

Korea's "Sunshine Policy": The Reunification of North and South Korea

How Bush Jr Quashed the Movement for Korean Reunification

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Global Research, April 16, 2017

[Dissident Voice](#) 2 April 2017

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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With the Trump administration and the mainstream media gleefully beating the war drums for a military attack on North Korea, there's crucial historical context missing from the corporate media coverage of this issue. I suspect most Americans have never heard of of Korea's "Sunshine Policy" (1998-2008), aimed at eventual reunification of North and South Korea. We certainly heard about it here in New Zealand, thanks to the mass revolt in Bush's diplomatic [corps](#) when he deliberately sabotaged this policy to isolate and provoke North Korea into amping up their their nuclear weapons program.

On learning of the Sunshine Policy, my Americans friends are shocked to learn that North Korea moved from active engagement in 1998 in nuclear disarmament and negotiations towards Korean reunification to announcing the their first nuclear weapons test in 2006. They also have no idea of the deliberate steps the Bush/Cheney administration took to sink the Sunshine Policy, nor their devious motives for doing so.

Carter's 1994 Agreed Framework and the Origins of South Korea's Sunshine Policy

The Sunshine Policy grew out of a treaty (the Agreed Framework) former president Jimmy Carter negotiated with late North Korean President Kim Il Sung in 1994. In return for North Korea agreeing to cease its nuclear weapons program and permitting the return of International Atomic Energy (IAEA) inspectors, the US agreed to replace the power lost when North Korea closed its Yongbyon reactor with oil shipments and two modern nuclear plants.

The North Koreans kept this agreement, and in 1998 South Korean president Kim Dae Jung began his Sunshine Policy aimed at lessening tensions and building reconciliation between North and South Korea. In June 2000, leaders of the two countries held a historic three-day summit in Pyongyang (the first in 50 years) and signed a pact in which they agreed to work towards reunification. Among other provisions, the [agreement](#) included substantial South Korean humanitarian aid to address North Korea's chronic food shortages, loosening of restrictions on South Korean investment in North Korea, the opening of North Korea's Kumgang Tourist Region to South Korean visitors, the establishment of a family reunification program, the opening of rail links through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and a worker exchange program permitting South Korean workers to work at North Korea's Kaesang Industrial Park.

In 2000, Kim Dae Jung won the Nobel Peace Prize for his successful implementation of the Sunshine Policy.

Why Bush Deliberately Sabotaged the Sunshine Policy

Unfortunately George W Bush, who took office in 2001, had very different plans for the Korean peninsula. In his view, a paranoid militarist North Korea threatening US allies South Korea and Japan was the most potent argument he had to justify his obsession with building a missile defense system. Once Japan joined the effort to normalize relations with North Korea, the neocons in his administration also had real concerns about the potential threat to US strategic dominance in the region.

In [“Blame Bush for North Korea’s Nukes”](#), journalist Barbara O’Brien gives a blow by blow description of Bush’s calculated efforts to derail the Sunshine Policy, starting with his refusal to meet with Nobel Prize Winner Kim Dae Jung during his March 2001 visit to Washington. In January 2002, Bush would make his infamous Axis of Evil speech, including North Korea with Iraq and Iran as states deliberately sponsoring terrorism and seeking weapons of mass destruction. In October 2002, a month after Japan joined the diplomatic effort to normalize relations with North Korea, he accused the latter (with even flimsier evidence than his administration put forward for Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction) of secretly developing a program to enrich uranium to weapons grade and unilaterally cut off oil shipments the US committed to under the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Bush would go on to pull US troops out of North Korea, where they had been working cooperatively with the North Korean Army searching for the remains of US army personnel killed in the Korean War.

As O’Brien asserts in her series, the immediate trigger for these moves was a visit by Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi to North Korea in a first effort to normalize relations between the two countries. In the view of the Bush administration, an independent economic-political block consisting of Japan and a unified Korea posed a serious strategic threat to US dominance in Asia and had to be stopped. Her arguments make sense in view of the fact that direct US military occupation of South Korea only ended in [1994](#), a year after the South Korean people overthrew the last US-installed puppet dictator.

Provoking North Korea into Resuming Their Nuclear Weapons Program

In the face of growing belligerence and military threats from the US, in 2003 North Korea announced they were withdrawing from the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and restarted the nuclear reactor frozen by the 1994 Agreed Framework. They also announced they were restarting their nuclear weapons program and long range missile testing. In 2004, they would announce they had successfully manufactured a nuclear weapon and in 2006 test their first nuclear weapon

Whereas there was no evidence they had nuclear weapons in 2002 when Bush first leveled accusations against them, by 2004 he managed to convince them their regime was under sufficient threat they needed nuclear weapons to defend themselves – he also managed to convince Congress that the North Korean threat justified massive expenditures on a wasteful and questionably effective missile defense system.

Meanwhile despite growing tensions related to North Korea’s decision to resume their nuclear weapons program, the Sunshine Policy would limp along until 2008. A shooting incident at the Mount Kumgang tourist region (in which a South Korean tourist was shot by North Korean soldiers) effectively ended it.

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