level closer to South Korea's in preparation for unification.¹⁷⁰ Proponents of engagement argue that opponents misunderstand what is actually happening in the North. According to Jun Bong-geun, director of the Institute for Peace and Cooperation, a recently founded NGO, critics "make a dichotomy between tactical and strategic changes, and see only tactical, so they dismiss the changes as unimportant. A better way to understand it is that North Korea is making the transition from symbolic to significant change".¹⁷¹

Conservatives believe the current North Korean government is incapable of change, and engagement is only helping to prop up an evil regime. "Kim Dae-jung gave over \$500 million to Kim Jong-il, but he never used it to help his own people", argues Park Syung-je of the non-governmental Institute of Peace

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 28 October 2004.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group email exchange, 2 December 2004.

¹⁶⁹ Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Choi Jin-wook, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

Affairs, a vocal critic of the engagement policy.¹⁷² Such critics believe that attempting direct engagement with the government in Pyongyang is counterproductive. "Inside North Korea there are 23 million people that we need to reunify with", says Lee Kwang-baek of the Network for North Korean Democracy and Human Rights, a non-governmental group that receives funding from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy.¹⁷³ "But we can't reunify with Kim Jong-il and his cronies".¹⁷⁴ Conservatives argue that engagement fails to make the proper distinction between the North Korean government, which they regard as a lost cause, and the North Korean people, who are worthy of aid.¹⁷⁵

The essential problem with evaluating change in North Korea is the lack of information about the country. Given the opacity of the leadership, it is easy and somewhat natural for observers to look at the trickle of knowledge that comes out of the country and use it to support their pre-existing interpretations. A good example was the report in November 2004 that portraits of Kim Jong-il were being removed from public buildings. Proponents of regime change were quick to seize on this as evidence of a crack in the Kim family cult presaging its eventual downfall. Engagers, on the other hand, interpreted it as evidence that Kim Jong-il was trying to tone down his personal image to pave the way for reform.¹⁷⁶

Another frequent criticism of engagement is that the North does not respond to conciliatory gestures with concessions of its own. A 69-year old woman summed it up: "We give them money, we give them food, and yet they never give us any peace. In a word, they're thieves".¹⁷⁷ Public calls for greater reciprocity in aid toward North Korea appears to be growing; 63 per cent in a September 2004 poll said North Korean policy should be based on reciprocity, up from 59 per cent a year earlier.¹⁷⁸

The desire for reciprocity is consistent with an emerging consensus in favour of joint commercial ventures, which are considered good for both North

and South.¹⁷⁹ A recent poll found that 54 per cent considered economic cooperation mutually beneficial, while only 12 per cent disagreed. A full 72 per cent supported more projects like the Mt. Kumgang tours, as opposed to a mere 18 per cent who favoured more government aid.¹⁸⁰ Even among opposition members of the National Assembly, 72 per cent support inter-Korean cooperation projects like the Mt. Kumgang tours.¹⁸¹ When asked about the Kaesong industrial complex, a 62-year old man who was otherwise against the government's North Korea policy stated, "That's OK. We need the cheap labour to help the South Korean economy, and North Korean living standards should improve somewhat as well".¹⁸²

Another area of emerging consensus is the undesirability of rapid reunification, particularly in light of the difficulties encountered by refugees adjusting to life in South Korea. Despite training and financial assistance from the government, very few North Korean defectors have succeeded.¹⁸³ The difficulty in assimilating even a trickle of North Koreans has led to worries about how Seoul could absorb a flood. The total of defectors is fewer than 6,000, more than half of whom now want to leave, according to a survey by the Ministry of Unification.¹⁸⁴ Kim Sung-jae, a professor at Hanshin University and former Minister of Culture and Tourism, notes, "There are two kinds of thinking about refugees. One is that they've been suffering so we need to help them. The other is that if too many of them come, it will cause South Korean society to collapse. Even conservatives are afraid of this".¹⁸⁵

Two separate conservative critics of engagement argued that the DMZ would need to be preserved for ten to fifteen years after the end of the Kim Jong-il regime to prevent the social chaos of trying to assimilate 20 million North Koreans.¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews with people of various ages and

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁷³ <http://www.nknet.org/>.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Jang Soo-keun, Seoul, 28 October 2004.

