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Security on the Korean Peninsula: Bush's Second Term

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 2 (February 2005)

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Introduction

The insecurity on the Korean Peninsula comes from the competition of the South/North political system arising from the division of the Korean peninsula. But the root of the region's security crisis originated with Japan's occupation before and during World War II, though a more immediate cause comes from U.S. policy after the war. At that time, the United States selected the 38th degree parallel on the Korean peninsula as the line at which to block the Soviet Union's march to the south to intervene in Japanese affairs. This line hardened through the Korean War, and turned the border into an Iron Curtain between the South and the North.

Since the mid-1970s, the North's national power has declined compared to the South's—leading Pyongyang to consider nuclear weaponry to compensate for the military imbalance. Today, the North Koreans have to use this as a political card during diplomatic negotiations in order to sustain the North Korean political system.

President George W. Bush's second term started on January 20, 2005; and soon after, President Bush nominated National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice as his new Secretary of State to replace Colin L. Powell. Powell is known as a moderate who values international cooperation: For example, his most triumphant moment came in November 2002, with the unanimous approval of a resolution by the U.N. Security Council demanding that Iraq comply with weapons inspections, or face the prospect of war.^[1] On the other hand, Rice is known as a principled policy advocate. She evaluated the U.S.-North Korea Agreement as “failed,” and strongly persisted in the importance of the Six Party Talks. And, she gave warning to North Korea: “I don't think we can speculate where an interdiction initiative should lead—but I do think it's extremely important that countries like North Korea recognize that if they're going to flaunt their international obligations there will be a price for that—there will be a cost for that.”^[2]

In this essay, I would like to suggest ways the Bush administration can improve its foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula in its second term. I would like to evaluate the perceptions of the South Koreans, the North Koreans and the U.S. toward each other. To understand these perceptions there is an old proverb: “*Jipi jiki baekjeon bultoai* (First know the enemy, before you fight; then you will win every time).”

Assessing Korea-U.S. Relations

South Korean perceptions of the U.S. have been formed upon a base of good will and an excessively dependent mindset toward the U.S. It also perceives that its relative prosperity has been realized by introducing an American-style democracy along with a free market in South Korea. On the other hand, with more freedom, its demand for democracy and need for an identity grew stronger. There have been active student and social movements across the country demanding the establishment of a relationship on more equal terms between the ROK and the U.S. These movements are led by progressive politicians, scholars, and religious bodies whose views toward the U.S. forces in Korea (USFK) are especially negative. They are endeavoring to build a consensus on such issues as a revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), utilizing a traffic accident in which middle school girls were killed by a U.S. armored vehicle as well as environmental concerns about the firing ranges used by USFK.

A 2000 survey conducted by the *Han-gyuhrae* newspaper—on the question, “Do you think it is necessary for the U.S. forces to stay in the Korean peninsula at the present time?”—found that 70.6 percent of respondents replied ‘Yes,’ and 26.85 percent replied ‘No.’ When the same survey was conducted in 2002, 57.7 percent answered ‘Yes,’ and 33.4 percent ‘No.’^[3]

A July 2004 survey found that 22 percent of congressmen in the National Assembly have backgrounds as student activists or progressive labor agitators. They claim the dispatch of ROK forces to Iraq is a mercenary action without a justification, opposed the North Korean Human Rights bill due to a possibility of more tension on the Korean peninsula, and generally maintain a negative point of view toward the role of the USFK.

Regarding these current attitudes, the conservatives who were devoted to the industrialization of South Korea are reminding their people of the lessons learned from the Korean War by emphasizing the communist revolution of warlike North Korea and working to expand the anti-nuclear/anti-Kim movement. In the midst of these divided politics, the biggest Protestant NGO, the Christian Social Responsibility Preparatory Committee, was established in November 2004 to “save the nation from the crisis in accordance with Christian conscience by leaving dichotomies of Left/Right, Progressive/Conservative and Pro-Rho/ Anti-Rho.” On the other hand, on the same day, the Free Democracy Solidarity group was organized mainly by young scholars who held a press conference to declare their duties to maintain the “Free Democracy and Stability,” demand North Korea pursue “Human Right improvement and democracy,” and develop an “ROK/U.S. alliance toward the 21st Century.”

