

# **The Past, Present, and Future of America's Relationship with the Koreas**

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Yale International Security Studies Colloquium Paper  
December 7<sup>th</sup> 2010

Although more than fifty years have passed since the declaration of an armistice in the Korean conflict, the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea remains one of the most dangerous places on the planet. With an estimated one million troops stationed near the border, as well as over a thousand of artillery pieces aimed at Seoul, North Korea constitutes a significant military threat, irrespective of its growing nuclear weapons program. The stakes are high in a potential Korean conflict. As one analyst at the Korea Institute at Harvard explained, “a second Korean War would produce tens of Chernobyl-like meltdowns and leave millions of lives lost...with deadly radioactive fallout raining on all parts of the Asia-Pacific region. The...economies of Northeast Asia would end up in ruins.” The ramifications of such an event could stretch far beyond Northeast Asia, potentially drawing nuclear powers into a spiraling global conflict, with unimaginable consequences. Obviously, no rational party would desire such an outcome.

Despite massive changes in the region during the past half century – the South Korean economic “miracle on the Han river,” the demise of the Soviet Union, the emergence of China as a global power, and the rise (and stumble) of Japan as an economic power – U.S. security policy in the region remains mired in myriad cold war era assumptions. Given the strong influence of history in political calculations throughout northeast Asia, this is not altogether surprising. However, successful U.S. security policy in the region requires a rethinking of those assumptions, both to decrease perpetually high tensions in the region and as part of a broader grand strategy vis-à-vis China.

Demographic changes in South Korea will eventually require a reconfiguration of the U.S.-South Korean alliance and the U.S. is best served by embracing such change and

exercising influence over its trajectory. Occupied with large scale military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. has allowed its relationship with Korea's to function on auto-pilot, resulting in awkward policy coordination with Seoul and missed opportunities to engage with Pyongyang. As the U.S. prepares to withdraw from its Yongsan base in Seoul, before irrevocably committing ourselves to a potentially costly rebasing project in Pyongteok, now is the right time to rethink important aspects of our security alliance with South Korea. In contemplating further troop reductions and increased flexibility in relations with Pyongyang, the United States may be able to reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula and more effectively counter and/or strategically utilize China's rising global influence, as well as initiating a more stable and sustainable long term relationship with Seoul.

### **The State of the U.S.-South Korean Alliance**

The policy positions of the United States and South Korea have been troublingly out of alignment for over a decade, especially as regards relations with North Korea. According to a 2008 poll, a substantial majority of South Koreans no longer think an attack by North Korea to be a serious possibility. These problems in threat perception can be traced back to at least the late 1990s, when, much to the consternation of the South Korean administration of Nobel Peace Prize Winner Kim Dae-jung, the U.S. stepped away from the Agreed Framework, insisting on positive steps from the North as a prerequisite to further diplomacy. The inauguration of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2003 reflected the desire of the Korean electorate to favor carrots over sticks, a policy completely out of alignment with the post 9/11 Bush administration. These mixed signals only made negotiations with the North more difficult and created a painful fissure in the alliance between the U.S. and South Korea.

In 2008 a new South Korean President, Lee Myung-bak, was elected to a five-year term on a platform of economic reform. In a sharp change on policy toward Pyongyang, President Lee cut virtually all foreign aid to the North, making its resumption contingent upon concrete first steps toward disarmament by Kim Jong-il. At the same time the Bush administration switched tactics, offering up a half million tons in food aid to Pyongyang. South Korea seems increasingly determined to find its own way diplomatically.

After initially getting caught in the briar patch of long standing Asian historical disputes, President Lee is increasingly asserting a foreign policy independent of the United States. For example, he recently held a trilateral summit with the leaders of China and Japan. The strategy of a preoccupied U.S. seems to be on auto-pilot, continuing to perceive South Korea as marching in formation with the U.S. on foreign policy issues. The election of Barack Obama in late 2008 produced a foreign policy toward the Korea's bound to the notion of six-party talks on nuclear issues, which is considered overly optimistic by many seasoned Korea researchers.

