

**The U.S. Role in Korean Reconciliation**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

The future of the U.S.-Republic of Korea alliance hinges on the ability of the two partners to adjust successfully to changing circumstances in Northeast Asia. The adjustment must achieve a new balance between the two partners' national security needs and their people's expectations. Otherwise, the half century old alliance will retreat into history.

Strain in the alliance is certainly not a new phenomenon. If anything, it has been a prominent characteristic of this and most other viable alliances.<sup>1</sup> Today, however, the sources of strain are more fundamental than in the past. Previously, these allies shared common goals and strategies, but in recent years their goals and strategies have diverged.

North Korea is the common cause for this divergence. Since at least 1993, some have claimed that the allies' common enemy, North Korea, has driven a wedge between Washington and Seoul. This may have been true a decade ago, but not now. Today North Korea, particularly its nuclear programs, remains their shared concern, but of greater concern is that how to deal with North Korea.

The Bush Administration perceives North Korea's despotic government and nuclear capability as integral to global problems. President Bush's priorities are to replace despotism with democracy and eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction and their proliferation. The Bush Administration aims to compel North Korea's acceptance of CVID, "complete verifiable, irreversible dismantlement" of all its nuclear programs, both military and civilian. President Bush asserts that he is seeking a "peaceful diplomatic solution" to this problem, but he refuses to rule out his "military option."<sup>2</sup>

South Korea shares Washington's preference for a diplomatic solution. At this point, however, Seoul parts company with Washington. Its priorities are regionally, not globally oriented. Its long term aim is the promotion of reconciliation with North Korea, not the transformation of North Korea into a democracy. Seoul prefers diplomatic and economic engagement with North Korea, not Washington's more coercive strategy. Also, Seoul, unlike Washington, is willing to allow Pyongyang to retain a civilian nuclear program.<sup>3</sup>

These differences, more than any wedge Pyongyang may have forged, is straining the US-ROK alliance. If the alliance is to survive, the allies must identify accurately the cause of their problem and address it. Thus far, both have focused on the symptoms of the strain, not its causes.

## **Symptoms Are Not Causes**

Growing anti-Americanism in South Korea has too often been cited as the cause of stress in the US-ROK alliance.<sup>4</sup> Actually, this view blurs more than clarifies the situation. It is rooted in the tragic death a few years ago of two South Korean school girls when they were run over by a US military vehicle. Many public opinion leaders in both nations

point to the public outcry of South Koreans after a US military court found the driver of the vehicle not guilty of misconduct in the students' death. Criticism focused on the perceived arrogance of the US military in South Korea, not on the United States as a whole. Subsequently the term "anti-Americanism" frequently has been pinned on South Korean criticism of the United States and its policies. This is quite presumptuous. Too often ignored is the fact that South Korea is now a democracy. The South Korean people's criticism of US policy is a democratic right, not necessarily the expression of "anti-Americanism."

### **The Enduring Tug-of-War**

Actually, every US president since the alliance's birth during the Korean War has found it challenging to deal with his South Korean ally.<sup>5</sup> Koreans have always asserted their national interests *vis a vis* the United States. Some Americans have magnified the stress in the alliance by dismissing Koreans' concerns as a manifestation of "national personality." Actually such a view tells us more about the extent of American ignorance of Korean history. For centuries, Koreans have felt compelled to resolutely assert their nation's interests in an effort to sustain Korea's cultural and political independence from its larger and more powerful neighbors, i.e. China and Japan.<sup>6</sup> Since 1945, Koreans in both halves of the Korean Peninsula have continued this tradition *vis a vis* their primary benefactors, the United States and Russia.

The US-ROK alliance came under intense stress even before it was formalized in 1953. South Korea's President Rhee Syng Man tangled repeatedly with US President Dwight Eisenhower.<sup>7</sup> Rhee's priority was national unification while Eisenhower had promised the American people that he would end the war. Eisenhower won this tug-of-war.

Nevertheless, the two allies soon formalized their alliance in the US-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty. Their shared goals were to deter war and sustain peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Despite profound changes in South Korea and the international situation, the US-ROK alliance continues to pursue, at least formally, the same goals. Maybe this, more than alleged "anti-Americanism" and North Korea's wedge driving account for today's tensions in the US-ROK alliance.

