

Policy Forum 04-56A: Runaway Ally Joins the Axis of Evil: One More Neocon Target: South Korea

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Recommended Citation

Gary Leupp, "Policy Forum 04-56A: Runaway Ally Joins the Axis of Evil: One More Neocon Target: South Korea", NAPSNet Policy Forum, December 16, 2004, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/0456a_leupp-html/

The Second Bush Administration and the Outlook on Its North Korean Policy: "Odd Man Out?"

By Gary Leupp

PFO 04-56A: December 16th, 2004

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I. Introduction

Gary Leupp, Professor of History at Tufts University, and Adjunct Professor of Comparative Religion, writes: "the neocons only want to cooperate in a scenario that destroys the North Korean regime,

discredits forever anyone in the South who feels any sympathy with it, and suppresses the 'anti-American' attitudes of those who want to negotiate with someone they label a 'tyrannical dictator.'"

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II. Report by Gary Leupp

-'"Runaway Ally' Joins 'the Axis of Evil': One More Neocon Target: South Korea"
by Gary Leupp

The neocons have added yet another country to their hit list, another one targeted for regime change: the Republic of Korea. Yes, that's South Korea, long-time U.S. ally, host to around 34,000 U.S. troops. William Kristol, editor of the neocon Weekly Standard and chair of the highly influential Project for the New American Century, has issued a memo (addressed to "opinion-leaders") on behalf of the PNAC. This is a highly significant and alarming document. It alludes to "the problems created by the government now in office in Seoul" and the need for a "strategy to deal with" them. These "problems" involve South Korea's failure to sufficiently cooperate with Washington's efforts to topple the regime in North Korea. Kristol draws attention to a long Weekly Standard article by Nicholas Eberstadt, an economist with the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, entitled "Tear Down this Tyranny: a Korea Strategy for Bush's Second Term." This article is must reading as a clear statement of neocon plans for Northeast Asia.

Eberstadt declares that the Bush administration must "[work] around the pro-appeasement crowd in the South Korean government" of Roh Moo-hyun, elected president in December 2002. With that election, Eberstadt asserts, "U.S. policy on the North Korean crisis suffered a setback, and a serious one thanks to which a coterie of New Left-style academics and activists assumed great influence over their government's security policies." The "core of this new government has remained implacably anti-American and reflexively pro-appeasement toward Pyongyang." Thus South Korea is "now a runaway ally: a country bordering a state committed to its destruction, and yet governed increasingly in accordance with graduate-school 'peace studies' desiderata--while at the same time relying on forward-positioned American troops and a security treaty with Washington to guarantee its safety. It is not too much to describe this utterly unnatural and unviable situation as our 'second crisis' on the Korean peninsula."

Neocon Links Seoul "Sabotage" with the Taliban, Urges Regime Change

So there are two crises: one caused by North Korea's (very understandable) desire to develop nuclear weapons as a deterrent to U.S. attack, another by South Korea's unwillingness to embrace what Eberstadt terms "a North Korea threat-reduction policy." The AEI ideologue notes that "the South Korean press" has dubbed "the core of the new government. 'the Taliban.'" (Actually, this epithet originated among "sunshine" foes in the Foreign Ministry in late 2003, and while some major Seoul dailies dislike Roh, it's an overstatement to suggest that the press in general characterizes Roh's team this way.) Eberstadt himself shamelessly applies this term to Roh's officials and their aims. Thus he says the U.S. must "salvage" the crisis-ridden alliance with the South Koreans "while avoiding 'Taliban' sabotage" of U.S. policy on their peninsula. The preposterous linkage between Mullah Omar and President Roh can be dismissed as simply facetious, but the point is clear: "You're either for us or against us in the War on Terror, and the regime in South Korea is against us." The language throughout the piece is undiplomatic, and State Department officials are unlikely to echo it

publicly. But surely Eberstadt reflects the views of John Bolton, the State Department's leading attack dog on Korea and top candidate to serve as chief deputy to new Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. This is the guy the North Koreans (and no doubt some South Koreans) poetically call "Human Scum."

This extraordinary trashing of an allied regime, bizarrely castigated as both "Taliban" and "New Left," is followed by the observation that its "anti-American" stand is not an insurmountable challenge. Here is the truly remarkable climax of the piece:

Over the past decade, some giant South Korean conglomerates that once boasted they were 'too big to fail' have completely disappeared from the corporate scene. Everyone in South Korea today remembers this--so they can also intuit the hollowness of their current president's strange claim just last week that the U.S.-South Korean relationship is likewise too big to fail. Public opinion in South Korea is deeply--and quite evenly--divided on the North Korea question, and the current government earns consistently low approval ratings. Instead of appeasing South Korea's appeasers (as our policy to date has attempted to do, albeit clumsily) America should be speaking over their heads directly to the Korean people, building and nurturing the coalitions in South Korean domestic politics that will ultimately bring a prodigal ally back into the fold.

