

Policy Forum 05-35A: A New Foreign Policy Paradigm: Perspectives on the Role of South Korea as a Balancer



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Ruediger Frank

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I. Introduction

Ruediger Frank, Professor of East Asian Political Economy at the University of Vienna, writes: "The recent efforts of South Korea's president Roh Moo-hyun to establish the country not only as a mediator, but as a "balancing power in Northeast Asia to prevent possible disputes in the region" ... are an expression of the dissatisfaction with the progress made under the current arrangement and could be interpreted as a change of the Status quo that benefits Beijing at the expense of the alliance with Washington, which will nevertheless not be given up. Quite remarkably, this position of being an independent actor in international relations corresponds very well with the North Korean position and opens one more field of possible future cooperation of both Koreas."

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II. Essay by Ruediger Frank

-A New Foreign Policy Paradigm: Perspectives on the Role of South Korea as a Balancer
by Ruediger Frank

Progress in the relationship with the DPRK is not just a means to an end for Seoul, like it is for other players, but an end in itself. Reunification was and is high on the political agenda (see article 4 of the 1987 constitution). Only with the unification issue resolved can Korea actively approach the crucial question of its future in the region and globally. Although the South Koreans, to the great surprise of the Americans, are responding relatively mildly and calmly to the continuous verbal and real threats from P'yòngyang, tension on the peninsula is as undeniable as the risk of a military conflict (see Yun 2004). That the latter might involve nuclear weapons worsens the situation considerably.

How to deal with North Korea will be at the core of South Korea's negotiations with the United States about the future of their alliance, which is described as "the one with the most inelastic mission" among alliances formed after World War II (Lee 2004: C-3). The same writer concludes that South Korea is now faced with the task to make strategic choices that will affect its situation well into the second half of the 21st century. The redefinition of the alliance with the United States is in this context as important as to find a sustainable relationship with China, with significant effects on the bilateral relations with Japan and South Korea's global posture.

Despite well-meant suggestions as: "Washington should not try to compel Seoul to see relations between it and Beijing as a zero-sum equation. Seoul should not be tugged between two competing poles." (Glosserman and Fritschi 2004: ix), it will in fact be very difficult to avoid this scenario. The International Crisis Group had warned that "Significant generational and political shifts have transformed views in ways that could undermine U.S. policy in the region unless Washington develops a better understanding of the situation in Seoul." (ICG 2004: i). And Scott Snyder of the Asia Foundation wrote: "The veneer of shared interests and objectives is cracking as the United States and South Korea increasingly find themselves with divergent perspectives vis-à-vis North Korea and other emerging challenges to the Northeast Asian regional security order. As the region adapts to new circumstances, contradictions are piling up, and the U.S.-ROK security alliance itself may now be at stake." (Snyder 2004: v).

The recent efforts of South Korea's president Roh Moo-hyun to establish the country not only as a mediator, but as a "balancing power in Northeast Asia to prevent possible disputes in the region" (speech at the Air Force Academy, March 08, 2005, quoted in: www.korea.net) are an expression of

the dissatisfaction with the progress made under the current arrangement and could be interpreted as a change of the Status quo that benefits Beijing at the expense of the alliance with Washington, which will nevertheless not be given up. Quite remarkably, this position of being an independent actor in international relations corresponds very well with the North Korean position and opens one more field of possible future cooperation of both Koreas. It can be expected that the EU will strongly support this new foreign policy paradigm of the ROK. However, domestic criticism of the new foreign policy line came quickly and strongly, in particular from the major opposition party (Hankook Ilbo, 05.04.2005); it is so far also unclear which concrete actions the balancer role would include.

Being a balancer could well develop into a new trend in East Asian foreign policy: Malaysia is trying to establish ASEAN as a balancer between the U.S. and the EU, with expected strong support from China (Cheow 2005). Both initiatives correspond with the Neorealist worldview. Kenneth Waltz wrote in 1991: "in international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads others to try to balance against it" (Waltz 1991: 669). While this remark was coined at the U.S., it does provide an explanation for the ROK's latest initiative. China and Japan have been overwhelmingly powerful neighbors for quite some time, so this alone would not necessitate a new paradigm. However, in the past Korea either relied on China or Russia to balance the power of Japan (which ended in a catastrophic failure after the sino-japanese War of 1894/95, the russo-japanese War of 1904/05, and the annexation in 1910), or on the U.S. to balance the power of China and to keep Japan under control. Obviously, now South Korea feels that it might not be in its best interest to rely solely on external balancing and therefore wants to become an active part of this process.