### **The Cold War's Child**

A child of the Cold War, the mutual need to contain communism and to deter North Korean aggression nurtured the alliance. Deterrence, anchored in the United States' superior conventional and nuclear forces, was the agreed strategy.<sup>8</sup> South Korea provided US forces a base in Northeast Asia while the United States ensured South Korea's survival with military and economic aid.

Success has been a consequence of each side's willingness to accommodate the other's preferences. Partnership gradually replaced dependency as the alliance matured. Impressive economic development enabled South Korea to increasingly contribute to the alliance. It dispatched soldiers to Vietnam, provided host nation support for US forces,

and paid the largest portion of cost to implement the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework. Most recently, South Korea dispatched troops to Iraq and provides it economic aid.

### **South Korea's Ascendancy - Pyongyang's Decline**

Major developments since 1980, however, have profoundly affected the alliance. The Cold War's end transformed South Korea's enemies, China and Russia, into trading partners. This garnered Seoul international respect and a world-wide market. First prosperity, then democratization followed.

The Cold War's end ushered in an extensive realignment of relations in the region. The confrontation between capitalism and communism gave way to commercial engagement and collaboration. South Korea retained warm relations with its primary supporters, the United States and Japan while it successfully built friendly and profitable ties with China and Russia plus all their allies except North Korea. At the same time, North Korea struggled to prevent deterioration of its relations with China and Russia, its former champions. Pyongyang also stumbled repeatedly in its efforts to improve relations with the United States and Japan.

South Korea lunged ahead of North Korea. It expanded economically into a global trading power.<sup>9</sup> Politically, South Koreans converted their government into a stable, maturing democracy while North Korea clung to its archaic autocracy. South Korea's openness to the outside world and intellectual diversity have fostered technological innovation. North Korea's uncertain political leadership, on the other hand, stifled modernization by continuing to impede foreign influence and striving to sustain ideological conformity.

Similarly, the balance of military power on the Korean Peninsula underwent a virtual reversal after 1980. North Korea began the decade of the 1980s confident that it could defend itself against any foe, including the United States. Also, its leadership believed it could exploit any opportunity to forcefully reunite Korea under its authority. A decade later, profound changes had shattered North Korea's self confidence.

### **Pyongyang's Dilemma**

Pyongyang had lost its primary champion, the Soviet Union. This superpower's collapse robbed North Korea of its nuclear umbrella and extensive military assistance. In the first Gulf War of 1991, the United States' superior weapons technology rendered obsolete the former Soviet Union's arsenal of conventional weapons. Pyongyang's once mighty conventional military prowess, almost entirely of Soviet origin, likewise was rendered impotent. Having lost its nuclear umbrella and economically unable to modernize its conventional weaponry, North Korea opted to build its own nuclear deterrence capability. The effort, however, blocked improvement of relations with its adversaries, the United States and Japan. Ever since, North Korea has confronted the dilemma of either nuclear

disarmament to improve relations with the United States, or retain its arsenal and risk co-existence with its nemesis.<sup>10</sup>

### **Altered Alliances**

The end of the Cold War initiated a global realignment of alliances around the world, except between the United States and the ROK. Both the former Bush and Clinton Administrations invested impressive effort in realigning the United States' relations across Europe, China, Japan and Southeast Asia. Washington's once extensive network of collective security alliances has been completely restructured. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been expanded to embraces many of the alliance's former adversaries. The European Union (EU) has also been expanded to include former socialist states. US policy toward China has shifted from confrontation to diplomatic and commercial engagement. The US-Japan alliance is being altered to accommodate global and regional changes. The Cold War era Southeast Treaty Organization (SEATO) has given way to the economic and trade oriented Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>11</sup>

While the global tendency has been for the United States to render its allies both a greater voice and responsibility for their security, the opposite has been true on the Korean Peninsula. In 1993, the Clinton Administration quietly asserted its supremacy over the administration of President Kim Yong-sam regarding policy toward North Korea. Until that time, the United States had played a supporting role vis a vis the government in Seoul. Washington had supported Seoul's lead in determining how best to deal with Pyongyang. Beginning in 1993, the roles were reversed, a consequence of the US nuclear negotiations with North Korea.<sup>12</sup>

### **Role Reversal**

The Korean Summit of June 2000 was a watershed in the two Koreas post-Korean War efforts toward reconciliation. The general trend ever since has been hesitant progress toward reconciliation between Seoul and Pyongyang.<sup>13</sup> National reunification remains, and seems destined to remain into the foreseeable future, a distant hope. But peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation are slowly becoming a reality. The United States, however, persists in insisting that it must determine how best to deal with North Korea, and similarly asserts that South Korea much play the supporting role.