The U.S.-South Korean alliance is further complicated by historical issues unrelated to diplomatic policy toward North Korea. The generation which was raised in the caldron of the Korean War has tended to view its relationship with the U.S. to be unshakable. However, for subsequent generations, whose members are now beginning to occupy leadership positions in government, history has functioned as a force arguing against alignment with the U.S. Memories of the brave U.S. landing at Inchon have been eclipsed by new findings about the alleged slaughtering of civilians by U.S. combat troops at No Gun Ri during the Korean War. Another threat to the future of the alliance is widespread public opposition in the South to the protections offered under a generous SOFA arrangement, which shield American troops from prosecution for offensive and criminal conduct. Any visitor to the military dominated Itaewon district of Seoul would

quickly discern, as they might in the Japanese city of Okinawa, the basis of local anger toward U.S. soldiers.

Economic issues have also become a political lightning rod. For example, in an effort to persuade the U.S. Congress to pass the deal, in 2008 President Bush convinced President Lee to end the five-year ban on the importation of U.S. Beef, which was enacted after detection of mad cow disease at a meat production facility in the United States. The controversial move touched off massive demonstrations of over 100,000 protesters in the streets of Seoul, forcing a reversal of the policy. Unsurprisingly, President Obama has been unable to wrest meaningful concessions on trade from the South Korean government on trade issues, making passage of a free trade agreement between the nations unlikely.

However, attitudes in South Korea regarding their alliance with the United States can be best disaggregated along generational lines: specifically, the three “G’s.” The first generation, the raised in the aftermath of the Korean War, as mentioned previously, tends to be strongly supportive of the alliance. The second generation is interestingly analogous to the U.S. “baby boomer generation.” They were raised and came of age during the economic boom often called the “miracle on the Han river.” The need to foment economic expansion justified a highly repressive government. Indeed, the South Korean “National Security Law” makes the U.S. Patriot Act appear as if it were penned by the ACLU. Much of the resulting backlash among the youth in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s took place in the Cholla province, peaking with an uprising in the city of Kwangju. Often called the “Kwangju massacre,” South Korea’s equivalent of the Kent State shootings involved the deployment of Korean troops to brutally put down protests against military conduct in the city, reportedly resulting the deaths of over a hundred civilians, many of whom appear to have been unarmed. This second generation, rightly

or wrongly, tends to blame the United States for not intervening to restrain the South Korean regime, over which it exercised strong control at the time. This generation has adopted a very “Realist” orientation toward the United States. While they are not anti-American, they believe the U.S. is motivated primarily by self interest in their dealings with South Korea. In turn, this generation’s support of the alliance is only as strong as strategic conditions demand.

The third generation, generally in their late teens to early thirties at present, have no heroic memories of U.S. action on which to build draw. Their view of the United States military is largely one of an occupying, restraining force. They do not share the previous generation’s level of antipathy toward Japan and feel a stronger pull toward alliance with China than Japan. The United States would need to invest an enormous amount of soft power assets to bring this generation firmly into the U.S. camp.

Militarily, the present state of the U.S.-South Korean alliance is less complicated. Traditionally, the U.S. has forward deployed its troops, housing them in Seoul or even closer to the DMZ. This has been part of a classic “tripwire” strategy. If the North were to invade, they would kill many Americans in the process. Given how paranoid the North Korean government has been about U.S. aggression in the region, they would likely expect that any American response to the sudden deaths of thousands of troops would result in an existential threat to the Kim regime and the nation as a whole. Political realities in the U.S. and South Korea, as well as the need to free troops for deployment elsewhere, have caused the U.S. to substantially alter its forward deployment strategy on the peninsula. Already, it has committed to reduced force levels in Korea from 37,000 to 28,000.

