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# Policy Forum 05-05A: Minding the Gap: Improving U.S. ROK Relations



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# Minding the Gap: Improving U.S.-ROK Relations

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## Minding the Gap: Improving U.S.-ROK Relations

By Balbina Y. Hwang

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## **I. Introduction**

Balbina Y. Hwang, Policy Analyst for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation, writes: "The United States has much to gain from maintaining its formal alliance with the Republic of Korea, as well as the broader bilateral relationship. However, to do so, both sides must work to overcome the serious gap in public perception that has emerged in recent years."

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## **II. Essay by Balbina Y. Hwang**

- "Minding the Gap: Improving U.S.-ROK Relations"

by Balbina Y. Hwang

At the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Economic Leaders' Meeting in late November 2004, President George W. Bush and South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun stated that both countries were in agreement on the goal of de-nuclearizing North Korea. Yet, despite such congenial official statements, a serious perception gap between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) has become increasingly stark in recent months. Official statements from the Roh government and expressions by the South Korean public and media are often critical of U.S. policies and laced with serious misperceptions about American foreign policy intentions and objectives. In addition to destabilizing the formal security alliance, this perception gap seriously undermines the unified approach toward North Korea.

Thus, as the Bush Administration prepares for its second term, one of its top foreign policy priorities should be a thorough examination of U.S.-ROK relations. Specifically, President Bush should:

1. Consider inviting President Roh to the White House for a summit as early as possible and work to ensure that the leadership in both countries reinforce their commitment to a unified position on North Korea;
2. Establish an interagency task force to identify areas of weakness and strength in the alliance and to offer concrete recommendations for establishing a new and positive relationship;
3. Use vigorous public diplomacy efforts to combat anti-American rhetoric in South Korea; and
4. Encourage greater bilateral exchanges at the congressional level.

The U.S.-ROK alliance has been a crucial cornerstone of stability and security in Northeast Asia for the past half century and will continue to play this critical role in the future-but only if both countries can narrow the gap between American and South Korean mindsets. Reaffirming this important and successful alliance will be essential to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue and achieving a permanent peace on the Korean peninsula.

From "Going Together" to a Gap in Views Much in the U.S.-South Korea relationship remains strong and positive. The alliance was formalized in 1953 by the Mutual Defense Treaty. The motto "Let's Go Together," a phrase drawn from the text of the treaty, handily captures the closeness and

cooperation that have characterized the relationship for the past 50 years. Indeed, America sacrificed over 37,000 servicemen during the Korean War, and the ROK quickly answered the U.S. request for assistance in the Vietnam War by sending more than 50,000 troops, which suffered over 4,400 casualties.

Today, the United States remains strongly committed to the defense of the ROK, as manifested by the continued presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula. South Korea, for its part, remains a staunch supporter of the United States, as demonstrated by its deployment of 3,600 troops to Iraq, making South Korea the second largest coalition partner in Iraq. The leaders of both countries have also pledged to work together and with other countries in the region to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem diplomatically.

Beyond the mechanics of the alliance and the shared tragedy of war and bloodshed, America and South Korea have intertwined their relationship through economic, political, and social bonds. Bilateral trade between the two countries surpassed \$56 billion in 2003. Ever since 1962, the United States has invested nearly \$27 billion in South Korea, with nearly \$4.5 billion invested in 2003 alone. South Korea is America's seventh-largest trading partner, and the United States is the ROK's second-largest trading partner. The United States remains the largest export market for South Korea and is the second largest source of imports, with American firms exporting more than \$22.6 billion in goods to South Korea in 2003.

The social and cultural ties between the two countries are also strong. Over 1 million ethnic Koreans now reside in the United States, and over 660,000 South Korean citizens traveled to America in 2003, including 7,000 students. South Korea sends more students to study in the United States than any country except China. In the same year, more than 530,000 American citizens visited South Korea, with some 50,000 American civilians considering it their home.

Politically, South Koreans and Americans share more common values today than ever before in the half century of formal relations. Ever since the political turmoil of the 1980s, South Korea has become one of the most vibrant democracies in East Asia. South Korean civil society has experienced tremendous growth, and its citizenry shares the American values of respect for the democratic process, the rule of law, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and religious freedom.

However, despite the success of the formal alliance relationship and close economic and social ties, the bilateral relationship has suffered in recent years with increased problems of perception on both sides of the Pacific. Many Americans have become increasingly concerned about flare-ups of anti-American sentiment, including mass demonstrations against the United States staged in late 2002 to protest the death of two schoolgirls in a traffic accident involving U.S. military personnel.[ [1](#) ] More disturbing are the less overt signs that South Korean attitudes toward America have shifted. For example, recent public opinion surveys reveal that more South Koreans see the United States as a greater threat to their security than North Korea.[ [2](#) ]

Today, the feeling of trust between the United States and South Korea that for decades has been taken for granted is eroding. The formal alliance relationship, which is critical to the security interests of both countries, may also be in jeopardy.

