

## **When in Doubt, Blame South Korea: The Politics of Food Aid to North Korea<sup>1</sup>**

Wonhyuk Lim<sup>2</sup>

“A hungry child knows no politics,” said Ronald Reagan when he approved food aid to Ethiopia in 1985. Although he had strong antipathy toward the socialist regime in Ethiopia at the time, he made it clear that food aid should not be used as an instrument of foreign policy. Sadly, well-fed adults know a lot of politics, and despite frequent references to Reagan’s dictum, food aid remains a deeply political and politicized issue. A case in point is the controversy over food aid to North Korea that broke in Washington last year, prompted in part by a report published by the U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Washington was engaged in this debate a full decade after North Korea’s initial request for international assistance was interesting enough, but “conventional wisdom” that was formed as a result of this debate was even more notable for its inattention to changed realities in North Korea and its tendency to bash South Korea. More fundamentally, the controversy seems to reflect Washington’s ignorance about North Korea and deep unease about South Korea’s engagement policy toward North Korea.

Regarding food aid to North Korea, this “conventional wisdom” in Washington may be summarized as follows: (1) international donor agencies (mainly the World Food Program (WFP)) could not ensure food was received by the neediest due to North Korea’s tight restrictions on access; (2) bilateral food aid provided by South Korea and China, with very few strings attached, reduced the negotiating leverage of international donor agencies; in particular, South Korea’s large bilateral aid had the effect of gutting the WFP’s operations in North Korea; (3) no longer needing contributions from international donor agencies thanks to bilateral aid, Pyongyang asked them to pack their bags and leave.

Each of these points needs serious caveats, if not outright corrections. As Hazel Smith makes clear in her new book, *Hungry for Peace*, international donor agencies had a reasonably good

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on a presentation prepared for the seminar on *Hungry for Peace: International Security, Humanitarian Assistance, and Social Change in North Korea*, hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace, February 7, 2006, Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> Wonhyuk Lim is a CNAPS Visiting Fellow at the Brookings Institution. He is also a Fellow at the Korea Development Institute (KDI) and Korea National Strategy Institute (KNSI).

<sup>3</sup> See Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Hunger and Human Rights: The Politics of Famine in North Korea* (Washington, DC: U.S. Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2005).

level of access after building mutual confidence with the North Korean authorities.<sup>4</sup> Their aid targeted the most vulnerable groups such as young children, and they had good access to relevant institutions such as nurseries, schools, and hospitals. The WFP was able to conduct extensive nutritional surveys, which clearly showed improvement in children's health over time. By late 2002, the nutritional levels of children aged under seven had become comparable to those in Cambodia and Indonesia—hardly well-fed but not in famine conditions, either. Although the WFP did not have information at the individual household level, this is understandable because it was not targeting the general population. It had access to most of the counties in North Korea, accounting for more than 80 percent of the population, and could construct a county-by-county database of socioeconomic statistics over time. As a few scholars have pointed out when comparing the WFP's monitoring regime with South Korea's, the WFP had over 40 resident staff and six regional offices in North Korea conducting thousands of monitoring trips every year.<sup>5</sup> With such an extensive presence, one wonders how the WFP could fail to collect good information.

With regard to South Korea's culpability in the alleged demise of the WFP's operations, numbers tell a rather different story. According to a recent CRS report, food assistance to North Korea provided by the WFP has declined dramatically from over 900,000 MT in 2001 to less than 300,000 MT in 2005.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the WFP's share in North Korea's total food availability has declined from around 20 percent to 6 percent. Reductions in contributions by Western donor countries basically account for this decline in multilateral assistance, in both absolute and relative terms. By contrast, multilateral aid from South Korea through the WFP channels has been fixed at 100,000 MT per year since 2001, and bilateral aid from South Korea to North Korea has also remained at a stable level since 2000 (400,000 to 500,000 MT per year, except for 2001 when it was zero). Both demarcation dates were well before Pyongyang's request in August 2005 for the end of the WFP's humanitarian aid operations in North Korea and

---

<sup>4</sup> See Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace: International Security, Humanitarian Assistance, and Social Change in North Korea* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005), especially, pp.101-134.

