

Policy Forum 07-059: A Unified Approach: Articulating a Coordinated U.S.-ROK Strategy in 2008



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By A. Greer Pritchett

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I. Introduction

A. Greer Pritchett, Assistant Project Director of Northeast Asia Projects for the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, writes, "if a smart policy is crafted now within the current administration, there appears to be little reason for a significant shift in 2009... Further, since the next administration will undoubtedly still be preoccupied and stymied in other parts of the world, a bolstered U.S.-ROK alliance would be a much appreciated housewarming gift."

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II. Article by A. Greer Pritchett

- "A Unified Approach: Articulating a Coordinated U.S.-ROK Strategy in 2008"

By A. Greer Pritchett

Now that the Six Party Talks have resumed and the process of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula appears to be a realistic (if still complex) goal, it is time to look towards the future of the United States' alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK). Historically one of the preeminent alliances in the U.S.'s "hub and spoke" model for security in the Asia Pacific region, this past decade has seen the relationship considerably strained.

It is no secret that the Bush administration was sharply critical of Kim Dae-Jung's Sunshine Policy; this disapproval and censure has continued during Roh Moo-hyun's presidency. The Sunshine Policy found South Korea actively engaging in economic and social interactions with its neighbor to the north in an attempt to ameliorate some of the latent, festering hostilities which still exist between these two countries. In the mind of President Bush, and many others in his administration, this engagement was seen as a type of pandering to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), a known enemy of the United States and the entire free world. After all, Bush called out North Korea as one of the three member states comprising the "axis of evil"; it was a rogue state and a sponsor of terrorism. The current administration's solution to the believed scourge that was the DPRK was not to engage it, but rather to further isolate it. Washington's approach was in direct opposition to Seoul's new policy, driving a deep wedge between the two capitals.

However, with the United States embroiled in the quagmire of the Middle East, it seemed as if President Bush would try to wait out populist President Roh's tenure until a president more amenable to the Bush administration's policies took the helm. Yet this overt rejection of South Korean policy exacerbated tensions and led to a wave of anti-Americanism across South Korea. This phenomenon particularly manifested itself within Korea's younger generation which, unlike those who had lived through the 1950 -1953 Korean War, may be said to suffer from historical amnesia.

Fortunately, however, this alliance has not been strained to its breaking point. By most accounts, the severity of the anti-American movement seems to have reached its zenith and is now waning. For example, there no longer appears to be frequent protests at General MacArthur's statue in Inch'on. And though the generational shift within the South Korean populace may continue to try the relationship, the October 9, 2006, DPRK nuclear weapons test might have served as the catalyst needed to reinvigorate and galvanize the U.S.-ROK alliance.

For one thing, there has been a palpable, strategic shift in George Bush's foreign policy over the past year or so. Previously, the administration espoused a policy whereby talking to one's adversary was forbidden; now, with the signing of the February 13 agreement, not even the formerly taboo subject of normalization of relations between the U.S. and the DPRK is off the table. Furthermore, working together during the Six Party Talks, appears to have created some positive, forward

momentum for the relationship between the U.S. and the ROK. It is time to capitalize on this moment.

The structural problems in the U.S.-ROK alliance need to be patched up so that the two countries remain in concert in terms of North Korean policy. This will require close coordination between Washington and Seoul and a recognition that the overarching strategic interests of the two countries, namely to maintain and enhance the security equilibrium in Northeast Asia, is a shared goal. This will become even more of an imperative should North Korea fail to live up to its promises as defined in the September 2005 agreement and elucidated in the February 13, 2007 Beijing Accord.

The United States cannot afford to make any unilateral moves against the DPRK; therefore, ensuring that the U.S. and the ROK show a united front is essential.

And yet to focus exclusively on the North Korean issue when discussing the U.S. - ROK alliance is to short shrift its broader significance. In fact, in order to solidify the alliance as one of the pre-eminent cornerstones of the United States' policy towards Asia-- as some scholars and former officials believe it is, or should be-- the scope of the alliance must be broadened. For example, there must be a formal peace agreement to replace the 1953 Korean War Armistice agreement; the U.S. and South Korea should also work to synchronize policies to mitigate the unknown potentialities surrounding the rise of China; and with increased nationalist sentiments throughout Northeast Asia, the United States could promote a Tokyo-Seoul rapprochement to assuage some of the overriding concerns which exist amongst neighbors, borne from historical mistrust.

This alliance, in other words, cannot be thrown into the dustbin of history; its usefulness extends far beyond that of a Cold War relic.

Given the importance of this alliance, how should President Bush utilize the final 18 months of his presidency in order to improve it? One thing appears obvious, with his foreign policy record riddled with holes and tarnished to such a severe degree, Bush needs a success story, and the Korean peninsula could be such a legacy. Yet this will require more than just a wing and a prayer in order to come through to fruition.

The newly established U.S. Defense Department post for managing relationships with the United States' allies in Asia, recently filled by Richard Lawless, former Deputy Under-Secretary of Defense, is a good place to start. The position, at least on paper, seems to speak towards the importance the present administration is placing on the alliances by trying to infuse new lifeblood into them. It's as if Washington senses that the enhanced articulation of the bilateral alliance is diplomatically manageable, if someone is willing to spearhead the effort.

Finally, if a smart policy is crafted now within the current administration, there appears to be little reason for a significant shift in 2009. An examination of the current slate of 2008 Presidential candidates reveals that no potential nominee seems to come from a more hard-line school than Bush. Further, since the next administration will undoubtedly still be preoccupied and stymied in other parts of the world, a bolstered U.S.-ROK alliance would be a much appreciated housewarming gift.

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.

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