¹⁷⁶ James Brooke, "Cracks Showing in Kim Family Dynasty", *The New York Times*, 23 November 2004.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 25 October 2004.

¹⁷⁸ "Things that Roh Moo-hyun Has Done Well Since His Inauguration", *Joongang Ilbo*, op. cit.

¹⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Park Jin, 6 October 2004.

¹⁸⁰ "Things that Roh Moo-hyun Has Done Well Since His Inauguration", *Joongang Ilbo*, op. cit.

¹⁸¹ "Survey on GNP Legislator's View of North Korea Policy", *Naeil Shinmun* (in Korean), 14 June 2004. 89 GNP legislators responded to the survey.

¹⁸² Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 25 October 2004.

¹⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Lee Seung-yong, Good Friends Society, 22 November 2004.

¹⁸⁴ Na Jeong-ju, "NK Defectors Seek to Move to US", *Korea Times*, 17 November 2004.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 17 November 2004.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Lee Kwang-baek, Seoul, 18 October 2004 and Jang Soo-keun, Seoul, 28 October 2004.

backgrounds found that while everyone expressed a desire for eventual unification, none thought that sudden reunification was in South Korea's best interest.¹⁸⁷ Shin Eui-soon, a professor of economics at Yonsei University, argued, "What do we get out of sudden collapse -- a flood of cheap labour? But we can get that without the burden of a collapse and absorption".¹⁸⁸

This consensus breaks down when it comes to the question of preserving the current North Korean regime. Proponents of engagement fear that were North Korea to collapse, South Korea could lose control over the situation on the peninsula. "If we isolate North Korea, they'll have to rely more heavily on China, which increases the possibility that North Korea will become a pawn in a regional game", argued Philip Lim of the Korean Development Institute.¹⁸⁹ His concerns were echoed by Lee Bu-young, chairman of the ruling Uri Party. "I am concerned that a radical pro-China regime may take over in North Korea in an emergency. China is ready to intervene whenever political disorder takes place in the North".¹⁹⁰ Another expert expressed fear that if North Korea were to collapse, there would be no legal basis for a South Korean takeover, so that unless South Korea remains closely allied with the United States, the United Nations would take over and the big powers, not South Korea, would determine North Korea's fate.¹⁹¹

Critics of engagement find such arguments morally objectionable, feeling that helping to maintain the Kim Jong-il regime amounts to condemning the North Korean people to continued suffering. "If someone said to you, we'll give you a nice house, but first you have to spend ten years in jail, would you accept?", asks Park Syung-je of the Institute of Peace Affairs.¹⁹² They also argue that South Korea would not have to bear the reunification burden alone, but would receive considerable help from surrounding powers.¹⁹³

Some conservatives hope that by working along the Chinese border to aid anti-Kim Jong-il forces within North Korea, educating people inside North Korea about democracy and human rights, and encouraging more defections, particularly among military and Workers' Party officials, they can bring about the collapse of the Kim Jong-il government.¹⁹⁴ "The Sunshine Policy probably caused 500,000 people to stay in North Korea who would otherwise have defected; that's 500,000 people who would otherwise be opposing the regime", argues Park Syung-je.¹⁹⁵ Progressives, like Lee Seung-yong of the Buddhist group Good Friends, argue that it is better to provide aid in North Korea itself to prevent refugees from leaving in search of food in the first place. They also criticise some Christians active in China for being more concerned with proselytising the refugees than feeding them.¹⁹⁶

Oh Jae-shik, who runs the North Korean program of the international Christian aid group World Vision, notes that NGOs are forced to choose between helping refugees or aiding people within North Korea, as Pyongyang makes it impossible to do both.¹⁹⁷ Thus, while progressives agree with conservatives on the severity of the refugee problem, those interested in building ties within North Korea have had to eschew taking action on this front, while anti-regime forces face no such constraints. Even some conservatives, like Jang Soo-keun of the Korea Freedom League, doubt the viability of causing regime change through encouraging refugee flows. "North Koreans are used to deprivations", he notes. "There's no chance that defections will bring about an East German style collapse."¹⁹⁸

