

Blame Game under Fire: Parsing South Korean Debate on North Korea Policy

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In late 2009, a North Korean warship attacked South Korean naval vessels near Daechong Island. The following year witnessed a further elevation of North Korean aggression expressed in attacks on the South Korean corvette *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong Island. These shocking developments have sparked a heated debate in the South, *inter alia*, on whether and how Seoul's North Korea policy has increased Pyongyang's belligerence. This paper aims to critically evaluate key arguments pervading the debate and offer an alternative perspective. (I limit my scope to examining how Seoul's policy has affected Pyongyang's recent aggressiveness, instead of offering a more comprehensive account of the provocations or a theory of North Korean behavior.)

I argue that all conventional wisdom (which either denies the significance of North Korea policy or views the level of engagement as mainly shaping Pyongyang's behavior) has only weak empirical support, but remains salient because it serves parochial political interests in the partisan blame game. In reality, Seoul's policy toward Pyongyang has significantly amplified North Korean belligerence primarily because it has been partisan in nature—not because inter-Korean engagement has been excessive or insufficient. Resolving this problem requires promoting post-partisanship, to which independent scholars and institutions can contribute significantly.

The Debate: Three Contending Perspectives

Three views dominate the current debate regarding the impact of the South's North Korea policy on the past years' attacks.

A diverse group of elites agree that Seoul's North Korea policy has little to do with Pyongyang's recent aggressions. There exist two variants to this argument. One posits that North Korea has acted aggressively for domestic reasons—whether increasing incentives to demonstrate loyalty or loosening civilian control of the military amid an uncertain political succession. The other variant asserts that Pyongyang's provocations had a primary goal of pressuring the great powers—the United States and/or China—for concessions. According to this “irrelevance” thesis, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was an innocent bystander caught in the middle of an internal power struggle or international bargaining.

Another group holds the view that Seoul's north-

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ern policy did have a significant impact on Pyongyang's belligerence. The group is divided into two opposing camps, roughly along partisan lines. They disagree on what aspect of the policy provided the stimulus for Pyongyang's aggressive actions.

The rightist camp within the group argues that the conciliatory tone of Seoul's approach to Pyongyang had a negative effect. The "appeasement policies"—unconditional engagement—adopted by Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun undermined South Korea's deterrence posture by reducing military readiness and condoning (or even rewarding) bad behavior. Leaders of the ruling Grand National Party—Kim Moo Sung and Ahn Sang Soo, for example—made remarks along these lines.¹ Those on the farther right go so far as to argue that the Lee Myung-bak administration made similar mistakes, albeit to a lesser degree: it failed to effectively signal a firm commitment to a principled northern policy and made only tepid responses to North Korean provocations. Advocates of this "spoiling sunshine" thesis tend to support a tough policy with diminished assistance to the North.²

On the other hand, leftists within the group assert that an insufficient level of engagement is responsible for Pyongyang's belligerent behaviors. In particular, President Lee Myung-bak's "confrontational policy"—conditional engagement—forced the Kim Jong-Il regime into a corner and empowered hardliners who called for lashing out militarily. The attacks of 2009–2010, attempts to break out of stifling isolation, were the result. Advocates of this point of view assert that had the sunshine policy continued, there would have been no artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Democratic Party leaders, including Chung Dong Young and Park Jie Won, belong to this group.³ Those on the far left—for example, the Democratic Labor Party chairperson Lee Jung-Hee—even argue that the ROK government is more responsible for the attacks than North Korea, thereby blaming the victim.⁴ The "back-firing wind" thesis naturally leads to demands for a softer policy toward Pyongyang.

Critique: Myth-Making under Fire

All of these views, despite their apparent veracity and wide acceptance, have shaky foundations. Supporting evidence is scarce, and compelling counterevidence is not difficult to find.