This reversal of roles since 1994, more than any other consideration, has intensified stress in the US-ROK alliance. The Bush Administration has been particularly adamant in this regard. It puts North Korea's disarmament first and prefers multilateral pressure to compel North Korea to unilaterally disarm. Washington prefers coercion over engagement, and confrontation over diplomacy. Seoul, on the other hand, seeks reconciliation with North Korea using diplomatic and economic engagement. South Korea used this approach to convert former enemies like China and Russia into friends. Seoul still champions deterrence, but Washington's unilateral decision to reduce its troop level on the Korean Peninsula jarred South Koreans' confidence in the alliance.

## **Containment or Engagement?**

Paradoxically, U.S. Republican presidents since Nixon have employed engagement backed by deterrence to pursue peaceful co-existence with China and the former Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> Former President Bush even extended this approach to Vietnam and North Korea. The present Bush Administration, however, condemns engagement as “appeasement,” an attitude that sparked tension in the US-ROK alliance. South Koreans who oppose President Roh Moo-hyun’s reliance on engagement labeled his supporters “anti-American” for criticizing current US policy. This political dueling within South Korea has further troubled the alliance and impeded reconciliation.

President Bush should demonstrate respect and support for the policy preferences of his ally and its democratically elected president. The United States, long the alliance’s dominate partner, should initiate an adjustment process. The aim must be to achieve a new balance between the two partners’ national security needs and their people’s expectations. Doing so would bridge the expanding wedge that now separates the two governments while also divides South Koreans over how best to deal with North Korea. It would also convince all Koreans, both north and south, that the United States truly supports the Korean reconciliation process. After all, the US-ROK alliance’s ultimate goal is to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, the half century old alliance will retreat into history.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Martin Gilbert, *A History of the Twentieth Century, Volume Three: 1952-1999*. New York and London: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1999. p. 135. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) served as the cornerstone of the US collective defense system in Europe during the Cold War. It, like other Cold War alliances, often experienced internal tensions. An example of this is NATO's inability to respond to the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive assessment of the Bush Administration's policy toward North Korea, see: C. Kenneth Quinones, "Dualism in the Bush Administration's North Korea Policy," *Asian Perspective* (Vol. 27, No.1) 197-224. See also: Richard Bush and Catharin Dalpino, *Brookings Northeast Asia Survey 2002-2003*, and *2003-2004*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003 and 2004.

<sup>3</sup> ROK President Roh Moo-hyun's basic strategy for dealing with North Korea is set forth in, *The Policy for Peace and Prosperity*, Seoul: Ministry of Unification, 2004. Also see: [www.unikorea.go.kr](http://www.unikorea.go.kr).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Armacost and Daniel Okimoto, *The Future of America's Alliances in Northeast Asia*. Stanford, CA.: Brookings Institute Press, 2004. Derek Mitchell, *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the U.S. and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Seongho Sheen, "Grudging Partner: South Korea's Response to U.S. Security Policies Policies," *Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies*. Honolulu: Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2003. William H. Gleysteen Jr., *Massive Entanglement, Marginal Influence: Carter and Korea in Crisis*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999. p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Chae-jin Lee, *China and Korea: Dynamic Relations*. Stanford, CA.: Hoover Institution Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-53*. New York: Times Books, 1987. pp. 971-976.

<sup>8</sup> Republic of Korea, Ministry of National Defense, *Defense White Paper 2000*. Seoul: 2000. Sung-joo Han, editor, *U.S.-Korea Security Cooperation: Retrospects and Prospects*. Seoul: Korea University, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Chamberlin, *Korea 2010: The Challenges of the New Millennium*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2001. Also see: Donald Kirk, *Korean Crisis: Unraveling the Miracle in the IMF Era*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Byung Chul Koh, editor, *North Korea and the World: Explaining Pyongyang's Foreign Policy*. Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Derek Leebaert, *The Fifty-year Would: How America's Cold War Victory Shapes our World*. Boston, New York and London: Little, Brown and Company, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> C. Kenneth Quinones, *Han bando unmyong*. Seoul: Joongang M&B, 2000. Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers – Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Republic of Korea, Ministry of Unification, *T'ongil paekso 2004*. Seoul, 2004.