The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

The New Face of the South Korea-U.S. Alliance and the North Korea Question

Selig S. Harrison

The New Face of the South Korea-U.S. Alliance and the North Korea Question

By Selig S. Harrison

In carrying out his election campaign pledge to reshape the U.S.-South Korean alliance, President Roh Moo Hyun has skillfully balanced conflicting national priorities during the first three years of his tenure.

Economic priorities make it necessary to avoid a sudden disruption of the alliance. The U.S.-ROK Mutual Security Treaty creates a climate of stability favorable for foreign trade and investment and for preferential treatment by U.S.-controlled international financial institutions. The U.S. force presence also provides an economic subsidy to South Korea by enabling Seoul to maintain a much more formidable defense posture than it could afford on its own.

At the same time, the favorable economic impact of the alliance is offset by the constraints that it imposes on the scope and speed of the President's effort to carry forward the accommodation with North Korea initiated by President Kim Dae Jung at his June, 2000, North-South summit with Chairman Kim Jong Il.

Kim Dae Jung meets Kim Jong Il in North Korea

The United States has attempted to slow down and, at times, to obstruct the reconciliation effort, arguing that food aid and other economic help from the South to Pyongyang undermines the six-nation diplomatic effort to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program. But President Roh has pursued his North Korea policy undeterred, while demonstrating his sensitivity to U.S. interests by sending South Korean forces to Iraq, and by yielding to U.S. pressure for a new base at Pyongtaek, facing China.

The alliance did not impede North-South reconciliation during the Clinton Administration because the United States was itself pursuing improved relations with Pyongyang. North Korean plutonium production was frozen under the 1994 Agreed Framework. President Clinton welcomed the North's second-ranking leader, Marshal Jo Myong Rok, to the White House in October, 2000, and a month later, Kim Jong Il gave red-carpet treatment to visiting Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The U.S. commitment to normalized relations with Pyongyang at that time was symbolized by the fact that Secretary Albright paid her respects at the late Kim Il Sung's mausoleum, which Kim Dae Jung had not done in June.

From the start, the Bush Administration has been divided over whether to continue the Clinton policy. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell declared on March 6, 2001, that "we do plan to engage with North Korea and to pick up where President Clinton and his Administration left off," only to be promptly countermanded by the White House. Two days later, in

the presence of Kim Dae Jung, Bush pointedly questioned whether North Korea was honoring its existing agreements and, specifically, whether its “secretive” leader, Kim Jong Il, could be trusted to honor any new agreements. In reality, North Korea had scrupulously observed the inspection provisions of the Agreed Framework, as the International Atomic Energy Agency and U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency inspectors had frequently declared.

Bush’s attack on North Korea, Iraq and Iran as an “Axis of Evil” in his January, 2002, State of the Union address was followed by increasingly explicit indications during 2002 that the White House goal was not to continue the pursuit of normalized relations with North Korea but, on the contrary, to promote its collapse.

Bush labeled North Korea as part of an "Axis of Evil" in his 2002 State of the Union

On February 17, 2002, on the eve of a visit by Bush to Shanghai for an Asian economic conference, the Financial Times reported that “the trip will be dominated by the challenge of toppling Kim Jong Il’s regime,” quoting a senior Administration official as saying that “the key question is how we can get Russia and China to cut loose the North Koreans.” European and South Korean engagement with Pyongyang, said this account, “is little short of appeasement. One official asked, ‘Don’t they feel they have blood on their hands when they meet the North Koreans?’” Against this background, it was not surprising when Bush, interviewed by Bob Woodward for his book Bush At War, declared that “I loathe Kim Jong Il. They tell me that the financial burdens will be so immense if we try to _ if this guy were to topple. I just don’t buy that. Either you believe in freedom or you don’t.”

The divergence between South Korean policy toward the North and the hard-line Bush approach has increased steadily since late 2002, when the United States took a series of steps that culminated in the abrogation of the Agreed Framework.