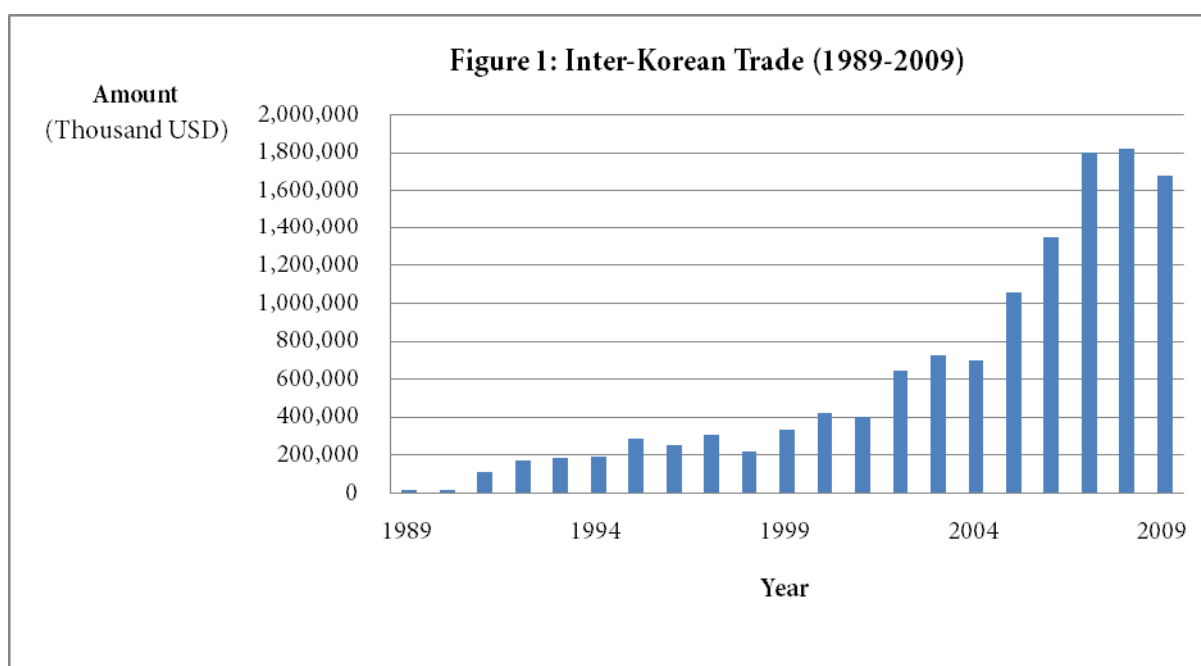
It is unconvincing to argue that Pyongyang's recent aggressions are unrelated to Seoul's actions. While denying any involvement in the *Cheonan* incident, North Korea itself has explicitly stated that the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island originated from grievances toward the South. (Of course, this does not mean that those grievances were legitimate.) Pyongyang claimed that the attack was a response to the ROK military exercises on the island and in its surrounding seas. There is no evidence that this statement is wholly rhetorical, merely providing cover for violent acts aimed at shaping domestic politics or great-power relations.

Although Seoul's North Korea policy indeed matters, the extant accounts for policy failure are not cogent, either. It is difficult to accept the Lee government's "confrontational policy" as the primary cause of North Korean aggressiveness. Contrary to common perception, the Lee Myung-bak government was not so harsh on Pyongyang *before* the North's attacks, even in comparison with the South's pro-DPRK predecessors. (The ROK sanctions imposed *after* the attacks cannot be regarded as causing DPRK belligerence since late 2009.) As Figure 1 shows, inter-Korean trade under the Lee presidency (2008–2009) was greater than that during the progressive era (1998–2007), except for one year.⁵ In 2009 South Korea accounted for 33 percent of North Korean foreign trade, which attained its highest level since 2000—except for 2007.⁶ A similar pattern emerges when only considering imports (which provide revenues for North Korea): the year 2009 witnessed an all-time high (US\$934.3 million).⁷ For all the armed attacks, inter-Korean commercial exchange has remained substantial. In October 2010, it amounted to US\$165.6 million; in January 2008—the last full month of the Roh presidency—the



volume was merely US\$140.5 million. After all, the Lee government has yet to close down the Gaesong industrial complex, which provides the North annually with US\$50 million in workers' compensation. The ROK government's assistance also remained significant *prior* to the attacks despite a conservative presidency: the total amount in 2008 was nearly US\$40 million (although this figure constituted a noticeable drop from

previous years).⁸ All these facts indicate that Seoul is still committed to engagement, albeit to a lesser extent due to the suspension of the Mt. Kumgang tours as well as food and fertilizer supplies since 2008. It is also noteworthy that North Korea made armed provocations near Yeonpyong Island in 1999 and 2002 when South Korea was unconditionally engaged with the North.



