



What Pres. Roh Should Do about North Korea's Nukes

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In the words of the great English playwright William Shakespeare, the president "doth protest too much." Over the past week, while in Europe, President Roh and his government have been on a tear, harshly criticizing certain vocal circles in the United States who have called for a change in the U.S. and South Korea's approach to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Bizarrely, President Roh's complaints appear to have been sparked by a single article, written by a mild-mannered scholar, and published in a magazine of limited circulation. Why the overreaction? Well, as the context of Shakespeare's quote suggests, people "protest too much" precisely when their positions are least defensible and they have no obvious success to point to.

The reality is that President Roh's conciliatory policy toward North Korea has not worked. It has neither stopped the North from moving ahead with its nuclear weapons program nor has it substantially lessened the tyrannical hold the Pyongyang government has over its impoverished and terrorized population. If anything, Roh's policies have made dealing with Kim Jong Il more difficult, not less. The North

Korean dictator uses Beijing and Seoul's unwillingness to challenge his behavior as a way of protecting himself and his regime from the tougher diplomatic approach being advocated by Japan and the United States.

That said, there are no easy policy options when it comes to North Korea. Talks, economic benefits, and offers of non-aggression statements are not likely to stop North Korea from becoming a nuclear weapons power. Why? Talks and economic assistance have been tried in the past and failed.

As for non-aggression statements, they wrongly suggest the underlying problem to be fixed is North Korea's own sense of insecurity a thesis supported by President Roh in a speech he gave in Los Angeles last month when he said it was "understandable that North Korea claims it is developing nuclear weapons and missiles as a deterrent to protect itself from outside threats; Yet does anyone really believe this? North Korea has been working on building a nuclear capacity for more than 15 years, long before George Bush came to office and designated North Korea as part of the "axis of evil!"

Furthermore, No senior US official during that period ever suggested that it should be America's policy to invade North Korea and remove Kim Jong Il or his father from power. North Korea does have its fears. But those are self-generated by a leadership that realizes its hold on power is only as solid as its military's ability to crush internal dissent and deter overt outside intervention.

No one in the United States, neo-cons included, are advocating a policy of regime change in North Korean by military means. But many in the U.S. also believe that, for the reasons given above, there will be no solution to the problem of North Korea's nuclear weapons program until there is a change in that regime. And, frankly, on this point, President Roh's views seem as confused as ever.

On the one hand, he says there is almost no possibility North Korea will collapse! but on the other, he explains that both Beijing and Seoul are busy supporting measures to prevent that from happening. Such incoherence on the part of President Roh makes him a difficult ally for the U.S. to work with. This is a point increasingly made privately by America's other allies in Asia.

Americans respect the fact that President Roh is the democratically elected leader of South Korea. But, more and more, the president seems to think that his election should free him from criticism from either abroad or even from South Korea's own newspapers. He would better serve himself and his nation if he worried more about how his own policies could be improved than whether everyone including certain vocal circles in the United States agrees with him.