The South-South conflict, and the difference in philosophies it represents, is most evident in the controversy over the ruling party's attempt to abolish the National Security Law. Liberal legislators claim the law restricts freedom of speech and violates human rights. They propose to rewrite the criminal code to strengthen protections against North Korean espionage. Opponents believe the law remains a bulwark against North Korea's ambitions to communise the entire

¹⁸⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Seoul, 31 October and 1 November, 2004.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 22 November 2004.

¹⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

¹⁹⁰ Yoon Won-sup, "Lee Fears Pro-China Regime in NK", *Korea Times*, 12 November 2004.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interview, Park Syung-je, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Lee Kwang-baek, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Lee Kwang-baek, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Park Syung-je, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 22 November 2004.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 22 November 2004.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 28 October 2004.

peninsula.¹⁹⁹ A survey by the *Joongang Ilbo* found widespread support for maintaining many of its restrictions; for example, 72 per cent said it should remain illegal for South Koreans to wave North Korean flags in public. Tellingly, when it came to issues such as reading North Korean propaganda or studying North Korean thought, only about one third of people in their 20s supported continued restrictions, while more than 80 per cent of those over 60 thought the bans should remain in place.²⁰⁰ "It's ironic that newspapers, which should be against the National Security Law because it restricts freedom of the press, are arguing against its abolition because of their ideological position", Chang Ho-soon of Soonchunhyang University points out.²⁰¹ The persistence of conservative influence on these issues can be seen in the decision by the government in early November 2004 to block 31 websites it labelled pro-North Korean.²⁰²

Of all the aspects of North Korean policy, perhaps the most vexing is how to deal with the human rights question. "Everyone agrees that the North Korean human rights situation is the worst in the world", states Kang Moon-kyu, founder of the Korean Sharing Movement. "But South Korea is afraid to bring up the human rights issue, because we don't know if the actual benefit to people in North Korea that would come from raising the issue will outweigh the damage that would be done to North-South relations".²⁰³ Progressives criticise conservative human rights activists for prioritising issues like freedom of religion and access to information over halting starvation. "Sure, radios are important", says Lee Seung-yong, Coordinator for Peace and Human Rights at Good Friends, referring to attempts to float radios into North Korea on balloons. "But food is more important".²⁰⁴

Some human rights activists, like Rev. Benjamin Yun of the Citizen's Alliance for North Korean Human Rights,²⁰⁵ advocate something along the line of the

Helsinki Process that was implemented toward the former Soviet Union. While he acknowledges that there are differences between the situation in North East Asia today and that of Europe during the time of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), Rev. Yun believes that human rights could be raised within the context of the movement to build an economic community in North East Asia. "To survive, North Korea would need to take part in that kind of community" and thus would have to engage on human rights, he argues.²⁰⁶ Progressives are becoming increasingly alarmed that the human rights issue is being co-opted by groups pushing a regime change agenda, especially since the passage by the U.S. Congress of the North Korean Human Rights Act.²⁰⁷ For this reason, many progressives, like Kim Sung-jae of Hanshin University and Lee Seung-yong of Good Friends, believe human rights should be raised in an international, rather than bilateral, context.²⁰⁸ Others, like Cheong Wook-shik, representative of the progressive NGO Civil Network for a Peaceful Korea,²⁰⁹ now call for a North-South dialogue on human rights to block conservatives from using human rights as a weapon against engagement.²¹⁰

B. TOWARD THE UNITED STATES

South Korean views of North Korea are closely tied to attitudes toward the U.S. The changes in perceptions of North Korea are intensifying the debate about the future of the U.S.-South Korean alliance. The administrations of both Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun have responded to the changing external and internal situations by seeking greater policy independence from Washington.²¹¹ In this they have the support of the younger generation; large majorities in their 20s (62 per cent) and 30s (72 per cent) want to restructure the U.S. alliance to make it more equal, but

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Jang Seo-keun, 28 October 2004.