Note: Figures represent annual sums of export and import cleared through customs. The 1995 figure excludes a supply to North Korea of rice worth US\$237,213,000.

Evidence also suggests that unconditional engagement under previous ROK governments was not a chief cause of North Korean belligerence. Although the North may have exerted corrosive influences on South Korean defense and deterrence, the fact is that North Korea did not act as aggressively during the period of unconditional engagement (1998-2008). Although the period saw two naval clashes near Yeonpyeong Island (in 1999 and 2002), they were not as serious as the more recent attacks in scale and intensity. The problem with the “spoiling sunshine” argument—as is the case with the “backfiring wind” thesis—is not that it has no veracity at all, but that it fails to do justice to what ac-

tual impact Seoul's policy has had on Pyongyang's aggressiveness. It captures too small a part of the picture.

Despite such deficiencies in empirical support, political elites hold on to these views because they serve partisan interests (although unreliable information and ideological bias regarding North Korea also play a role). Leftists use the “backfiring wind” thesis to discredit the conservative Lee administration. On the other hand, supporters of the current government find the “spoiling sunshine” account convenient for deflecting the criticism and shifting blame to the progressive forces that advocate unconditional engagement with Pyongyang. Revealing partisan motives behind the



arguments is the conspicuous fact that few stand on the middle ground, claiming a (sequential) combination of both “sunshine” and “wind” to be responsible.⁹ Instead, political elites typically cast the argument in black-and-white terms, which compel a choice of one over the other. Its neutral appearance notwithstanding, the “irrelevance” thesis is no less politically charged. Pro-government elites invoke it to avoid being held responsible for the fatal attacks and the resultant strains in inter-Korean relations, and also to deny any need for policy change. Some opposition elites, for their part, utilize the thesis—especially the variant positing that renegade generals initiated the attacks without central authorization—to provide an indulgence to Kim Jong-Il and claim that their presupposition of his trustworthiness (which underpins their pro-North Korea approach) is not misguided.

These myths created by political elites for their parochial interests spread into public opinion; consequently, the architecture of the debate within political society is reproduced in civil society at large. This diffusion process takes several paths. Partisan elites propagandize their preferred views by making public statements and collaborating with friendly media, pundits, and civic organizations.¹⁰ Independent institutions also unwittingly assign privileged positions to the partisan myths. For example, public opinion polls ask respondents to choose among the three views only.¹¹ The media invite advocates of only these views to discussion panels. These practices have the unintended negative consequence of discouraging the general public from looking beyond the politicized views and forming a more balanced understanding of the issue. Once the partisan views captivate the public perception, politicians who articulate an alternative perspective risk becoming outcasts. The result is consolidation of the highly partisan debate within political society.

An Alternative View: A “Deadly Partisanship” Argument

ROK policy toward North Korea has significantly affected the North’s belligerence, but not in ways that participants of the politicized debate assert. In that case, what is the key factor strengthening the aggressive tendency in North Korean behavior?

The main problem is that Seoul’s northerly policies have been based on partisanship rather than on consensus. In a vibrant democracy, heated debates are natural, and consensus on an important issue is rare. This is all the more true when political forces fall to strong partisanship. South Korea is a case in point. While leftists and rightists hold uncompromising views on numerous issues, the cleavage is particularly wide and deep when it comes to North Korea policy. Unconditional engagement—embodied in President Kim’s “Sunshine Policy” and President Roh’s “Policy of Peace and Prosperity”—is an article of faith for nearly all leftists. Most rightists dislike the soft-line approach and support conditional engagement based on the principle of reciprocity (although some prefer containment). The reproduction mechanisms described above duplicate that cleavage within civil society, with a sizable element wavering on the sidelines. Since this fragmented civil society can produce neither a consensus nor a consistent majority view, the political forces controlling the powerful presidency unilaterally dictate North Korea policy. In this sense, all policies toward Pyongyang have—despite varying shades—had a partisan nature in common.

