



The Perils of Progress: The U.S.-South Korea Alliance in a Changing Strategic Environment

by Eun Jung Cahill Che and Brad Glosserman

The Pacific Forum is pleased to announce the publication of the 2nd special annual issue of Comparative Connections. Each year, the journal takes an in-depth look at one bilateral relationship. The following is excerpted from this year's review of U.S.-Korea relations. The full report can be viewed on the Pacific Forum Web Site [<http://www.csis.org/pacfor/>]. A brief summary of the report follows:

No one said managing the U.S.-South Korea alliance would ever be easy, but we seem to be going through a particularly challenging period at present. For much of this year, the focal point of the relationship has been the March 2001 summit between U.S. President George W. Bush and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung. The summit left all involved feeling a little uneasy about the role the U.S. would be willing to play in inter-Korean relations. The delay in U.S.-DPRK contacts pending the recently concluded North Korea policy review did nothing to assuage the worriers.

During the summit, Mr. Bush made his suspicions of North Korean leader Kim Jong-il plain. The President's skepticism garnered undue attention. What was lost was Bush's endorsement of the South's engagement policy, his support for the 1994 Agreed Framework, and the recognition by both leaders of the importance of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Nonetheless, the overall tone of the summit made the prospects of future inter-Korean talks seem bleak. Many feared that the negative summit outcome would produce a fundamental shift in expectations; questions were raised as to whether North Korea would participate in a cross-DMZ dialogue at all.

U.S.- South Korea Bilateral Context

Cut away the interpretations of summit statements and the bare bones of U.S. policy are encouraging, however. President Kim received support for his engagement policy, although not without nuance. Mr. Bush stated, "I do have some skepticism about the leader of North Korea... but that's not going to preclude us from trying to achieve the common objective." Mr. Bush's chief political concern is balancing international and diplomatic reality -- the need to support inter-Korean dialogue with domestic political pressures, including the need to distinguish his Korean policy from that of his predecessor. That reconciliation process yielded the recently concluded policy review, which endorses continuing talks with the DPRK. We are beginning to see practicality slowly overriding rhetoric. There will be more continuity than change in America's Asia policy; it'll be a rose by another name, but it will still be a rose.

Domestic Political Context. Domestic politics in South Korea and the U.S. had a heavy influence on the summit. Neither president has a clear mandate from his public. Mr. Kim has courageously, and doggedly, pushed the Sunshine Policy, even without sufficient consensus to overcome opposition. His presidency expires next year and the upcoming campaign will limit his ability to press North-South dialogue on his terms.

The chief worry among South Koreans is that the South is going too far to accommodate the North. Growing numbers of South Koreans believe that they are giving too much without getting enough in return. Hard questions are being asked about what kind of reciprocity should be expected from North Korea.

What North-South relations need now is a major breakthrough. Kim Dae-jung's decision to stress the 1992 North-South Basic Agreement underlines this point. Confidence building measures and discussion of arms control seem to be the next logical step. North Korea needs to commit itself to working toward a viable security environment for the two Koreas through direct dialogue with the South, or the peace process is sure to falter.

Meanwhile, Mr. Bush became the 43rd president of the U.S. after a hotly contested election that many in the U.S. feel was decided by the courts rather than the people. Equally significant was the framing of a Bush presidency in terms of opposition to the Clinton administration. Thus, as a U.S. participant noted during our meetings, the Bush administration needs to recreate an engagement policy in its own image.

Much ire has been directed against the U.S. for appearing to put in place the stumbling block that has all but halted inter-Korean dialogue. But Pyongyang's apparent decision to link the resumption of North-South high-level discussions with U.S.-DPRK dialogue seems disingenuous. It either represents an attempt to drive a wedge between the U.S. and the ROK (by generating anti-U.S. feelings among Sunshine Policy supporters in the South) or another effort to place Seoul in the secondary position vis-à-vis Peninsula peace talks... or both.