²⁰⁰ "Public Opinion on Uri's Plan to Abolish the National Security Law and Revise the Criminal Code", *Joongang Ilbo* (in Korean), 20 October 2004. Nationwide survey, 18 October 2004, with 926 respondents, margin of error plus or minus 3.2 per cent, within a 95 per cent confidence interval.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, 19 November 2004.

²⁰² "S. Korea to Block Access to 31 Pro N. Korea Web Sites", *Asia Pulse*, 3 November 2004.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 17 November, 2004.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 22 November 2004.

²⁰⁵ "Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR) is a non-governmental, non-profit and non-partisan

organisation working to improve the human rights situation of the people in North Korea as well as of those North Koreans who have fled their country for various reasons", <http://www.nkhumanrights.or.kr>.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 19 October 2004.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kang Moon-kyu, Seoul, 17 November 2004.

²⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Seoul, 17 November and 22 November 2004.

²⁰⁹ <http://www.peacekorea.org>.

²¹⁰ Cheong Wook-shik, "Solve the North Korean Human Rights Problem through North-South Dialogue", *OhmyNews* (in Korean), 30 September 2004.

²¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, Lee Su-hoon, 7 October 2004.

only a small minority (21 per cent) over 60 agree.²¹² But while the desire to break away from dependence is strong, the alternative is not yet clear.²¹³

Most people in South Korea now believe that the policy context on the Korean Peninsula has changed from that of the Cold War era.²¹⁴ "The Soviet Union was always the primary enemy; North Korea was just a secondary enemy", argues Lee Hyun-sook, vice president of the National Committee for the Red Cross and a long-time peace activist.²¹⁵ A poll by the Korean Institute of National Unification bears this out: 75 per cent saw the changes in North-South relations as weakening the Cold War mentality on the peninsula.²¹⁶ This changed perception is the biggest factor contributing to the growing split in U.S.-South Korean relations. "The problem is that the U.S. government still has a Cold War mentality", argues Jun Bong-geun, a former Unification Ministry official and international relations expert.²¹⁷

For the older generation that sees a looming threat from communism, American troops will be necessary to keep the peace as long as the current North Korea regime is in place. A Rand study of polling data found a strong correlation between South Korean perceptions of a threat from North Korea and support for the continued presence of U.S. troops.²¹⁸ "We have to maintain the two pillars of our security -- the National Security Law and U.S. troops in Korea -- as they're the best way to guard against North Korea's communisation policy", warns the Korea Freedom League.²¹⁹ Most South Koreans remain reluctant to see U.S. troops removed. One survey found that 61 per cent believed the military balance would then favour North Korea.²²⁰ The opposition party, which fears that anti-Americanism in the ruling party could push the U.S. military out, is quick to remind South Koreans of the danger posed by the North. Park Jin, a

leading GNP legislator, publicly revealed military studies showing that South Korea would lose a war to North Korea without U.S. intervention.²²¹

Compulsory military service for men remains a mitigating factor in younger South Koreans' desire for U.S. troop withdrawal. According to a survey by the army, 57 per cent of inductees said before undergoing basic training that U.S. troops are important for South Korean security. After training, the figure jumped to 97 per cent.²²²

While security remains the paramount reason for maintaining a U.S. troop presence, some in the ruling party appear to be less concerned about deterring Pyongyang than restraining Washington. Some fear that the movement of U.S. troops back from the DMZ is designed to get them out of harm's way to allow Washington more freedom to pursue a hard-line policy toward Pyongyang. A 39-year old copywriter, interviewed a few days before the U.S. presidential election, expressed fear that a Bush victory could lead to war.²²³ The American presence is also important for the economy, as South Korea's bond ratings are dependant on a perception of stability that would suffer if U.S. troops were withdrawn.²²⁴

As South Korea attempts reconciliation with the North, there is increasing concern, particularly among younger people, that the U.S. is an obstacle. Many South Koreans believe that it does not want reunification because it could result in reduced U.S. influence in the region.²²⁵ In the Korean Institute for National Unification's study, only 29 per cent named the U.S. as the country most in favour of reunification, while 50 per cent answered "none".²²⁶

These answers reflect an attitude among those too young to remember the Korean War that Washington cannot be relied upon to safeguard South Korean interests. This has its roots in the 1980 Kwangju incident, when the U.S. failed to stop (some claim abetted) the massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators by troops under the order of Chun Doo-hwan. During

²¹² Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., p. 84.