ROK policies (which have lacked a firm anchor in the popular will) have presented attractive targets for armed coercion. When a campaign aims to change a policy preferred by a small group of partisans rather than by a broad public, the target government expects a low domestic audience cost from accepting the sender’s demand.¹² In addition, it is less challenging for a foreign government to generate popular pressure for policy change in the target country: the civil society contains a partisan group detesting the current policy



and a dithering group lacking a strong preference; democratic governments tend to be accountable and receptive to calls for concession made by the intimidated populace.¹³ Due to these conditions, Seoul's North Korea policy is susceptible to external manipulation.

Such susceptibility may have tempted North Korea to engage in military actions against the South. Due to the opaqueness of North Korean decision-making, no direct evidence is available to ascertain that the temptation actually caused the use of force. However, the “deadly partisanship” argument can draw indirect yet significant support from a consistent historical pattern: while partisan policies were in place—whether conditional or unconditional engagement—the Kim Jong-Il regime continually resorted to force. The progressive era of unconditional assistance was not devoid of military provocations, since North Koreans could expect to obtain even greater concessions. The subsequent conservative period has also witnessed the use of force, since its less appeasing policy toward Pyongyang has been potentially reversible. Also confirming the argument is that North Korea has made repeated efforts to influence the South Korean public to concede to its demands. It seems that Pyongyang is well aware of the shaky popular base for Seoul's policy. Admittedly, the North Korean efforts were unsuccessful on some occasions and even counterproductive on others.¹⁴ However, these failures do not mean that Seoul's North Korea policy is not susceptible. Forcing a policy change is not easy, and such force generally has a low success rate.¹⁵ The fact that Pyongyang repeatedly takes up such a tough challenge implies that it probably sees a *relatively* favorable opportunity presented by Seoul's partisan politics.

Conclusion: Toward a Post-Partisan Debate

If the partisan character of the South's North Korea policy is indeed the source of the problem, the solution requires establishing post-partisanship in the debate

from which the policy grows.¹⁶ This is a tough challenge: for political actors presently engaged in fierce competition, abandoning an effective instrument of partisanship (if unreciprocated) can amount to unilateral disarmament amid a battle. This move is simply too risky to make, especially when mutual trust is lacking. Considering this obstacle, a post-partisan debate requires a changed atmosphere in which partisan arguments no longer confer advantages on their producers and distributors. Partisan assertions turn into a political liability rather than an asset when the public can clearly understand their untruthful and self-serving nature. No one likes being told lies or half-truths (unless they are well-meaning—e.g. white lies).¹⁷ Therefore, voters will likely punish politicians and their mouthpieces who propagandize myths for selfish purposes, if the populace understands what they are up to. Therefore, debunking myths and promoting truth can discourage myth-making to a significant extent.

This task is cut out for independent scholars who reject partisanship. They can conduct balanced research on policy issues (such as the subject matter of this paper), grounding their conclusions on nothing but logic and fact. Their findings then can be used to verify political claims. It is unfortunate that many nonpartisan experts prefer staying out of policy debates, since they are afraid of coming under politically motivated attacks and being branded as “polifessor”—an invented word pejoratively designating academics whose primary goal is to occupy public office. The participation of truth-seeking scholars in the debate is crucial to breaking the spell of partisanship.

