Reciprocity in South Korean Security Policy Vis-à-vis North Korea and the United States

Young-Geun Kim

I review the principle of reciprocity in South Korean security policy with regard to North Korea and the United States and analyze how the principle fits with US security policy concerning South Korea. Diffuse reciprocity shaped Korean security policy starting with President Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy. The Lee Myung-bak government’s hard-line approach increased military tension and economic anxiety on the peninsula. The new South Korean government under Park Geun-hye should devise achievable policy measures rather than place excessive pressure or unrealistic demands on North Korea. Keywords: specific/diffuse reciprocity, security policy, Sunshine Policy, North Korean nuclear program, engagement policy.

With the recent election of Park Geun-hye as president of South Korea (the Republic of Korea; ROK), a review of the security arrangements on the Korean peninsula is timely. To date, no attempt has been made in the new administration to take a wider perspective on South Korea’s policies toward North Korea. In this article, therefore, I focus on the concept of reciprocity in security to explore how South Korea’s political and economic relations with North Korea have evolved since the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998–2003) and what its implications are for the ROK-US alliance.

The South Korean government has had difficulty pursuing stable and consistent security policies toward North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; DPRK) because of indigenous and exogenous variables on the peninsula. After each democratic transfer of authority in the ROK, the South Korean government’s changing stance toward the North has led to controversy in the South (e.g., a split in public opinion) that minimized the effectiveness of its policies.

I analyze the trend and direction of recent South Korean for-
eign policies toward the North by studying the overall pattern of the South’s security and foreign policies found throughout the historical changes in the ROK-US alliance. Furthermore, I discuss how the alliance and the differences in the two countries’ policies should be understood in the same context. Moreover, I provide an analytical frame for understanding how South Korea’s political motives affect the direction of the stance against North Korea by exploring the changes in the South’s policies toward the North based on the concept of reciprocity (Rhodes 1993). For convenience in this discussion, I categorize South Korea’s policies toward North Korea as either hawkish (strict reciprocity) or dovish (diffuse reciprocity).

In this article I investigate the following substantive questions: What are the reasons for and implications of harmony between ROK reciprocity in security policy and US reciprocity in security policy toward North Korea since the Kim Dae-jung administration and President Bill Clinton’s second term? In contrast, what are the reasons for and implications of the discord between the two nations during George W. Bush’s first term? I compare the South Korean and US administrations, and I try to clarify their mutual relations, both in conflict and cooperation, in order to observe how policies toward North Korea have changed.

Researching Engagement Policies with North Korea

As is commonly recognized, politics and diplomacy are intimately connected (Jeong 2002). Thus, South-North relations and political circumstances in South Korea are bilaterally tied and intimately related. The political application of South Korea’s policies toward North Korea is a major factor in analyzing South Korea’s foreign and security policies. Although South Korea’s political circumstances and foreign policies are undoubtedly intimately connected (Putnam 1988; Evans, Jacobson, and Putnam 1993), not only do Seoul’s policies toward Pyongyang have the character of foreign policy toward a neighboring country; they also strongly reflect cooperation within one ethnic group (inter-Korean).

Research on the Sunshine Policy, which called for engage-