KIM DAE JUNG AND THE SUNSHINE POLICY: AN APPEALING POLICY OPTION FOR INTER-KOREAN RELATIONS

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Abstract

Kim Dae Jung, an opposition leader who later became the president of South Korea in 1998 is celebrated for his progressive outlook that facilitated engagement with North Korea. Kim’s harsh political experience as a persecuted pro-democracy crusader at the hands of authoritarian South Korean regimes contributed to his more progressive political orientation towards North Korea compared to his predecessors. Changes in the global environment that included the end of Cold War and the Asian financial crisis are also important in understanding Kim’s approach towards North Korea. Had North Korea collapsed in the 1990s, the South with its weakened economy would have had to deal with increased instability and a likely massive influx of the North’s population. As such, engagement was seen as a preferred option by Kim because the cost of reverting to containment would have been politically and economically too high for South Korea. The article argues that Kim’s Sunshine Policy increased opportunities for economic and social linkages between the two Koreas and improved the situation in North Korea itself. In comparison, the conservative government of Lee Myung Bak’s rigid North Korea policy has not only damaged inter-Korean cooperation but has also increased tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Keywords: Kim Dae Jung, Sunshine policy, inter-Korean relations, North Korea, South Korea

South Korean President Kim Dae Jung became notable when he introduced the Sunshine Policy in 1998 to engage North Korea. Prior to 1998, during conservative governments, North Korea’s provocative acts towards South Korea engulfed the Korean peninsula in hostility and unrelenting tension. By contrast, once the progressive political elite (beginning with Kim Dae Jung) were in power, they attempted to transform the situation from conflict to reconciliation through engagement with North Korea. It was largely the work of Kim Dae Jung that led to improved inter-Korean relations between 1998 and 2008. However, the engagement policy faced numerous obstacles. The main aim of this article is to examine the Sunshine Policy and the challenges faced by Kim Dae Jung in developing the policy between 1998 and 2003. This article is divided into several sections. It begins with the reasons as to why Kim Dae Jung adopted an engagement policy towards North Korea. This is followed by a discussion on the domestic and international support that Kim received in order to execute his desired policy. Next, the implementation, successes and challenges to the Sunshine Policy are analysed. The ideological differences between conservatives and progressives are then examined at length.