

Stars Aligning for a Korean Global Role?

by Spencer H. Kim

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There is much discussion these days about a greater contribution from Asia in addressing global trouble spots. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Asia has helped focus the dialogue. Korea has to decide whether it will play a role commensurate with its economic and political status, as well as with its role as a treaty ally of the United States; if it chooses to do so, stars may be aligning that could make such actions much more smoothly integrated with U.S. efforts.

Asian countries are increasingly called on to make more global contributions. When in Tokyo, Secretary Clinton called on Japan to be more involved in UN-led missions. The Japanese government announced its sponsorship of an international conference on stabilization in Pakistan. The Australian government is considering taking military responsibility for an Afghan province when Dutch troops leave. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean warships are joining those of Britain, India, the U. S., France, and Germany off the coast of Somalia to fight piracy.

As Korea calls for a new 21st-century alliance with the United States, it is considering what else it might do outside the Pacific region. Significant discussion has already taken place on possible contributions to the U.S.-led international effort in Afghanistan. Some strategic thinkers in Seoul are considering, albeit less publicly and more tentatively, ways to contribute in Iraq and the wider Middle East – not just in response to American requests but in ways that play to Korean strengths and are Korean initiatives. These would not be subject to the minimalist approach that comes from grudgingly fulfilling an ally's request to do one's "duty."

Should Seoul decide to show initiative and creativity and seriously work on a trouble spot, the Obama team responsible for those areas of the world could hardly be better for Korea. The U.S. ambassador-apparent to Iraq is Christopher Hill, a former ambassador to Seoul, assistant secretary of state for East Asia, and six-party nuclear negotiator with North Korea. The special negotiator for Afghanistan and Pakistan is Richard Holbrooke, who is also a former assistant secretary of state for East Asia. Alexander Vershbow, who was ambassador to Seoul and left a few months ago, has been picked to be the Department of Defense's assistant secretary for international security affairs, which means he has responsibility for the Middle East and Central Asia. Each of them knows Korea well, they all know each other well, and have worked together in key roles in trouble spots in the Balkans.

Kathleen Stephens, the current ambassador in Seoul, has also worked closely with this team on Kosovo and other issues when she was responsible for European issues at the National Security Council and in the State Department's European bureau.

Should Korea decide a 21st-century alliance with the U.S. demands greater global efforts on its part, it could not hope for a better constellation of experts on the U.S. side with which to work.