In October, the United States accused the North of cheating on the accord. The CIA declared that the North had a secret weapons-grade uranium enrichment plant in place that would be able to make “one or two” uranium-based nuclear weapons per year by “mid-decade.” I have confirmed from the concerned South Korean authorities that only sketchy, inconclusive evidence in support of this assessment was presented to South Korean intelligence officials during intelligence exchanges with the CIA both before and after the publication of this assessment. South Korea was told that as a “good ally,” it should accept the U.S. allegation on faith.

The accusation that North Korea had cheated on the Agreed Framework was used to justify a termination of the oil shipments to the North required under the 1994 agreement. South Korea succumbed to intense U.S. pressure for the oil cutoff. Predictably, this gave opponents of the Agreed Framework within North Korea their opportunity to resume the plutonium production that had been suspended at the Yongbyon reactor since 1994.

The Yongbyon reactor

The so-called “second nuclear crisis” with North Korea that has subsequently intensified was welcome to Washington hard-liners, who wanted to shift to a confrontational posture toward Pyongyang that would set the stage for overt efforts to bring about “regime change,” or at a minimum, to forestall economic help for North Korea as part of a denuclearization agreement. As I have spelled out in Foreign Affairs, (January and April, 2005), the Bush Administration has yet to present evidence sufficient to establish that a weapons-grade uranium enrichment program exists. Pakistan made clear on September 15, 2005, that it provided only 12 prototype centrifuges to Pyongyang, not the thousands of already-manufactured, ready-to-use centrifuges that would be necessary to make weapons-grade uranium. Even before this, in February, 2005, the South Korean National Intelligence Service announced its conclusion that North Korea did not have a weapons-grade uranium capability. China has been more circumspect, but has increasingly signaled that it shares the South Korean assessment. As my own extensive conversations with Chinese officials make clear, Beijing also questions whether Pyongyang has so far developed a militarily operational, plutonium-based nuclear weapons capability.

The underlying assumption of the hard-liners in the Bush Administration was originally that China would cooperate in bringing about a collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime by putting economic pressure on Pyongyang. China instead began stepping up its economic help to Pyongyang, made clear that it did not want North Korea to collapse, and criticized the United States for hamstringing the six-party nuclear negotiations. The hard-liners then staged a temporary tactical retreat. They permitted Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill to launch a serious negotiating initiative with Pyongyang in mid-2005. The result was the September 19 six-party Beijing Declaration, which envisaged the eventual normalization of U.S.-North Korean relations. Immediately thereafter, however, the hard-liners deliberately set out to undermine Hill’s effort. An “Axis of Evil” within the Administration—David Addington, Vice-President Cheney’s Chief of Staff; Deputy National Security Adviser J.W. Crouch, and John Bolton’s successor as Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and National Security, Robert Joseph—have orchestrated a campaign to depict North Korea as a “criminal regime” with which normalized relations are not possible. The cutting edge of this campaign has been the crackdown on a Macau bank linked to alleged North Korean counterfeiting and drug trafficking. If the charges against the bank are true and North Korea has suffered a financial loss, as intended, from the crackdown, then further denuclearization negotiations are likely to remain paralyzed unless China finds an under-the-table way to compensate Pyongyang for the monetary losses it has suffered.

The steadily widening divergence between U.S. and South Korean priorities in relation to North Korea was dramatically underlined when the U.S. Ambassador to Seoul, Alexander Vershbow, made his January 17 appeal for South Korea to join in treating Pyongyang as a “criminal”

regime. South Korea's priority objective is to stabilize and liberalize the existing regime in Pyongyang—a "changing regime" policy—leading to a confederation and eventual reunification. By contrast, the U.S. policy is "regime change." Faced with this divergence, President Roh is no doubt tempted to tell Ambassador Vershbow that the South regards the alliance as military, not political, in character, and that the United States, as a "good ally," should respect South Korea's sovereign right to define its own national priorities and to decide how best to defuse any remaining North Korean military threat.