<sup>5</sup> While South Korea provides multilateral aid in the form of grants, it provides bilateral assistance in the form of long-term loans (typically to be repaid over 20 years at the annual interest rate of 1 percent after a grace period of 10 years). So, strictly speaking, North Korea could argue it has no obligations to allow South Korean monitoring if North Korea were serious about paying these loans back. But this is a big if indeed, and it would be better to do away with this long-term loans approach and switch to grants with tighter monitoring. While diversion is a red herring and should not be exaggerated as an issue, donors would prefer to see their food aid go directly to the most vulnerable instead of trickling down North Korea's social pyramid. Tighter monitoring, within limits justified by technical and professional needs, would also have the added benefit of enhancing interaction with the North Korean officials.

<sup>6</sup> Mark E. Manyin, "U.S. Assistance to North Korea: Fact Sheet," CRS Report for Congress, Order Code RS21834, Updated January 31, 2006.

switch to developmental assistance. So, how could South Korea's *stable* bilateral and multilateral aid to North Korea since 2000/2001 undermine the WFP's negotiating leverage in 2005? It is actually the reduced contributions from other countries that have led to a sharp decline in the significance of the WFP's aid, at least in the eyes of the North Korean authorities. Perhaps these countries had their reasons to reduce food aid to North Korea, but it is unclear why South Korea should be blamed for their decisions.

Furthermore, the alleged demise of the WFP's operations in North Korea is in question. In August 2005, Pyongyang did not ask the WFP to leave North Korea once and for all. Rather, Pyongyang informed the WFP that beginning in 2006, it would accept developmental assistance instead of humanitarian aid. What accounts for this change? Improved domestic food production since 2001 and the reduced significance of the WFP's food aid must have affected Pyongyang's decision, but the hardening of U.S. policy toward North Korea might have played an important role as well. In particular, the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act in the fall of 2004 might have made Pyongyang more nervous about the threat of "intrusive" food aid. The Act links humanitarian assistance activities to "substantial improvements" in transparency and human rights, and, by implication, to regime change, at least in the eyes of the North Korean authorities. By making transparency a central issue, when the WFP actually had a reasonable level of information access, the North Korean Human Rights Act might have made Pyongyang more suspicious and less cooperative with the WFP. Although this line of reasoning sounds persuasive, it does not explain Pyongyang's request for developmental assistance because developmental assistance may actually require *more* information access than humanitarian aid—unless, of course, Pyongyang presumed otherwise. The WFP is currently presenting a proposal for a developmental assistance program for Executive Board approval,<sup>7</sup> and it remains to be seen how North Korea will deal with the issue of information access if and when this program is implemented. Until then, a hasty conclusion should not be drawn about Pyongyang's decision last year.

In short, publicly available information suggests that international donor agencies had a reasonably good level of access in North Korea and that the accusations of South Korea's culpability in the alleged demise of the WFP's operations are less than warranted. This assessment, however, begs the question of why misperceptions about food aid to North Korea persist in Washington. In particular, why do many in Washington blame South Korea while failing to understand changing realities in North Korea?

---

<sup>7</sup> WFP, "Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation—Democratic People's Republic of Korea 10488.0," Project for Executive Board Approval, Agenda item 8, February 3, 2006.

A genuine concern about the future of the WFP's operations in North Korea may be a motivating factor. Mistakenly believing that bilateral aid from South Korea and China rather than sharply reduced contributions from other donor countries undercut the WFP, some may think that South Korea can somehow be "shamed" into donating more through the WFP. In their view, South Korea is a democracy much more susceptible to public pressure, while China is a lost cause. Also, at least in theory, it may not be a bad fundraising tactic for the WFP to encourage the belief that South Korea and China are undermining the WFP.

Upon closer examination, however, these possible motives for blaming South Korea make little sense. To the extent that democracies are susceptible to public pressure, it would be more logical, based on data since 2001, to try to "shame" Western donor countries into reversing their position on food aid to North Korea. Certainly, South Korea would be happy to reduce its bilateral aid to North Korea and "stop undermining the WFP's negotiating position" if other countries increased their food aid back to the 2001 level. As far as fundraising is concerned, it would actually make more sense for the WFP to argue for the desirability of a continued multilateral presence in North Korea rather than criticizing and alienating the South Korean government. The WFP could make a case for more funding as it contemplates a switch from humanitarian aid to developmental assistance in North Korea, and could even coordinate with South Korea's efforts.

A far more likely reason for blaming South Korea may have to do with Washington's deep unease about South Korea's engagement policy toward North Korea and the belief by many that it is a policy of "appeasement." Since the humanitarian nature of food aid makes it difficult to challenge South Korea for providing food aid *per se*, blaming South Korea for the alleged demise of WFP's operations may be a more effective way of criticizing its policy toward North Korea.

