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## Strategic Insight

### Coping with Dual Korean Problems

by [Edward A. Olsen](#)

*Strategic Insights are authored monthly by analysts with the Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC). The CCC is the research arm of the [National Security Affairs Department](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

**January 17, 2003**

Korea's role in U.S. foreign and defense policy has evolved in an interesting manner over the years. For many Americans who are familiar with the United States' involvement in Korea during the Cold War and its aftermath, it may seem natural that today's U.S. policy makers would be concerned about U.S. interests in Korea. Prior to World War II, however, that was decidedly untrue. Even though the United States was the first western power to take the lead in establishing diplomatic relations with Korea (1882), it was able to do so largely as a by-product of international circumstances in which Chinese guidance led the Korean government under the Yi Dynasty to interact with the United States to offset other countries—especially Japan. This Chinese role was in keeping with its traditional Sinocentric hierarchical ties with Korea. Even after the United States became more proactive in the imperialist era, its interests in Korea were significantly overshadowed by its interests in China and Japan. A number of diplomatic arrangements with Tokyo (notably the Taft-Katsura memorandum of 1905 and the Root-Takahira agreement of 1908) involved the United States cutting geopolitical deals, partially at Korea's expense, that effectively sanctioned Imperial Japan's incremental colonization of Korea. Compared to China or Russia, the United States did not express the kinds of interest in Korea that Koreans considered appropriate. In short, Koreans deemed the United States to be inconsistent at best and opportunistic at worst.

That began to change during World War II. The Cairo Declaration of 1943 in which the United States, Britain, and the Republic of China stated "three great powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent" was welcomed by Koreans. Initial postwar events yielded a divided Korea and ambiguous U.S. interests in Korea. Not until the Cold War developed and expanded to Korea—especially in the form of the Korean War—did U.S. commitments to Korea become resolute. Unfortunately those commitments were predicated upon Korea's division and were characterized by close alliance ties with South Korea and intense adversarial ties with North Korea. That mixture has meant that the United States' "in due course" commitment to a "free and independent" Korean nation state has been postponed indefinitely and remains unfulfilled.

This context was not much of a problem for many years because of South Korea's pragmatic client-state style dependence upon the United States and its shared perception of North Korea as a threat to both South Korea and regional stability. However, South Korea's mounting economic prosperity and generational shifts in attitude, the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reemergence of China as a major player in a broader spectrum of Korean affairs, and changes in both Korea's perceptions of each other have created a new dynamic surrounding Korea that challenges U.S. policy toward the peninsula. It is against this backdrop that the United States has coped with the results of economic and political maturation in its South Korean ally and de facto dynastic succession in a North Korean rogue state. Both processes have unleashed new circumstances for U.S. policy toward Korea.

Today, as the United States simultaneously copes with challenges posed by the threatening situations in Iraq and North Korea, a number of critics have raised questions about the relative importance of each case and whether a double standard exists. At the core of the critics' proposition is the issue of why Iraq should be a higher military priority for the United States if North Korea arguably is more dangerous

because of its greater capabilities. The importance of that comparison—and the awkward atmospherics it causes—tends to eclipse another comparison, namely how effective the United States may be in addressing challenges posed by recent developments in *both* Koreas. In short, the United States now has two Korean problems on its plate that also warrant a critical appraisal.

For several months Washington has struggled with how to cope with North Korea's renewed nuclear brinkmanship. Given the legacy of North Korea's provocatively reckless behavior in the past, its use of terrorist methods against South Korea during the Cold War, its participation in global weapons proliferation, and the highly unorthodox reputation acquired by North Korea's father and son team of 'Great/Dear Leaders' as they cultivated the so-called cult of Kim, the current U.S. administration in early 2002 decided to include North Korea in the international cohort labeled the "axis of evil". In the post-9/11 atmosphere the Bush administration was much less amenable than its predecessor had been to support the Kim Dae-jung administration's readiness to proactively engage North Korea in a "sunshine policy" peace process aimed at reconciliation, coexistence, and reunification. This was reinforced by many neo-conservatives' skepticism about the merits of casting sunshine by offering incentives that they scorned as appeasement in response to North Korea's extortion. As a consequence the United States adopted a much harder line posture toward Korean issues that was consistent with its war on global terrorism and that war's Iraq corollary. Implicit in this was a preference for North Korean regime change as well, rather than helping to facilitate North Korea becoming a better partner for a future merger with South Korea. This harder line posture was further complicated during 2002 by the greater emphasis placed on the value of strategic preemption within U.S. security policy as compared to strategic deterrence. Within the context of U.S. policies toward the other two members of the "axis of evil" these issues provoked anxieties among Koreans on both sides of the DMZ.