²¹³ Crisis Group interview, Nam Kwang-kyu, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

²¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Nam Kwang-kyu, Maebong Centre for One Korea, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

²¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Lee Hyun-sook, 5 October 2004.

²¹⁶ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 129-130.

²¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Jun Bong-geun, 18 October 2004.

²¹⁸ Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., pp. 81-85.

²¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Jang Seo-keun, Seoul, 28 October, 2004.

²²⁰ Eric V. Larson, et al., "Ambivalent Allies?", op. cit., p. 85.

²²¹ "After U.S. Troops are Withdrawn, North Korea Could Advance Southward", *Chosun Ilbo* (in Korean), 5 October 2004, p. 3.

²²² "U.S., Korea Have Security Threats", *Chosun Ilbo* (in Korean), 5 October 2004.

²²³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 31 October 2004.

²²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Choi Jin-wook, 29 October 2004.

²²⁶ Choi Jin-wook, et al., "Progress in South-North Relations and its Domestic Impact", op. cit., pp. 87-88.

the 1997 financial crisis, many felt the U.S. focused on multinational banks' interests instead of helping its ally.²²⁷ South Koreans also feel that Washington slights Seoul's role in the alliance. President Bush failed to mention South Korea as a member of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention despite the fact that it has more troops there than any country except the UK and the U.S. itself.²²⁸

The growing split is exacerbated by a surprising lack of communication between two countries that have been allied for over 50 years. This communication gap is in part a product of the shift in the balance of power that has taken place in Seoul. Washington insiders maintain ties primarily to South Korean experts on security and bilateral relations. This is the group that has lost power in recent political changes and has neither the insight nor the inclination to explain the thinking of the "new elite", whom they regard as upstarts. South Korean officials with little previous government experience primarily talk to State Department regional specialists, who under the Bush administration have minimal sway over policy.²²⁹ Two separate U.S.-South Korean dialogues are thus taking place: the people out of power in Seoul are talking to the people in power in Washington, and vice versa.

As the debate over the future of the alliance unfolds, the question of a united Korea's future relationship with China becomes increasingly salient. Experts disagree over whether China could or would ultimately replace the U.S. as the main guarantor of Korean security. Proponents of a closer relationship with Beijing point to growing economic ties and historically close links. Lee Su-hoon, a professor at the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at Kyungnam University, notes that China has surpassed the U.S. as South Korea's main trading partner, and ever more young people are learning Chinese and studying there.²³⁰ Choi Jin-wook of the Korea Institute of National Unification argues, "Unified Korea would naturally lean towards China" given their historic relationship.²³¹

Sino-sceptics abound, however, among both proponents and opponents of engaging North Korea. They fear that, without the U.S. to play a balancing role in the region, Korea would again be a "shrimp among whales" between its larger and more powerful neighbours, China and Japan. The recent debate between Korean and Chinese historians over whether the ancient kingdom of Koguryo, which straddled the Korean Peninsula and Manchuria, was Korean or Chinese has, in the minds of some, exposed Beijing's territorial ambitions in the region.²³² Others simply do not believe that communist China could possibly act as the elder brother for a democratic Korea. Rev. Park Jong-hwa of the National Council of Churches Korea argues, "We can accept China as a regional trade empire, but it cannot take the place of the United States on security issues. We need the U.S. to balance between China and Japan".²³³

²²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Lee Su-hoon, Seoul, 7 October 2004.

²²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Hyun In-taek, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

²²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Jun Bong-geun, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

²³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 7 October 2004.

²³¹ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

²³² Crisis Group interview, Philip Wonhyuk Lim, Seoul, 6 October 2004.