President Roh has resisted this temptation. Indeed, he has rarely expressed explicit disagreement with U.S. policies, with the notable exception of his November 12, 2004, Los Angeles speech declaring that it was "understandable" for Pyongyang to pursue the development of nuclear weapons, "considering the security environment they live in," a reference, in part, to the Bush National Security Doctrine with its explicit threat of preemptive military action against potential U.S. adversaries. In my view, the reason for his discretion is that he understands the economic value of the alliance for South Korea. It is a common sense policy for Seoul to avoid a sudden disruption of the alliance, so long as Roh does not let the United States slow down the momentum of his economic aid and military tension-reduction policies toward Pyongyang.

On a recent visit to Seoul, I was surprised to find that so many South Koreans, of all political views, appear reconciled to the continued presence of U.S. forces for the indefinite future. I repeatedly asked why this was so, and explained why I was surprised.

After all, I said, North Korea is no longer in a position to sustain a protracted invasion like the one in 1950. The Pentagon knows that is the case, as emerging plans for force redeployments and reductions show. So why does the United States still want to stay in Korea if the North Korean threat is fading?

One reason, I suggested, is that the Defense Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency want to keep on spying on China with their secret electronic monitoring facilities in Korea. Another is that Air Force and Army units stationed in Korea might be useful in a war with China over Taiwan. These reasons suggest that the divergence between South Korean and U.S. priorities will grow in the years ahead, since Seoul increasingly values close ties with Beijing.

Roh (right) meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao

Some conservatives replied promptly that North Korea is still unpredictable and that the presence of U.S. forces will, therefore, remain critical for security reasons for a long time.

A more common answer was that the U.S. alliance creates a climate of stability favorable for foreign trade and investment. But no one mentioned what I consider the real, unspoken, underlying reason why the prospect of an end to the U.S. alliance is unsettling to South Korea:

the U.S. military presence and the alliance commitment provide the massive economic subsidy to the South mentioned earlier.

This unspoken reason was once spelled out to me by a former U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, the late William J. Porter, later Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. In April, 1971, I was visiting Seoul for the Washington Post and had a long conversation with Porter, who was a very plain-spoken man. He was angry. He was engaged at that time in bitter negotiations with the Park Chung Hee military regime over the size of the U.S. military presence in the South. He had successfully pushed the Nixon Administration to cut down the U.S. presence from 60,000 to 40,000 troops, but South Korea was fighting it tooth and nail. “That’s not surprising,” he said. “They have attached themselves to the big fat udder of Uncle Sam and naturally they don’t want to let go.”

The subsidy provided by the U.S. presence enables South Koreans to postpone hard choices concerning how fast, and how far, to move toward reunification, and thus it postpones hard choices between civilian and military budgetary priorities.

The U.S. presence enables the South to minimize the sacrifices that would otherwise be necessary to maintain its existing high levels of defense spending. By the same token, the withdrawal of U.S. forces would force Seoul to decide whether it should seek the same level of security now provided by the U.S. presence by upgrading defense expenditures—or whether, instead, the goal of accommodation and reunification with the North would be better served by negotiating a mutual reduction of forces with the North.

Joint US-ROK Osan air base

Lower-income groups in the South would benefit from a diversion of resources from military spending to social welfare programs. The South’s upper and middle-income minority, by contrast, has acquired a vested interest in the status quo. Without its U.S. subsidy, Seoul would have to double or triple its military budget if it wanted to replace the conventional forces now deployed for its defense by the United States _ not to mention the much higher outlays that independent nuclear forces would require.

In addition to the direct costs of its forces in Korea, averaging $2 billion per year, the United States spends more than $40 billion annually to maintain the overall U.S. defense posture in East Asia and the western Pacific on which its capability to intervene in Korea depends. So long as Seoul regards this U.S. economic cushion as an entitlement, it will be under no compulsion to decide whether to move toward the confederation envisaged in the June, 2000, summit, as a prelude to eventual reunification.

A significant portion of the South Korean defense budget goes to a vast military-industrial complex. There are more than 80 defense contractors in the South producing some 350 categories of defense equipment in nearly 150 factories. This powerful interest group, allied with leaders of the armed forces, opposes reduced defense expenditures.