The two most significant U.S. bases in South Korea are located in Seoul, in the Yongsan district, and Osan. The U.S. and South Korea are jointly building a massive

new base with South Korea about fifty miles south of Seoul, next to Osan Air Base, in Pyongtaek. This move is largely a result of prolonged pressure by the South Korean public for the U.S. to abdicate its present site in Seoul; the Yongsan Military Base. The Yongsan base has been a constant source between the U.S. and the South, as a result of the usurpation of prime riverfront real estate, the resultant toxic polluting of the base and river by the U.S. military, and numerous accusations of sexual assaults by U.S. servicemen. The \$13 billion transition project, involving massive construction, is scheduled to be completed by 2017. South Korea has agreed to pay the lion's share of the cost for the multi-billion dollar military base; an agreement that under present economic condition might arouse might generate anger towards the US. The transition will involve reclassifying South Korea to a non-hardship post, which means the lengths of tours will increase from one to three years, with the new base designed for families to be able to accompany the troops during their deployment. Once the transition is complete, less than 5000 U.S. troops will be based within eighty miles of the DMZ.

South Korean military planners have not been idle during this time of transition. According to a recent paper released by the Korea Economic Institute (KEI), South Korea is engaging in a large-scale modernization of its military, moving closer to self sufficiency. One motivation for such spending, according to 2006 Korean government White Paper, is the belief that the North possesses significantly “asymmetrical capabilities,” especially as regards WMD's and artillery pieces within range of Seoul. In addition, it has been acknowledged by South Korean politicians that part of the reason why they are willing to pick up a large portion of the tab for U.S rebasing in Pyongtaek is that, in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, the base would serve as an excellent installation for an emergent South Korean military. South Korean military expansion may not be uniquely tied to security concerns. Although the KEI disagrees with such reasoning,

successive administrations in Seoul, including the Lee government, have argued strongly that domestic military spending is one of the best ways to stimulate a weak South Korean economy. Unfortunately, since the economic downturn, the South Korean government appears to be having trouble coming up with their substantial share of the funding. In addition, local residents and anti-military activists have held up construction with a series of protests and legal challenges.

### **The State of U.S.-North Korean Relations**

In order to understand where things stand currently with North Korea, it is necessary to look back at a longer arc of relations between the nations. Understanding the United States' history with the North, considered from North Korea's perspective, offers first, an explanation why Pyongyang has felt the need to develop a nuclear program and second, pathways out of the United States' current predicament.

The North likely views the nuclear history of the region in the context of the following events and factors: in the mid-1970's an altercation at the border caused the U.S. to dispatch a phalanx of nuclear capable B-52's from Guam toward the DMZ, turning away only at the last second; annual "Team Spirit" military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea have often included preparations for the use of battlefield nuclear weapons; the U.S. has consistently refused to rule out a first use of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, viewing it as part of a "tripwire" strategy of deterring the North. While not intended as a defense of their activities, it seems easy to understand why Pyongyang, lacking a stable peace with the United States, would wish to obtain a nuclear capability.

This strategy of scaring an unstable adversary has often produced a predictable effect – instability. Although rarely discussed publicly, the U.S. was shockingly close to war

with North Korea in 1994. The Secretary of Defense at that time, William Perry, concluded that the situation “had a real risk of war associated with it.” Upon returning from negotiations with Pyongyang in 1999, Perry was asked why he thought the North was developing long range missiles. He answered, “I believe their primary reason...is deterrence...Who would they be deterring? They would be deterring the United States. We do not think of ourselves as a threat to North Korea, but I truly believe that they consider us a threat to them.” In the aftermath of U.S. military action in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the inclusion North Korea on the infamous “axis of evil” list, it is difficult to imagine that tensions have abated. As former State Department official and experienced Korea hand, Leon Sigal, pointed out about Pyongyang’s motives, “above all it wants an end to its lifelong enmity with the United States, South Korea and Japan, so as to ease its insecurity.” Indeed, there has never been any reason to suspect North Korea of having any expansionist ambitions. In fact, their national philosophy of Juche, grounded in self reliance and cultural pride, would likely make military adventurism anathema to them.