Based on these activities, there exists in South Korea a conservative pro-U.S. power group which appraises the USFK as an essential element to protect the current political structure, and therefore tries to enhance the alliance with the United States; a progressive radical anti-U.S. power group which asserts a justification from a nationalist point of view to exclude foreign interferences; and a new right wing group which values national interests first and foremost, in the form of more group cooperative internationalism with the United States.

North Korean perceptions of the United States are easily found out from the vast number of documents published by the North Korean government. For example, North Korea’s official publications and public media refers to the United States as a “sworn enemy” (*chulchunji woeunsu*), “core enemy” (*jujuck*) or “American Imperialist” (*mi jeguck jueui*). Some statements are propaganda, but they reflect the views of a tightly controlled state and are the only views the North Korean people are exposed to. They claim that it was the United States that blocked the way to national unification by communist revolution in the Korean War (referred to in the literature as the “National Unification War”), and it is still the United States that is blocking the way of reunification. They also claim that their current economic poverty is due to the United States’ hostility and economic containment.

They assert that North Korea is the one true negotiator with the U.S. for reunification of the Korean Peninsula, because South Korea is the puppet government of the U.S., which they perceive to be occupying South Korea. Its pre-condition for negotiations has always been a withdrawal of USFK. The North Koreans propagandize that:

The United States had to publish an apology when the *Pueblo* was captured in 1968; when an EC-121 was shot down in 1969, the United States had to give up its military retaliation; during the nuclear crisis between 1993 and 1994, the only measure the United States could do was to publish "N.K./U.S. Basic Agreement," and the United States had to pay \$0.3 billion for a tour fee inside the suspicious Kum-chang-ri Underground Facilities.[4]

Even though all these examples are exaggerated and distorted in many aspects, the North Korean people perceive that the North Korean government plays the main role in the reunification process because they are only exposed to this interpretation.

Such anti-U.S. sentiments are seen not only in the leadership, but seem to have spread among the North Korean people as well. The main reason why the North Korean government seeks to maintain anti-U.S. sentiment is to preserve and justify its own political system, declaring the U.S. as the class enemy of the people. A typical educational instrument for North Korean political socialization is the war museum named "*Shin-chun* (Grand Brutality)," which fosters a hostile feeling against United States. According to North Korean defectors, "after several visits at the museum, people couldn't help realizing hostilities aroused against the United States in their mind." [5]

Questionnaires of North Korean defectors reveal that the countries they most detest are the United States, Japan and South Korea, in that order. Also, 90 percent of them believe USFK must depart from the peninsula "right away," while only 7.5 percent prefer "phased withdrawals of troops." Most alarmingly, a majority of them (64 percent) still believe a war would be a desirable solution for reunification.[6] Even though these results come only from the North Korean defectors whose status is rather exceptional, the data does suggest how the North Korean people perceive the United States, owing to the anti-U.S. sentiments generated by the North Korean government in an effort to rationalize its political slogan, "Second to None Korean Nation Policy," and cover up their internal problems to the outside. The main reason why the North Korean government spreads anti-U.S. sentiments is to bind its system and secure its legitimacy. Therefore, there is a little hope of stopping North Korean hostility to the U.S. under the Kim Jung Il regime.

U.S. perceptions of both Koreas have evolved throughout the long history of the United States on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. first established official diplomatic relations with the Cho-sun Dynasty through the Shufeldt Treaty in May 1882. In 1908, the United States secured a foothold in the Philippines and, in turn, turned a blind eye to the Japanese occupation in Korea in the Root-Takahira Agreement. "The United States rather blatantly sold out Korea and complied with Japanese desires for a free hand in its backyard." [7] And, in November 1943 at Cairo, the United States took part in the Cairo declaration, which 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."

However, as mentioned in the introduction, the ultimate fate of Korea was determined by the U.S. counter-Soviet measures, which divided the Korean peninsula along the 38th parallel. Once again, Korea fell victim between the two great powers. Shortly after, upon entering the Cold War era, the Korean peninsula became a local battlefield where the U.S. containment policy against the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union's expansionism, collided with each other—creating an international "Hot War," the Korean War. After the cease-fire in 1953, the United States gave South Korea full support to prove the superiority of its democracy and free market economy, and South Korea successfully fulfilled this purpose during the Cold War.

In the post-Cold War era, during the Clinton and Bush administrations, U.S. foreign policies towards the Korean peninsula such as the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” “Non-proliferation of WMD,” and “Peace and Stability,” have coincided with U.S. national interests—but the United States did not always consult closely with South Korea on these policies.