From historical perspective, however, the charge of "appeasement" against South Korea's engagement policy sounds rather strange. As in the case of Neville Chamberlain's compromise with Adolf Hitler, the term "appeasement" is traditionally used in the context of making futile concessions to a powerful regime intent on pursuing aggressive expansion. Trapped between China and Russia on the north and South Korea on the south, North Korea seems to be in a relatively weak position and concerned mostly about regime survival. Although North Korea maintains a huge army and a large arsenal of weapons, it is deterred by the no-less-strong military posture of South Korea and the United States. Perhaps many in Washington do not like North Korea's tough bargaining tactics, but negotiating with a weaker

and poorer counterpart does not amount to “appeasement” in any proper sense of the term. The characterization of South Korea’s engagement policy as “appeasement” is basically a talking point unsubstantiated by any detailed analysis of inter-Korean negotiations over the past decade.

For an intelligent debate on South Korea’s engagement policy toward North Korea, it may be helpful to place this in a larger historical and philosophical context. In particular, it may be useful to think about alternative perspectives on how the Cold War came to an end and what implications they have for North Korea policy.

Regarding the Cold War, some believe that the policy of "containment," including the alleged U.S. efforts to trap the Soviet Union in an escalating arms race, created serious strains and frustrations in the Communist Bloc, eventually resulting in its collapse. Others contend that the policy combination of "peaceful coexistence" and "change through rapprochement" (to borrow from Egon Bahr's 1963 speech) induced internal changes and eventual implosions in communist societies as people-to-people interaction increased. The truth is probably somewhere in-between. By maintaining a strong military posture against the Communist Bloc, the United States and its allies deterred communist expansion, although it would be an exaggeration to claim that this policy “bankrupted” the Communist Bloc. After all, the economic collapse of the Communist Bloc came after its political implosion, not before. While maintaining strong deterrence, the Western allies also promoted change in the Communist Bloc through increased people-to-people interaction, especially after the Helsinki Accord of 1975. When the Soviet Union itself was internally changed and externally reassured to loosen its grip on Central and Eastern Europe, the Cold War came to an end. Without “change through rapprochement,” the policy of “containment” or “peaceful coexistence” would likely have meant the preservation of the status quo.

Philosophical differences also affect historical interpretation and policy orientation. People like Dick Cheney subscribe to a Manichean world view, as indicated by his widely cited comment on North Korea policy: "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it." Clearly, this philosophical position has an affinity with the hawkish interpretation of the Cold War that sees “containment” and the escalating arms race as key to the resolution of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. Others believe that, to the extent that interaction with the outside world promotes change, it makes sense to engage even a bad regime—lest it be replaced by an even more terrible regime as we see in Iran today. Their philosophical position is consistent with the dovish interpretation of the Cold War that focuses on the transformative influence of “peaceful

coexistence” and “change through rapprochement.” They think it makes sense to offer an early taste of benefits from engagement when there is mutual distrust. In their view, when the regime is controlling access to its people and the only viable means of improving the lot of the people is through interaction with the regime, options are rather limited. Willy Brandt's *ostpolitik* faced this problem; some even likened it to paying ransom to hostage takers. In the end, however, although *ostpolitik* failed to change the East German regime, it won the hearts and minds of the East German people (including East German soldiers who didn't fire on demonstrators in 1989) and helped to set the stage for Germany's peaceful reunification.

Since North Korea's dramatic economic decline in the mid-1990s, the South Korean government and public have been endorsing engagement policy. Many officials in the Bush Administration, especially those who were opposed to détente during the Cold War, seem to prefer a much tougher approach toward North Korea and other “rogue states.” 9-11 reinforced their tendency to see international politics as a struggle between good and evil, and to play on American anger and anxiety. This difference between Seoul and Washington in philosophical orientation and policy approach is real and far from being resolved.

As the experience of the last four years shows, however, moralizing about good and evil only makes it difficult to see the world as is and formulate effective policy to bring about substantive change. In fact, the controversy over food aid to North Korea may be regarded as yet another example of this tendency to ignore changing realities and criticize engagement without producing a viable policy alternative. The end of the Cold War showed that even “an evil empire” was full of normal people and leaders who could bring about an enormous change when it was engaged with the outside world. Perhaps a return to what worked in the past may be a better policy than wishing for a regime change without any realistic strategy.

Instead of “Appeasement” (Perhaps being overly generous and spoiling the other side)