North Korea's heightened nuclear brinkmanship is infused with a number of themes salient to these developments. One ironically amounts to a way to deal with what Pyongyang seems to perceive as the Bush administration's preemptive counter-brinkmanship. For North Koreans who seem worried that the United States might well be preparing to deal militarily with all three members of the "axis of evil" in some ill-defined sequence, one way to deal with such supposed American plans is to use North Korea's version of deterrence by clarifying the military risks in and around Korea. Perversely, North Korea's intensified use of its nuclear card—whether representing real weaponry or manipulative rhetorical pressures—also is a form of deterrence designed to use a North Korean rendition of the United States' brand of nuclear deterrent against the United States. Another way is to play to American anxieties about the sanity of the Pyongyang regime by projecting for international consumption what amounts to calculated irrationality. Cumulatively these constitute North Korea's version of containment of the United States' preemption doctrine via pressures that are often seen in the United States as extortionary. They also constitute a way for North Korea to emulate the United States' past policies of double-containment by trying to persuade the United States and South Korea to accept its proposals for a mutual non-aggression pact and to have the United States accept the logic of replacing U.N. nuclear inspectors in North Korea with U.S. nuclear inspectors. All of these would comprise a security bond involving the United States and North Korea that simultaneously would help North Korea contain the United States and be part of the larger inter-Korean peace process that is of growing importance in South Korea as it aspires to the creation of a united Korea.

Yet another way for North Korea to cope with perceived U.S. counter-brinkmanship is to take advantage of the potential for a rift between the United States and South Korea over how best to deal with North Korea. This proved to be particularly insightful. Partly because of constraints imposed by the Iraq situation, but also because of profound expectations that the conservative candidate in South Korea's December 19th 2002 presidential election, Lee Hoi-chang, would prevail, Washington's responses to Pyongyang's provocations had been a blend of strategic caution and rhetorical counter-brinkmanship. Those political expectations were not met despite not-very-well-camouflaged U.S. efforts to facilitate Lee's victory by focusing upon Kim Dae-jung's scandal-tainted image problems and domestic critics of his sunshine policy. For all practical purposes Washington treated Lee as a virtual president in waiting. This approach proved ineffective and may have long term repercussions for the U.S.-ROK relationship. Instead, South Korea's next president—Roh Moo-hyun, the human rights activist candidate of the ruling Millennium Democratic Party—is poised to be even more radically progressive than the incumbent, Kim Dae-jung, especially with

regard to North Korea. This set of developments is likely to compound the Bush administration's problems in Korea, but it also creates a potential turning point for U.S. policy toward Korea.

President-elect Roh's campaign was engulfed in a rising tide of anti-Americanism in South Korea. This was provoked by controversial domestic legal issues involving U.S. armed forces and Korean civilians, and by Korean perceptions of self-centered U.S. policies toward South Korean economic issues surrounding the 1997-98 IMF rescue package substantially shaped by the United States, and toward inter-Korean reconciliation efforts embodied by President Kim's "sunshine policy" of proactive engagement. The Bush administration's approach to the inter-Korean peace process fostered by President Kim was widely perceived as less than supportive and drew much sharp criticism. U.S. pressures for greater reciprocity through 'tailored containment' and for South Korean conformity to U.S. regional leadership contributed to growing resentment throughout South Korean society. This fed upon a long standing theme in Korean political culture—namely accusations that national leaders are too ready to be deferentially subservient to a foreign major power in exchange for that power's benevolent protection. This is called *sadaejui*—flunkyism or toadyism. In the past this accusation was a subtle undercurrent of Korean acceptance of Sinocentrism. Since the division of Korea, during the depths of the Cold War both Seoul and Pyongyang lambasted each other for groveling at the feet of Washington or Moscow/Beijing, respectively.