A New Start for Japan?

After a painful, and at times, sadly comical year and a quarter under former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro, Japan was eager, if not desperate, for a stronger, more dynamic leader to lift its spirits as well as its economy. Newly-selected Prime Minister Koizumi brings to Japanese politics an element that has long been lacking: charisma.

For all the new prime minister's good intentions, however, he is a victim of bad timing, at least when it comes to relations with South Korea. Mr. Koizumi took office just as Japan's Education Ministry approved a high school textbook that is said

to "beautify" Japan's history and its role in the Pacific War. This has threatened efforts by both sides to put history in the past. One possible way out of this quagmire would be a joint ROK-Japan history project, perhaps facilitated by the U.S.

The China Factor

China is another critical player in the North-South dynamic. China's historical friendship with the DPRK gives the North Korean leadership much needed psychological and material support. The security blanket that Beijing has provided is an incalculable asset for an embattled and isolated regime. To its credit, China has attempted to nudge Pyongyang toward reform.

South Korea appreciates the importance of the Sino-DPRK link. Seoul understands that China can be a force for positive change in the inter-Korean dialogue. At the same time, however, we should have no illusions about Chinese motives. China has no desire to see a unified Korea that would eliminate an ally and a buffer state on its border. Neither does China -- like every other country in the region -- want to see North Korea implode or self-destruct.

Washington and Beijing must also ensure that they do not create a zero-sum situation on the Peninsula. South Korea cannot afford for relations with the U.S. and China to be an either-or proposition. A unified Korea would share a land border with China. While a unified Korea would not want the PRC to be a guarantor of security for the Peninsula, neither could it afford to have a contentious relationship with its larger neighbor.

The Russian Piece of the Puzzle

Russian President Vladimir Putin is doing his best to reassert his country's influence on Korean Peninsula affairs, having visited both Pyongyang and Seoul during the past 12 months. To maximize Russian influence, Mr. Putin has called for six-party talks (U.S., China, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, and Japan). In theory, that is a good idea; in practice, it is difficult to envision, at least in the near term.

Still, Russia should not be excluded. The failure to give Moscow the status it thinks it is due will push Russia closer to China; Moscow's road to Northeast Asia should not have to travel through Beijing.

The Missile Defense Morass

Perhaps no issue reveals -- and exacerbates -- the tensions in Northeast Asia as does missile defense. Both national interests and basic immutable facts, like geography, have created fundamental differences in perspective regarding this question. Any successful deployment of a missile defense program (MD) -- and here we mean success in the technical, military, and political senses -- will have to take those diverging perspectives into account.

For better or for worse, the United States has decided to go ahead with some form of missile defense. Some governments in the region do not share the U.S. preoccupation with the missile proliferation threat or its optimism about the effectiveness of a

missile defense program. They worry that MD will create more insecurity than security and that the Bush administration will use MD as a litmus test for its friends and allies.

For South Korea the dilemma is particularly acute, as the contretemps with Russia over the joint communiqué made clear. In their statement Presidents Putin and Kim vowed to "preserve and strengthen" the ABM Treaty, language similar to previous statements by the U.S. But the language reflected the sentiment of the previous U.S. administration, and President Kim felt compelled to recant the statement in speeches during his U.S. visit. For the ROK, MD -- no matter what form it takes -- offers South Korea little extra security: it is ineffective against the bulk of the North Korean threat.

The Outlook

Amid the interplay of the various issues and the widely divergent perspectives that the different players bring to negotiations, it is easy to lose sight of the chief objective: reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Every country has clearly stated that peace on the Peninsula is the ultimate end. The hard part is getting there. And the challenges are made even more daunting by the competing visions of what a "peaceful" Peninsula would look like.

The U.S.-ROK relationship has been instrumental in promoting peace and stability on the Peninsula and promises to play a similar role in the future, provided both sides can agree on a common path toward a mutually-desired end.

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