Neorealism regards states as power-maximizers in an anarchic world. The concept of "International Community" must be viewed critically from this perspective, if it is to be more than a propagandistic tool to isolate the enemy (as in "the International Community versus North Korea"). Nevertheless, in reality there are multilateral approaches by interested parties such as the Six Party Talks and KEDO, so there is momentum for concerted actions. Every single involved nation has its own strong interest in the North Korean issue. It would, however, be naive to expect a congruence of these interests, although any successful multilateral approach towards a solution must take these interests into consideration. Therefore, instead of acting based on the smallest common denominator, it might be useful to turn the diversity of views, goals and potentials into an advantage by allowing multiple individual, i.e., bilateral initiatives under a broader multilateral framework according to the relative weight of the individual party's preferences.

These actions must be coordinated. In particular against the light of the recent South Korean initiative to establish itself as a balancing power in the region, this could be one way to execute this policy. A coordinator is more active than a mediator, and has the chance to introduce his own policies. South Korea would be a good coordinator in the sense that (1) its interest in a resolution of the North Korean issue is recognized as legitimate, (2) there are no fears that South Korea would use the issue to elevate its own status to that of dominance in the region, (3) the ROK is economically strong enough to create its own input into the process. A close cooperation with the EU appears highly reasonable, since Europe shares with Seoul such important goals as a peaceful solution and the readiness to change the status quo.

One form of international cooperation has been growing markedly in importance during the last years: ASEAN+3, currently the most promising approach to regional integration in Asia. The momentum for its rapid rise is certainly provided by China. These developments pose a serious challenge to nations like Korea and Japan who must be worried not to come too late in this very dynamic process. The success of the recent years did not only lead to the wish to integrate China, India, Japan and South Korea into ASEAN, but also to the expression of such goals as to "hold its own" in future negotiations with the United States, Europe or other emerging economic entities

(Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo at the 10th ASEAN summit in Vientiane, October 2004, quoted in: Cheow 2005). Eventually, ASEAN+3 is to be transformed into EAS, or the East Asian Summit, although differences over the membership of countries like India, Australia and New Zealand remain.

As Cheow (2005) further observes: "...there is a growing perception of an increasing Sino-Japanese rivalry as the principal trend and force in shaping the future Asia. In fact, the EAS could heighten Sino-US rivalry in Asia, as the strategic future of Washington in the region is hotly debated; the EAS would therefore logically provide the appropriate theatre for the increasing Sino-Japanese rivalry, against a more ominous backdrop of an even bigger rivalry between Beijing and Washington in Asia.". This adds another important task to the South Korean concept of a balancing power and the suggested coordinating role. Seoul would be well advised to prevent a setting in which Washington has to rely solely on Tokyo to remain involved in East Asian affairs. Expecting a lasting solution without consent of the U.S. would be naive; a redefinition of the Korean-American alliance has to be preferred over a break of this relationship. The latter would not only be very costly in the short run; in the long run, it would only shift dependency from one strong partner to another.

It has to be noted that with regard to North Korea, East Asian regional integration could open a wide range of new options. There appears to be a consensus in the international community that a multilateral solution to the issues of the North Korean nuclear threat and economic rehabilitation is preferable. The current approach (Six-Party-Talks) has so far not provided the expected results, with North Korea's distrust against at least two partners at the table being one reason. ASEAN or EAS could be an alternative, in particular one where the DPRK would find a lot of sympathy for its position vis-à-vis the United States. This is the third arena in which the wish of South Korea to become a balancer in the region might breathe some desperately needed fresh air into the current stalemate situation. North Korea has, decades ago in the bipolar world, attempted to position itself as a leading nation in the non-aligned movement. This attempt failed. However, South Korea is in a much better position to embark on a similar project with the ASEAN nations, which are torn between the greed for the Chinese market and the fear of Chinese dominance. As an economic powerhouse and a well-developed democracy, with the legitimate aim of bringing peace and prosperity to the Korean peninsula, the ROK could be acceptable as a leading balancing player in the larger context of ASEAN+3.

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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.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org