²³³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

VI. WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THESE CHANGES?

Some experts fear that as the debate over North Korea intensifies, the country is becoming increasingly polarised, with extremists growing more powerful and pragmatists disappearing.²³⁴ Others, such as Professor Park Gil-sung of Korea University, a leading sociologist, disagree.²³⁵ What does appear the case is that moderates are being drowned out by more vocal extremes. Polling data shows a majority of South Koreans fall somewhere near the centre on most issues, but this "silent majority" is largely kept out of the policy debate. Those with strong views on left and right demonstrate in the streets and demonise opponents as American lackeys or communist stooges. "We're losing the people in the middle", warns Choi Jin-wook of the Korea Institute of National Unification.²³⁶

To some degree, the intensity of this division reflects a Korean cultural difficulty in accommodating divergent views. Koreans see themselves as an homogenous people ethnically and culturally, and thus have not had to develop mechanisms to deal with pluralism. Historically, Korea has been heavily influenced by a neo-Confucianist ideology that emphasised deference to authority. Before democratisation, street demonstrations were the only means of expressing dissent, creating a culture of protest that persists. Even as South Korean democracy nears the end of its second decade, mechanisms for facilitating dialogue and reaching compromise remain underdeveloped.

On the left, nationalistic tendencies are increasingly driving policy toward North Korea. Nam Kwang-kyu of the Maebong Center for One Korea at Korea University points out that pro-North Korean nationalism is more emotional than rational. "North Korea is a ridiculous country, but it is run by nationalism – *juche* -- and that appeals to some people".²³⁷ The danger is that such emotionalism could overcome more sober, practical considerations. Instead of seeking to build a consensus for engagement with the North, the government and ruling party try to forge ahead with controversial measures that are bound to raise the hackles of

conservative opponents and threaten to alienate even moderates and the apolitical. In its attempt to transform society, the government has tried to introduce "four reforms" -- abolition of the National Security Law, investigation of human rights violations of past governments, equalisation of the education system, and movement of the administrative capital from Seoul -- all of which can be seen as direct attacks on the traditional power structure. Conservatives have responded by accusing the government of ignoring very real economic problems.²³⁸

But rather than offering an alternative vision, the right appears to be fighting a rearguard action. The older generation, proud of its contributions to the country's economic and cultural modernisation, are intent on defending what they created. Anti-communism was a pillar for this generation,²³⁹ and conservatives have difficulties redefining themselves in the wake of its decline as an effective unifying force.²⁴⁰ The persistence of this anti-communist ideology begs the question of what might happen were conservative forces to regain political power. An expert expressed fear that a right-wing revival, if it came in response to a major economic crisis, could lead to a renewed ideological war against the left -- "a South Korean version of McCarthyism".²⁴¹ Conservatives might consider this payback for what they see as an ongoing purge being perpetrated by the left. Certainly, a renewed domestic emphasis on anti-communism would derail moves toward reconciliation with the current government of North Korea.

There are signs that, in the search for an alternative conservative ideology to anti-communism, some conservatives are turning to Christian fundamentalism. So far, the movement to create a political movement around Christianity lacks broad appeal. The Christian party some leading conservative pastors attempted to create during the last parliamentary elections won less than 1 per cent.²⁴² "The Christian party was very immature", notes Kang Moon-kyu. "It was just a movement by a few ambitious pastors. They didn't do

²³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Jun Bong-geun, Seoul, 18 October 2004.

²³⁵ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 1 November 2004.

²³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 29 October 2004.

²³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nam Kwang-kyu, 6 October 2004.

²³⁸ "Yesterday the National Security Law, Today State Examinations, When the People's Livelihood?", *JoongAng Ilbo* editorial, 14 October 2004.

²³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Park Gil-sung, Seoul, 1 November 2004.

²⁴⁰ Norman D. Levin and Yong-Sup Han, "Sunshine in Korea: The South Korean Debate over Policies toward North Korea", Rand Corporation, 2002, p. 81.

²⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Choi Jin-wook, 29 October 2004.

