

S. Korea's 'Northern Policy' gamble

by Lydia Cherry

South Korean President Noh Tae Woo harshly warned "the highest responsible authority" of the North Korean government that "armed provocation against the South will never succeed and only lead to its own grave of self-destruction," at a press conference March 6. The warning came with the discovery that North Korea had constructed yet another underground tunnel crossing the buffer zone into the South. The only thing the South can do is "to defend freedom by blocking North Korean aggression through a firm defense posture and induce it to join a forum for national integration," Noh said.

In recent months, Seoul has offered dialogue to Pyongyang, a policy first spelled out by President Noh on Oct. 4, 1988 as his "Northern Policy"—a plan to open relations with both Beijing and Moscow in an effort to begin talks on the reunification of the Korean peninsula and rebuilding the North Korean economy. In the wake of the changes in Eastern Europe and the United States' announcement that it will begin cutting troops, Seoul's diplomacy with the North and with Moscow has intensified.

In February, Seoul decided to maintain current rice production of 6 million tons, despite a glut, in order to help the North, which produces 2.1 million tons and has severe shortages. In January, sources at the Energy and Resources Ministry revealed that Seoul is considering supplying North Korea with electricity as part of an effort to activate inter-Korean exchanges, the South Korean news agency Yonhap reported. It also reported Jan. 8 that Seoul "is considering buying goods from the North at prices far higher than normal while selling the goods at below normal prices, compensating private traders for their losses, possibly from the South-North Korean cooperation fund."

At the same time the Kim Il-sung North Korean government was showing small signs of a desire to negotiate with Seoul, South Korean military intelligence determined that military cooperation between North Korea and the Soviet Union was increasing. A joint maritime exercise off the east coast of Korea in late September involved more than 40 vessels and 50 aircraft. It was determined through satellite photographs that North Korea has significantly expanded nuclear facilities and it is strongly believed to already have the atomic bomb. The Japanese government Feb. 9 voiced concern over the matter, after a team at Tokai University Research and Information Center ran computer analysis of

two sets of photographs taken by a French satellite in 1986 and September 1989. The team said the photographs showed North Korea had expanded the facility substantially, located near Nyongbyong, about 55 miles north of Pyongyang.

Will North Korea negotiate?

President Noh is still optimistic that pressure can bring Pyongyang to the negotiating table. "It seems that North Korea will resume dialogue with the South after a system to hand Kim Il-sung's mantle of power to his son is consolidated," Noh told Yonhap on Feb. 24. A few days later, Japan's Kyodo news agency reported, citing Beijing sources, that the elder Kim would step down April 15 and hand over power to Kim Chong-il, his long-designated heir who is believed to be the mastermind of the Rangoon, Burma bombing in October 1983 which killed 17 South Korean government officials, including the foreign minister.

Following the changes that shifted the geometry of Eastern Europe, the South Korean government—strengthened by the merger of the ruling party with two opposition parties, and the isolation of firebrand Kim Dae-jung—became more convinced that the totalitarian regime of the aged Kim Il-sung would soon be superseded. (East European developments have led the student movement in the South to vote out its pro-North Korean leadership). Placards began to appear on the streets of Seoul saying, "Let the East European winds spread to Pyongyang," and "Kim Il-sung is finished."

Some experts on North Korea think Seoul's policy is based on wishful thinking. Japanese Diet members who visited Pyongyang in December returned saying they were of the opinion that no changes would be made. Foreign Minister Taro Nakayama warned U.S. Defense Secretary Richard Cheney against U.S. troop pullbacks from Korea on Feb. 21 when Cheney was in Tokyo, saying there was simply no lessening of the North Korean threat.

The expectation that the developments in Eastern Europe will affect North Korea "is not based on any careful analysis of the internal situation in North Korea and its policies," insisted Hajime Izumi of Shizuoka Prefectural University in Japan, in the February *Wolgan Chungang*, a South Korean publication. Izumi, who visited Pyongyang in April and November 1989, insists that comparisons between Germany and Korea cannot be made; that East and West Germany normalized relations in 1972, joining the U.N. as two separate states a year later—none of which could occur in the foreseeable future on the peninsula. He insists that for the West, "the consideration has to be what will maintain peace and security on the Korean peninsula. . . . Any attempt to induce North Korea immediately to open its society is a matter which should be weighed very carefully, and it should *not be made*. No one can preclude the strong possibility that the North Korean leadership will take an oppressive attitude to forestall unrest. . . . Tension between North and South may become aggravated due to this."