To be sure, there are certain aspects of the U.S. military presence that are particularly crucial to the defense of the South: sophisticated command and control and intelligence capabilities in particular. Seoul would be wise to upgrade these capabilities to prepare for an eventual U.S. withdrawal, even at a high cost. Some spending on them is already underway and is justified. But that is very different from a broad-based, across-the-board expansion of the armed forces designed to replace the overall U.S. presence.

The South should respond to the recent U.S. force reductions and redeployments, in my view, by offering to resume the dialogue on mutual

force reductions with the North agreed upon in the 1992 North-South Agreement. The Joint North-South Military Commission envisaged in the agreement was never implemented after the nuclear crisis erupted but should now become a priority for President Roh. The agreement specifically provided for negotiations on mutual force reductions under the auspices of the Joint Commission.

Just as the military-industrial complex in the South opposes mutual force reductions, so there is also a military-industrial complex in the North, allied with hard-liners in the Workers Party. Force reductions are not popular with this hard-line faction in Pyongyang. In the case of the North, however, economic factors have made it imperative to reduce defense spending, and Kim Jong Il is prepared to join in mutual force reductions if the South is ready to do so, I was told in Pyongyang last April. By contrast, since the South spends so much less of its GNP on defense, the pressures for reductions are not as great as in the North. The South's rapid economic growth, together with the U.S. military presence, have enabled successive regimes to avoid increasing the proportion of GNP allocated to defense while, at the same time, steadily raising the actual level of defense expenditures.

A US-made F-15, part of a multi-billion dollar deal with Boeing Co.

In addition to mutual force reductions, I have urged in my book, Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and the U.S. Disengagement (Princeton, 2002), that the United States and South Korea negotiate a pullback of forces from the 38th Parallel in return for North Korean pullbacks, as part of a broader accommodation with Pyongyang. Instead, the Pentagon has pursued the U.S. relocation of U.S. forces as part of a policy of confrontation with the North. In negotiations on the relocation of forces, President Roh has not attempted to define a long-term approach to the reduction of the U.S. presence in the context of improved relations with Pyongyang.

The most striking example of the President's desire to avoid disturbing the status quo has been his decision to send South Korean forces to Iraq. This has been done at a high cost to South Korea's reputation in the international community. The U.S. invasion of Iraq is widely regarded throughout the world as a blunder of historic proportions that will foster continuing instability in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, and is inflicting horrendous humanitarian suffering on the people of Iraq. President Roh's determination to back the U.S. adventure in Iraq underlines his desire to avoid disruption of an alliance that still has wide public acceptance in South Korea for economic reasons. At the same time, on the plus side, it has strengthened his hand in seeking to restrain the Bush Administration from pursuing a confrontational policy with Pyongyang that could lead to war.

In conclusion, during his remaining two years in office, President Roh could seek to make the alliance more compatible with his North Korea policies in three ways.

First, he could pursue mutual North-South force reductions in bilateral discussions with Pyongyang, resisting pressures from the Pentagon and his own military-industrial complex.

Second, he could press for the more "open and equal" alliance discussed

by Ruediger Frank in the January Korea Policy Review, focusing on preparations for the return of full operational control over South Korean forces to Seoul and for an eventual shift from the existing Combined Forces Command model to the more equitable Japan model, under which co-equal Japanese and U.S. command structures and intelligence operations are closely linked.

Finally, he could step up efforts to promote a trilateral peace treaty ending the Korean War (The United States, North Korea and South Korea). The Pentagon fears that a formal end to the Korean War would increase pressures in the United States and South Korea alike for total U.S. disengagement from the peninsula. But it should be remembered that the U.S. presence is governed by the ROK-US Mutual Security Treaty, which would remain in force even if a peace treaty ended the Military Armistice Commission, the U.N. Command and other relics of the 1953 armistice agreement. Given the huge network of U.S. bases and facilities in Korea, it would take many years for a complete withdrawal, even if both sides should want one in the years ahead.

Selig S. Harrison, who has visited North Korea nine times, is the author of Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement. This article appeared in The Korea Policy Review, February, 2006. It is posted at Japan Focus on May 03, 2006.

Created by Datamomentum