After 9/11, the United States has been pursuing active interventionist policies to defend its homeland, and its methods of pursuing its national interests are well observed in the *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR). The 2001 QDR stated, “If deterrence fails, decisively defeat any adversary. Such a decisive defeat could include changing the regime of an adversary state or occupation of foreign territory until the U.S. strategic objectives are met.”^[8] Such a defense policy has not only articulated in that policy document, but was actually implemented in Afghanistan and Iraq. That North Korea has been categorized as part of the “Axis of Evil” along with Iraq has resulted in extreme tension.

Bush's Second Term: Foreign Policy toward the Korean Peninsula

It's quite likely that U.S. foreign policies during Bush's second term will be more uncompromising, with its hardliners—such as Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Rice, Undersecretary of State Bolton, and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld—in positions of influence. Neoconservative supporters of these hardliners who are out of public office are strongly critical of current South Korean policies towards its northern counterpart, and are calling for a change of regime in North Korea.

Nicholas Eberstadt, senior researcher at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), claims that “the core group of the South Korean Roh Government has become uncompromisingly anti-U.S. and appeasing towards the North Korea.” He also argues “the U.S. must realize it is impossible to persuade the North Korean regime through dialogues or economic aid and should treat the nuclear issues the same as the North Korean regime itself to find a solution.”^[9] And, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld stated in congressional testimony that “[t]he priorities for the Department of Defense in 2004, are for example: radicals using the existing WMD or example capabilities of unfriendly states and non-state actors, and stopping the spread WMD.”^[10]

A close look at the major players in the White House and their views suggests the political standpoint of the U.S. government toward the Korean peninsula remains committed to harder line policies. Whether the U.S. defense policies articulated in the 2001 QDR will be implemented or not depends on how the North Korean regime will react, and how this will affect the United States' vital national interests such as homeland defense and non-proliferation of WMD.

As for the consequences, the major issues on the Korean nuclear crisis are summarized as follows:

1. *There remain fundamental differences in perspective on security in this region.* The American position is that they will never tolerate the possession of nuclear weapon by North Korea, which is becoming a great threat to world peace, especially after 9/11. North Korean possession of nuclear weapons is indeed a formidable threat to other countries, and moreover, it is feared that such weapons could be infiltrated into a terrorist group or a hostile member of the international community. On the other hand, North Korea insists that they have the right to have nuclear weapons for their national security, as they would more effectively deter a possible pre-emptive strike by the United States.
2. *There are three major differences in perspective on the issue of nuclear proliferation policy between South and North Korea.* President Rho's government is more generous about the potential nuclear armament of North Korea and wants to deal with North Korea in a sensitive way. President Rho intends to promote North-South relations by easing the North Koreans out of their economic crisis through the promotion bilateral trade and the

normalization of U.S.-North Korean relations. John Feffner argues that “North Korea will not likely feel secure enough to relinquish its nuclear deterrence, if it forever remains an outlier, and normalization is an important step toward a future in which North Korea is unlikely to use whatever weapons of destruction it possesses.”^[11] The South Korean government sees any economic support of the North Koreans a necessary cost of achieving Korean unification. Though North Korea accepts economic help from South Korea in order to cope with its current economic crisis, it will not tolerate anything it perceives as attempted interference in their national sovereignty.

3. *The third problem comes from difficulties in how to manage the nuclear crisis on both sides of peninsula, while they compete with a hegemonistic establishment for the unification of Korea while addressing processes to solve the nuclear armament problem.* Since North Korea has come to understand that waging an accelerated arms race is a losing battle, it now seems to concentrate on nuclear armament, which may give it an asymmetric advantage and let North Korea achieve strategic supremacy with less cost. But North Korea criticizes the intensions of South Korea, suggesting it's exacerbating the nuclear issue as part of the US–North Korea conflict, hiding its intentions to acquire military supremacy through nuclear armament. Knowing these North Korean intentions would be a major obstacle to Korean unification, the South Korean government is trying to solve the crisis by establishing a nuclear free Korean peninsula. South Korea, which perceives that any instigation of the North could bring about unexpected military tension, insists that the problem of North Korea's nuclear ambition should be solved in a peaceful way.