As Professor Bruce Cumings, an expert on the history of modern Korea, noted “When the Carter administration announced plans for a gradual but complete withdrawal of U.S. ground forces from Korea...a prolonged period of North Korean courting of Americans began...Kim referred to President Jimmy Carter as a “man of justice,” Kim gave interviews saying he was knocking on the American door, wanted diplomatic relations and trade, and would not interfere with American business interests in the South once Korea was reunified.” In fact, even as recently as the most recent Bush administration came into office, Pyongyang explicitly offered to curtail, and potentially terminate, all missile development. What they asked for in return was the withdrawal of some or all of the U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. Of course, with the coming to

office of the hawkish President Reagan, such an opportunity for engagement drifted away.

If such a perspective is credible, why have negotiations consistently failed? Again, a look backward is helpful. In 1994, the U.S. and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework, where North Korea pledged to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons program and the U.S. promised to phase out economic sanctions that had been in place since the Korean War. Shortly thereafter, a Republican congress was elected. This congress opposed President Clinton's strategy and the United States failed to deliver its part of the bargain.

In late 1998, while honoring the letter of the 1994 agreement, North Korea tested long-range missiles. On September 17, 1999, the United States and North Korea reached an agreement that the United States would relax "most" sanctions in exchange for a temporary moratorium on North Korean missile testing. North Korea honored its part of the agreement. The White House, under significant pressure from Congress, did not use its power of executive order to ease the sanctions. Instead, the United States demanded a comprehensive missile agreement that would go beyond a testing moratorium to a complete ban on development, production, and deployment of all missiles beyond a range of 180 miles. At that point, negotiations were not promising, but were still alive.

Initial signs were encouraging at the outset of the Bush administration, marked improved North Korean relations: North Korea participated in the Asian games held in Pusan, South Korea (North-Korea's first ever participation in a sporting event in the South) and Colin Powell met with Paek Nam Sun, North Korea's foreign minister. The overt campaigning by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung for a soft-line American policy was reaching at least some ears in the administration. However, the post 9/11

labeling of North Korea as part of the “Axis of Evil” slammed shut that window of opportunity for constructive engagement.

In October of 2002, North Korea announced that they had successfully engineered Highly Enriched Uranium. North Korea immediately offered to halt the HEU program in exchange for a non-aggression pact with the United States. Bush, however, unwilling to reward bad behavior, declined and instead charged North Korea with violating the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework and suspended the shipment of 500,000 tons of heavy fuel.

Since the final months of 2008, the six-party talks have remained stalled over nuclear inspections in North Korea. However, the United States has been strongly committed to maintaining the structure of six-party talks. Interestingly, in a recent interview, South Korean Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan argued that, while six party talks are both useful and important, augmenting multiparty talks with bilateral discussions between the U.S. and North Korea would be considered a positive development by the South Korean government. Many analysts have assumed that South Korea has been insistent upon being involved in all the talks, as they are surely a primary stakeholder on these issues. However, Yu identified the primary roadblock to a two-party conduit as the preference of the Obama administration to work through the six party framework, possibly in the hope of solidifying the mechanism for use beyond questions directly related to the Korean peninsula.

Of course, the interests of the U.S. and the Koreas are not the total sum on interests of the region. The historic geopolitical significance of the Koreas, as a strategically significant buffer zone between greater powers, cannot be overstated. Its fate has often been compared to that of the historic role of Poland in Europe. These

interests of the other nations in the region serve to complicate the task of effectively engaging the North.

Japan, long the focus of considerable anger from both the Koreas over the lack of adequate contrition regarding colonization policies and wartime atrocities, is unlikely to favor a trust-based arrangement with Pyongyang, given the North's previous missile tests conducted over Japanese territory. It might be politically impossible for Tokyo to support soft line measures toward Pyongyang, given the public outrage over the repeated kidnapping of, and subsequent refusal to return, Japanese citizens by the North. Recent threats by North Korea to conduct a new missile test, depicted by Pyongyang as a satellite launch, have caused Japan to undertake initial deployment of its new ship based missile defense system, which has been dubbed by analysts as "Son of Star Wars," in order to shoot down any foreign object entering Japanese air space. Given the power of history in the region, even this tepid showing of Japanese military capacity has rattled the nerves of several nations.