²⁴² Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 27 October 2004.

a good job getting information out, and they couldn't even agree among themselves on who should be the candidates".²⁴³ Still, there is fear that if such a movement gained momentum, it could create strife with the 25 per cent that remains practicing Buddhists. While Korea has been able to live comfortably with religious diversity for the last century, the rise of religious fundamentalism could quickly change that.

Perhaps the biggest danger is that the drift in South Korean-U.S. relations over North Korea policy will evolve into a full-fledged split before anyone is prepared to deal with the consequences. In the short and medium term, there is a pressing necessity for finding common ground on how to deal with North Korea. With George W. Bush in the White House until January 2009, and Roh Moo-hyun in the Blue House through February 2008, neither side can afford to wait and hope that the next election cycle brings a more like-minded administration to power. North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and America's post-9/11 nervousness over the possession of WMD by "rogue" states combine for an extremely unstable situation with the potential to deteriorate at any time.²⁴⁴

Over the longer term, the question of what role, if any, U.S. troops should play on the Korean Peninsula is a vital one, not only for the security of South Korea itself but for the overall peace and stability of the North East Asian region. While it is possible to envision alternative security arrangements to the U.S. alliance system for keeping the peace, such ideas need time to be developed by experts, negotiated by governments, and accepted by public opinion in the affected countries. Without such a multilateral security dialogue, a split in the U.S.-South Korean alliance could create a power vacuum, leading to a regional arms race that could easily go nuclear. The future of North-South Korean relations thus is one that should be of major interest to all countries concerned with peace in North East Asia.

VII. CONCLUSION

To an outsider, it may look like little has changed on the Korean Peninsula since the end of the Cold War. The armies of the two Koreas continue to face each other across a no-man's land of barbed wire and mine fields, and military clashes still occur from time to time. But while change in North Korea has been halting and slow, South Korea has undergone a profound political, economic and social transformation. This, more than anything else, is the driving force behind changing perceptions of the North.

Among these, the most important is the generational shift underway. The older generation experienced war, deprivation, and authoritarianism, while the younger generation has grown up with peace, economic growth, and democratisation. These different experiences shape responses to North Korea. For older people, it remains a fearsome adversary that has never deviated from its all-consuming goal of unifying the Korean Peninsula under its own system. For the young, it is a starving cousin that needs to be helped to his feet to pave the way for unification. Reconciling these views to forge a consensus is a daunting task but in the long run it is the younger generation which will decide the future course of the country.

At the same time, all South Koreans, regardless of age or political orientation, recognise the devastating consequences that war would bring. The prospect of instability in North Korea is only slightly less threatening. When the Berlin Wall collapsed, many South Koreans dreamed they would soon see their brethren streaming across the DMZ. Today that is regarded less as a dream than a nightmare.

While it is impossible to predict the future with any certainty, continued hostility between the two Koreas can no longer be assumed. The Sunshine Policy did not end with Kim Dae-jung's retirement, as some anticipated. Instead, a broad consensus has emerged on the need for engagement, although its pace and nature remain contentious. Whether this consensus can hold depends largely on Pyongyang's reactions to Seoul's overtures. Should it fail to show gratitude, reform its economy, improve its human rights record, and reduce the military threat, enthusiasm for engagement will likely wane. But having waited 50 years for even the smallest signs of opening in the wall that divides them from the North, South Koreans have learned to be patient.

²⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Seoul, 17 November 2004.

²⁴⁴ For more on this subject, see Crisis Group Report, *North Korea: Where Next for the Nuclear Talks?*, op. cit.

Washington's reaction to these changes will determine the future of the alliance system. Should it continue a hard-line policy in defiance of South Korean wishes, anti-Americanism will undoubtedly increase. South Koreans want the benefits of alliance with the U.S., but they do not want the U.S. to dictate how they deal with their "own people". Any successful U.S. security policy in the region must take into account not only the North Korean threat but the legitimate aspirations of the South Korean people as well.

Seoul/Brussels, 14 December 2004

APPENDIX A

MAP OF NORTH KOREA



APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

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