Considering the varying perceptions discussed above, we are recommending an American foreign policy toward both Koreas with four distinct themes:

1. *Firstly, since the nuclear crisis is basically a problem within the Korean Nation, the Koreans must solve it.* The United States should be a good faith mediator that can provide assistance toward a successful resolution.. Both South and North Korea should understand that possessing nuclear armaments could result in the destruction of both Koreas, and take part in a humble discussion and work toward a constructive solution that may resolve perceptual ambiguities on each side through the spirit of agreement between South and North.
2. *Secondly, the United States should provide full support to negotiations to solve the nuclear problem between South and North Korea, serving as a supervisor using six-party talks, and by supporting UN Security Council resolutions to send a strong message to North Korea that the US really wants to help solve the crisis.* Zbigniew Brzezinski has observed “[t]he cost of sustaining development and keeping Nuclear weapons is high, but the reward of discarding the nuclear card will be much more than that.”^[12] Also, the United States can present guidelines for solving the nuclear crisis with the option that the North could return to the NTP agreement and commit to a sincere responsibility.
3. *Thirdly, the tension and the relations between the United States and North Korea should be resolved and normalized by replacing the current truce agreement with a peace treaty including a mutual non-infiltration agreement through fundamental and basic understanding of problems on each side.* These measures could provide North Korea with good cause to dismantle their nuclear program and also give South Korea legitimate partnership status for controlling Korean peninsular security problems. Then the US could escape from the various difficulties and high costs of enforcing the current armistice agreement between the US and North Korea. Once a final peace treaty is established, American forces in Korea can be redeployed as part of a new UN peacekeeping force, or other various types of military forces.
4. *Finally, the United States should provide appropriate assistance for the reunification of Korea, which could result in the realization of the Cairo Doctrine that the independence of Korea is owed to the Korean people.* The United States will never be free of its responsibility for the division of Korea, and should thus positively affirm its responsibilities

in international affairs, and have the flexibility to apply possible economic sanctions on North Korea, giving way to success through large-scale economic projects like the Gae-Sung Industrial Complex.

To Koreans, their country was divided without the consent of the people, resulting in the loss of numerous lives and the tremendous destruction of properties. In the midst of a dispute between great powers, Koreans have worked hard to improve their quality of life after enduring much pain during the Cold War period. One part of the nation, which has the wrong political system, needs international help; while the other part of the nation has achieved a basic quality of life, and is trying to enhance it.

In recent years, South Koreans have collaborated to lay a corner stone for the reunification of Korea, restoring the integrity of the two Koreas and eliminating the prevailing distrust for each side, which is a great obstacle generated by fifty years of division of the Korean peninsula. The most important element of the various South and North exchanges and assistance programs is the development of economic cooperation, which could secure the basic quality of life for the North Korean people.

During its first term, the Bush administration—while waging a global war against terrorism and implementing its pro-active nuclear non-proliferation policy—did not agree with the South Korean policy toward North Korea, where South Korea initiated South/North Korea cooperation and reconciliation. For their part, the Kim Dae-joong and Rho Moo-hyun administrations also did not provide their full consent to making a deal on nuclear policy, arguing that it would only instigate greater tension on the Korean peninsula. Regarding the cliffhanger policy of North Korea a terrorist attack against South Korea during the Cold War period, the U.S. government would not tolerate any more provocative and ruthless behavior by North Korea. So, a policy of flexible engagement between the ROK and the DPRK was certainly not warmly embraced by Washington as serving the best interests of either the ROK or the United States.^[13] On the other hand, in evaluating the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, North Korea is no doubt anxious about a preemptive attack by the United States, which has designated it as a member of the axis of evil.

There is an old saying in Korea that “mighty uncle should be generous (*himsen ahje ga chamahra*),” which means the stronger party must endure and retreat in a dispute to accomplish a deal. Self-reliance and cooperation within the nation has recently, and more frequently, come to the surface in Korea—which has resulted in the South and North engaging in a unification process. They want the U.S. government to be a good coordinator of Korean unification, to facilitate the process toward unification—leaving the nuclear problem, which is a prospective major obstacle to the unification process, to both Koreas to solve as an internal problem of the nation. In the future, after unification is achieved with the assistance of the United States, the leaders of the united Korean nation-state will have the authority to handle all business relating to the Korean peninsula.

The Bush administration must clearly understand that problems relating to North Korea cannot be solved by military means, and should assert openly that they will not use military measures to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis. If the United States, as a good faith mediator, offers broader assistance, it shall achieve much better results—and more easily way—with cooperation from both South and North Korea.

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