Nonpartisan institutions can play important supporting roles in this endeavor. Foundations can encourage independent analysis by providing funds and other logistical support, while turning away from partisan scholars. Media also can help out by publicizing nonpartisan findings to the broader audience and inviting to interviews and forums independently-minded scholars, rather than simply partisans whose



opinions are all too predictable. Polling institutions, for their part, can consult apolitical scholars for questionnaire design, and thereby avoid practically forcing respondents to select among partisan choices. All these efforts can combine to free the public mind from partisan prejudices and build a free “marketplace of ideas,” in which partisan argument finds few customers.¹⁸

A post-partisan debate would not suffice to produce a consensus. Divergent views can emerge even among nonpartisan scholars, due to their varying scholarly perspectives and methods as well as the irreducible uncertainties surrounding reality. A sizable number of voters and politicians will remain inattentive and therefore ignorant. Others will intentionally avert their eyes from facts and adhere to false arguments, in order to advance nonpolitical interests including economic gain.

Nevertheless, post-partisanship makes a consensus or a lasting majority opinion more likely to emerge. As a result, it becomes less probable that North Korea will see a window of opportunity to extort concessions through violent actions. Given the potential damage that Pyongyang’s belligerence can cause to Seoul, it is worthwhile to pursue post-partisanship no matter how challenging and elusive that goal is. Moreover, once post-partisanship becomes rooted in this public debate, the practice can diffuse to other related debates, improving policymaking in those issue areas as well. Thus expected payoffs clearly justify sustained effort. ■

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Notes

¹ Jaeyeon Woo. 2010. “Surprise Attack Fuels the National Debate, Again.” *Wall Street Journal*. November 30.

² Since the Kim presidency, sunshine is a common metaphor for unconditional engagement. This expression is coined from an Aesop fable in which the Sun and the Wind compete for a man to take off his coat. Wind represents pressure in this context.

³ Yonhap News, March 18, 2011; *Korea Economic Daily*, November 24, 2010.

⁴ *Chosun Ilbo*, November 23, 2010.

⁵ Data provided by Korean Statistics Bureau (www.kostat.go.kr). The exchange is made through the Gaesong industrial complex.

⁶ Hyung-min Joo. 2011. “Is North Korea Putting All of the Eggs in One Basket?” *North Korean Review*. vol. 7, no. 1: pp. 21–35.

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ The ROK government provided North Korea with an assistance package worth US\$106.6 million per year on average between 1998 and 2007. The amount decreased to US\$ 24.2 million in 2009 when the first of the serial attacks occurred. The figure of 2009 is not used for comparison since the attack may have influenced it. Data provided by Korean Statistics Bureau (www.kostat.go.kr).

⁹ For an example of such eclectic accounts, see Dong Sun Lee. 2011. “Leadership Transition and North Korean Belligerence.” IIRI Background Paper No. 3. Seoul: Ilmin International Relations Institute.

¹⁰ These collaborators often participate in production as well as distribution of myths.

¹¹ For instance, see opinion poll conducted by the East Asia Institute after the Yeonpyeong attack. Newsis, December 1, 2010. Also see *Donga Ilbo*, December 2, 2010.



¹² James D. Fearon. 1994. "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes." *American Political Science Review*. vol. 88, no. 3. September: pp. 577–592; Kenneth A. Schultz. 2001. *Democracy and Coercive Diplomacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹³ Robert Pape. 2005. *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. New York: Random House.

¹⁴ A counterproductive case was the sinking of *Cheonan*, which led to Seoul's decision to stop providing aid on March 24, 2010. However, this incident still heightened popular pressure for appeasement and inflicted losses on the ruling party in local elections held in its aftermath. See EAI Opinion Review Series No. 201006-01.

¹⁵ Robert J. Art. 2007. "Coercive Diplomacy." in Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis eds. *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*. 8th edition. New York: Pearson Longman. pp. 163–176.

¹⁶ Bipartisanship, in which existing partisan groups formulate a common policy, is not a realistic solution in South Korea. It would be difficult to form and nearly impossible to sustain, since rightists and leftists have neither ideological common ground nor practical incentives for cooperation. Therefore, eliminating partisanship—albeit a more radical solution—holds a better prospect for success.

¹⁷ John J. Mearsheimer. 2010. *Why Leaders Lie: The Truth about Lying in International Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁸ Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine. 1996. "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas." *International Security*. vol. 21, no. 2. Autumn: pp. 5–40.