An interesting and telling analogy. The Korean people know how badly the South Korean capitalism has been hit by the imperialist globalization championed by Washington. They should know, too, that relations between Seoul and Washington can suddenly deteriorate due to Washington's displeasure. Eberstadt seems to be saying, "If we strike fear into the South Korean public, encouraging them to get this Taliban gang out and support forces who will abet U.S. plans for the peninsula, if we pump money into the most pro-American parties and newspapers, we can bring the prodigal home!" But Roh's term ends in February 2008, and Washington surely wants to move on North Korea before then. Obviously Eberstadt wants vigorous U.S. interference in South Korean politics, and "regime change" in both halves of the peninsula during the interim.

Such interference may have been at work in the very odd impeachment process that removed Roh from power from March to May of this year. Roh is a human rights lawyer, an activist who organized against the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship in 1987, and was jailed for supporting striking workers that year. In 2003 he succeeded Kim Dae-jung, as a member of the Millennium Democratic Party, a spin-off of the party that Kim had founded. He continued the "sunshine policy" towards the North of his predecessor, which George W. Bush had summarily rejected, to Kim's great chagrin, in 2001.

In March 2004 opposition parties in the parliament impeached Roh, charging him with violating a minor election law, forcing him to step down. But he was returned to power by the Constitutional Court in May. (Kind of reminiscent to what happened to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, toppled then returned to power in April 2002.) At the time the official North Korean news agency charged, "It was none other than the United States that sparked such a disturbing development." Not so implausible, actually. The Bush administration, which had sought to sabotage Kim's efforts at rapprochement with North Korea, was not real happy with Roh, even though under great pressure he'd agreed to send South Korean troops to Iraq. They can't be happy that Roh told the World Affairs Council in Los Angeles recently that North Korea's desire to obtain nukes was not irrational given the threats it confronts. Eberstadt's probably just saying what the neocon Bushites have been thinking all along.

Korean Nationalism vs. Hyperpower Plans

I have known many Koreans, in various capacities, for many years. There's no people I more admire, or for whom I feel greater affection. Temperamentally, I relate to Korean friends' expansiveness,

love of song and drama, capacity for indignation over matters of principle, and their pugnacity. One thing I've noticed: there is no people with a greater sense of national pride or unity. The inclination of many South Koreans to reject U.S. policy towards the North is not "unnatural" as Eberstadt opines. It's the exact opposite. It's very natural for them to work for unity that preserves all Koreans' self-respect, built on a long shared, tragic history of complex relations with China, Russia, Japan and the U.S. It's natural for them to hope for U.S. cooperation in the reunification all earnestly desire.

But the neocons only want to cooperate in a scenario that destroys the North Korean regime, discredits forever anyone in the South who feels any sympathy with it, and suppresses the "anti-American" attitudes of those who want to negotiate with someone they label a "tyrannical dictator." These neocons are best understood as thugs whose judgment and morality are exactly the reverse of what they should be. Good for them is evil, and evil good. So the U.S. takes action that leads to a repeat of the Korean War on 1950-53, which killed 4 million? Wouldn't it be good, they fantasize, if the North was destroyed this time, and in the end the U.S. was there in charge, throughout the peninsula, "nurturing coalitions in domestic politics" and correcting all which is so currently out of control?

The article and memo attack both the Seoul and Pyongyang governments. They disparage Korean solutions, Korean sovereignty, Koreans in general, to say nothing of graduate students, peace studies folks, and the whole "reality-based community." Will these attacks meet with a deferential bow from the people these neocons want to address over Roh's yet unbowed head? Or will they meet with a taekwondo roundhouse kick, which to properly execute from a forward stance, requires one to employ both south and north feet?

* * * * *

"The bad plowman quarrels with his ox," runs the Korean proverb. South Korea has been a serviceable, loyal beast of burden for the U.S. plowman. It will soon have 3600 troops in Iraq, the third largest "Coalition" contingent, contributing them because, according to UPI's Jong-Heon Lee, this is "necessary to win Washington's backing for a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis." The Faustian bargain here requires that Korean boys get sent to Iraq to kill Iraqis, so that the U.S. will agree to refrain for the time being from attacking part of Korea. There is widespread domestic opposition to the bargain, which the U.S. might break anyway. Should that happen, according to a recent poll, at least 20% of South Koreans would side with North Korea, while 30% are undecided on the issue. The plowman, in quarreling with the ox, seems to act against his own interests. Maybe he knows how to cow the ox with whippings and threats; maybe there is method in his madness. But maybe, being stupid or crazy, he will so provoke the ox that the animal quite naturally and reasonably bolts or gores him.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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