Russia, once a stalwart alliance partner of Pyongyang, has decreased its commitment to the North in the aftermath of the sudden decline of the Soviet empire. Russia, however, still retains an interest in the area, as it is embroiled in low-level conflict with both Koreas and Japan, primarily regarding disputes ownership of several small, but strategically significant, islands in the region.

China, in contrast, is the Asian power most directly implicated by actions taken in the North. It shares a notoriously porous border with North Korea, is a significant source of foreign aid, and is perceived as likely to come to the defense of Pyongyang in the event of military conflict. Any American driven solution to the Korean conflict will require at least the acquiescence of China. Unfortunately, the Obama administration got off to a rocky start regarding North Korea and China. In the aftermath of reports of Kim

Jong-il's stroke speculation ignited over the issue of possible succession and whether it might proceed along dynastic or military lines. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton breached a regional taboo against publicly discussing leadership succession, suggesting dialogue with China over the issue.

The motives of China regarding the Koreas are clearly different than those of the United States. China does not appear especially concerned about North Korea's nuclear program. What they fear is instability in North Korea, which could spark a flood of refugees into a region essential to the continuation of Chinese economic growth, as well as a regional war. While they profess to be uncomfortable with the military presence of the U.S. in Northeast Asia, China knows that it benefits from such an arrangement. The United States policies the region, incurring both the diplomatic risks and economic costs. Meanwhile, China is not forced to have much "skin in the game." As Professor John Mearsheimer noted in a recent talk at Brown University, part of why China has been able to focus on extending its influence beyond Asia, is that it faces no serious security concerns in its own region.

## **Conclusions**

Balancing carrots and sticks, inducements and coercive action, has been a long-standing principle of American policy toward the Koreas. During the Bush administration, policy-makers relied on the stick, almost entirely to the exclusion of carrots. Some analysts have argued to increase economic pressure if North Korea goes through with the upcoming missile launch. Indeed, some security analysts have even argued for military action, such as air strikes on suspected North Korean nuclear sites. However, that would be a dangerous approach, risking, as Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute points out, "a full retaliatory response from North Korea," "the lives of hundreds of thousands of South Koreans," and "spread[ing] nuclear fallout throughout East Asia."

Moreover, in light of the relaxation of the United States' military posture in South Korea, it is unclear whether previous models, projecting eventual victory over the North after weathering a strong initial onslaught, are still valid. These optimistic simulations assume the rapid deployment of reinforcements, the vast majority of whom are currently occupied in Afghanistan or Iraq.

However, Leon Sigal claims that now is a crucial time to offer up a helping of carrots, giving North Korea "a tangible stake in being nuclear free." While Sigal focused his recommendations on offering to construct conventional power plants, thereby obviating the alleged need for nuclear power, his argument points to a broader need to alter the policy of insisting upon gestures from the North prior to engaging in constructive engagement. For decades Pyongyang has maintained, despite its prickly exterior, that its top foreign policy priority is to stabilize relations with the United States. Even in the aftermath of being included on President Bush's "axis of evil" list, North Korea offered to give up its weapons if the U.S. were willing to establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. The U.S., however, has continued to insist that North Korea act first. If the United States were to carefully extend its hand to the North, the U.S. may at least see a reduction in the dangerous tension in the region. As Sigal pointed out, "Kim Jong-Il wants to force America to be his friend...[yet he] seems unwilling to unclench his fist and shake Obama's hand. We may have to settle for a fist bump." Given the undeniable failure of hard line policies, such as economic sanctions, for over half a century, there would seem to be a strong argument for a different approach.

Of course, North Korea has a longstanding record of being an unreliable negotiating partner. This is why it is essential that overtures to Pyongyang must a) be easily paired with incremental steps by the North, and b) not be infrastructure based,

allowing them to be easily rolled back if the North responds in an unacceptable manner.