The growing anti-American fervor in South Korea refocused this sentiment on South Korean leaders' willingness to toe an American defined policy line when that line does not seem to serve the ROK's interests in inter-Korean affairs. Americans who deal with Koreans on both sides of the DMZ would do well to familiarize themselves with the nuances of this aspect of Korean political culture and recognize that the relatively innocuous concept of client state-mentor state relations can have intensely negative overtones for Koreans. In this milieu Candidate Roh distanced himself from the Bush administration's Korean policies and overtly declared during the campaign that he would not grovel before or kowtow to Washington. He treated the fact that he had never visited the United States as a political asset rather than a liability as his opponent contended. He also implied that South Korea might be neutral or play a mediating role if the United States ever contemplates preemptive war with North Korea over the nuclear issue rather than being an automatic ally. President-elect Roh is actively playing that diplomatic card amidst the United States' tensions with North Korea.

It is clear that Washington's approach to the North Korean nuclear situation may have to be modified due to political frictions with the United States' South Korean ally. Although President Bush and Secretary of State Powell have refrained from using the word crisis regarding these issues, that is what it is. The more heatedly the United States denies that U.S.-North Korean nuclear tensions constitute a crisis, the more such denials lose their credibility. Faced with this dual-faceted crisis, Americans should learn another lesson from Korean political culture. In this convoluted context Americans should recognize that the Korean word for crisis—*wigi*—conveys a symbolic message. It is written with the Chinese characters for both "danger" and "opportunity". It conveys the same meaning in Chinese (pronounced *weiji*) and in Japanese (pronounced *kiki*). For Koreans, Chinese, and Japanese this phrase implies a prospective turning point. The readiness of Koreans to seize this opportunity is manifest. While the PRC's ability to make use of this *wigi/weiji* may be more obscure to many Americans, as the United States tries to get China to support U.S. anti-nuclear diplomacy vis-a-vis North Korea, for Beijing the opportunity could be significant. Inadvertently this unanticipated compound crisis also has created an opportunity to develop a more innovative U.S. policy toward Korea if Americans are willing to be more imaginative.

Although the United States may well manage to devise an interim diplomatic resolution to these North Korean nuclear tensions and South Korean political strains, Washington will remain burdened for the longer term by the United States' legacy of policy ineptitude when it comes to coping with the broader issues surrounding inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification that are so important to its South Korean ally. The U.S. strategic commitment to South Korea inadvertently caused the United States' policy toward the Korean peninsula to embrace Korea's open-ended national division and to treat the issue of Korean reunification as a vague goal that can be postponed indefinitely with impunity. In turn, this causes all too many Koreans to suspect that the United States does not want Koreans to reunify their nation because of

the costs and risks that might accompany that resolution of Korea's problems. This aspect of U.S. policy is unsound and should be rectified. The current political strains underscore this point and foster a genuine opportunity to be truly innovative.

The United States should look forward with far more enthusiasm than it now displays to having normal relations with a single independent sovereign Korean nation state. This is made more difficult by the strategic pressures the United States confronts in the wake of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. With the prospect of a new war in Iraq preoccupying the United States, conventional wisdom suggests that altering fundamental American priorities in Korea is not today of paramount importance in U.S. foreign policy.

Despite these inhibiting factors, the United States should revitalize the objectives of the original "in due course" end game articulated during World War II and make them the core of U.S. policy toward both Korean states in the long-divided Korean nation. If it does so, then the United States will simultaneously fulfill a long overdue commitment, end an anachronistic remnant of the Cold War, and peacefully cope with a perceived threat from one portion of the so-called "axis of evil" within the United States' war on terrorism. It can do this by being enthusiastic about working together with the new Roh administration in Seoul and adopting its anticipated efforts for innovative inter-Korean engagement as part of U.S. policy toward both Koreas. One bold way for the United States to do this would be to clarify its commitment to inter-Korean reunification by creating a senior 'special advisor' to the President or Secretary of State, tasked with creating and implementing a new U.S. policy that makes Korean unification a top priority in U.S. Asia policy and *the* top priority within U.S. policy toward Korea.

This approach is even more salient now that North Korea's escalating brinkmanship and South Korea's presidential election have generated so much anxiety, spawning new dangers-*cum*-opportunities. All of these larger goals warrant the support of Americans who are actively interested in improving U.S. policy toward Korea and of Koreans in both halves of their divided nation who would like to see U.S. policy toward Korea become more helpful in bringing about Korean reconciliation and unification. The United States can best cope with this dual-faceted crisis (*wigi*) by transforming ominous nuclear dangers and disruptive political tensions into a tremendous diplomatic opportunity.

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