A strong initial strategy might involve the following actions:

- 1) Initiate bi-lateral talks with North Korea (if necessary, initially with China performing the role of midwife) regarding establishing a U.S. diplomatic presence in Pyongyang. Amazingly, even though the threat of invasion due to miscalculation is omnipresent, we have no way to directly communicate with the North during a crisis, instead relying upon diplomatic cutouts with nations such as Sweden.
- 2) Suspend all military exercises with South Korea for one year. The purpose of such exercises has been to a) send a signal of “strength” to North Korea, and b) offer opportunities for important training between U.S. and South Korean troops. However, the deterrence strategy has been ineffective and involves undertaking dangerous risks of miscalculation during such exercises. As regards training, the relative loss of force interconnectivity from a one year suspension would be minimal.

There is good reason to believe that such an overture would meet – at least initially – with a very positive response. If the North offered some concession in return, we could then offer to undertake the following steps in exchange for sharp limits on the North Korean nuclear program.

- 1) Over a decade long arc, gradually draw down U.S. forces in South Korea from their present level to perhaps less than 5000 troops, stationed primarily in the southern part of the nation.
- 2) Loosen economic sanctions on non-military products in exchange for increased inspection access to ships carrying good to and from North Korea.

Of course, such a strategy would necessitate a strong reaffirmation of our security commitment to South Korea in the unlikely event of an attack from the North, including explicit inclusion under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. We could, however, lessen the blow of such a reaffirmation to diplomatic efforts by pledging to not use nuclear weapons against North Korea unless South Korea was invaded by the North. This ten year transition period would allow South Korea time to move toward military independence, which might – as previously discussed – have economic benefits for South Korea, as well as for the United States defense industry.

This strategy, insofar as it involves U.S. troop redeployment, offers an interesting opportunity to engage China on exercising stronger influence over the North. With the U.S. winding down its role in policing the Korean peninsula, China would either have to step into the breach or incur the costs of instability in a region where they should clearly have more “skin in the game” than the U.S. An interesting question to where those troops would be redeployed. At least three possibilities exist, 1) They could be redeployed to Japan, where they could still perform a deterrent function against North Korea, while helping stifle recent impulses in Japanese political culture toward remilitarization, 2) They could be redeployed to any theaters in which the U.S. military is engaged, such as Afghanistan or Iraq, or – most interestingly – 3) They could be deployed further south in Asia, toward our allies who have economic claims on the strategically important and mineral rich South China Sea.

This third approach would doubly constrain China. Not only would they now have to assume responsibility for stabilizing the Koreas while facing the possibility of a militarily resurgent Japan, but they would have to confront a situation in which countries who contest China’s claims regarding the South China Sea might have the implicit support of the U.S. military in the case of Chinese aggression. One possibility for troop

redeployment might be reestablishing the U.S. presence at Subic Bay in the Philippines, where the economic downturn and deteriorating security situation has generated some nostalgia for the return of the U.S. Another possibility might include Vietnam, which clearly is concerned by recent moves by China to assert claims over resources in recent spats with Japan. A promising location for such a base in Vietnam might be in Da Nang.

This prospective strategy of soft line diplomatic moves, followed by substantially reducing U.S. troop levels in South Korea would enjoy several benefits, 1) It creates the framework for a more equitable and sustainable alliance with South Korea in the long term, one not bound by a pejorative military relationship, 2) It creates an opening for dialogue with North Korea. If they were to rebuff such an opening, it would even more difficult for China to defend them in the world community, 3) It places China in a position where they may be compelled to induce the United States to remain in Northeast Asia, as a hedge against feared Japanese rearmament, at the price of acting in concert with U.S. foreign policy not only in Northeast Asia, but on other important global issues.

While such a strategy is not without risks, one thing is very clear. The present policy is not working. It places the U.S. and all of Northeast Asia at constant risk of war and is draining American resources, at a time where we cannot afford to do, for what is ultimately to the strategic benefit of the Chinese, freeing their hands to complicate our diplomatic efforts in other parts of the globe. Sometimes, as in chess, one must retreat to gain an advantage. This may well be the situation we confront in South Korea today.