Sources of the Gap Several factors have contributed to this divergence of views. One important factor is that South Korea has undergone a profound political, economic, and social transformation during the past two decades. Two decades ago South Korea was an authoritarian country. Today it is one of the most vibrant and thriving democracies in East Asia, with a vigorous civil society and freedom of expression, fueled in part by the explosive use of the Internet.

South Korea's economy has rapidly grown from one of the poorest in the region at the end of the Korean War to a regional powerhouse and the 12th largest economy in the world. Today, South Korean society is dominated by the younger generation- in both number and influence-who are struggling to adjust to the immense challenges that accompany such changes. These include reconciling national pride and achievements with lingering feelings of inadequacy and dependency stemming from its recent bitter history as a Japanese colony, which was followed by division and war. Regrettably, such "growing pains" are often manifested in nationalistic rhetoric, which is often couched in anti-American expressions.

At the same time, changes have also occurred in the United States. The events of September 11, 2001, changed not only the strategic orientation of the United States, but also the attitudes of the American people. After 9/11, America-both its government and its people-is less inclined to tolerate anti-American sentiments and is less patient with and accommodating of allies that hesitate to support the United States in endeavors that serve their mutual interests.

North Korea Contributing to the growing gap between the United States and South Korea are their fundamentally altered and divergent views of North Korea. From the U.S. perspective, North Korea remains an imposing threat because of the regime's military strength, illicit pursuit of nuclear weapons, "military first" policy at the cost of mass starvation of its citizens, proliferation of arms and missiles, record of state-sponsored terrorism, continued hostile military stance toward South Korea and other neighbors such as Japan, and its continued widespread violations of the human rights of its own people.

Yet from South Korea's perspective, the North Korean threat has less to do with its strength as a regime than its weakness. Today, South Koreans fear a North Korean collapse more than an attack, because a collapse would unleash social, political, and economic chaos that would impose unacceptable costs.

Regrettably, because of this widespread perception gap, some South Koreans have chosen to accept at face value the North Korean propaganda that the United States is an obstacle to reconciliation and reunification. Many South Koreans seem to blame President Bush's principled stance against North Korea for slow progress in inter-Korean rapprochement and the break in dialogue with Pyongyang-even though North Korea is solely responsible for creating a nuclear crisis in the region. This perception was further reinforced when President Bush named North Korea a part of "the axis of evil."

Bridging the Gap. In actuality, the U.S.-ROK alliance and bilateral relations are in better shape than superficial perceptions may suggest. Today, the two allies have more in common than ever before during their 50-year relationship, including shared values of democracy, open markets, free trade, and respect for the rule of law. Person-to-person contacts at all levels of society are increasing, as are economic interactions between the two countries.

Nevertheless, perceptions matter in foreign policy, and both Washington and Seoul should pay heed to the changing environments in both countries. Various components of the leadership in both countries have been making concerted efforts to adjust the formal details of the alliance to reinvigorate the relationship and improve its efficiency.

For example, as part of the Department of Defense's Global Posture Review, the Pentagon and the ROK Defense Ministry have been discussing the future of the alliance with the object of implementing needed changes to the U.S. force structure on the Korean peninsula. As part of the plan to increase the efficiency and efficacy of the alliance and the U.S. defense commitment, they have agreed to a gradual drawdown and repositioning of U.S. forces on the peninsula.

While both governments wholeheartedly agree on the positive benefits of restructuring, public misperception, particularly among South Koreans, has undermined these efforts. Restructuring has been falsely characterized as a unilateral move by Washington, indicating either a reduction of U.S. commitment or preparation for a sudden attack on North Korea. In reality, such changes to the alliance structure actually strengthen the American commitment to the ROK's defense, as evidenced by the U.S. pledge of \$11 billion over the next 10 years for joint development of the ROK military.

Regrettably, such misperceptions undermine the strength of the alliance, just when full cooperation and a combined show of strength are critical to resolving the North Korean nuclear problem peacefully. Although some critics argue that Washington should postpone-if not abandon-efforts to restructure the alliance during this particularly tense time with North Korea, the uncertainties caused by North Korea make improving the alliance even more urgent. Moreover, given the perennial nature of the North Korean threat, there may never be a good time-much less a better time- for restructuring.

Both Washington and Seoul must focus on bridging the gap in public attitudes toward the future of the alliance. The alliance has served the interests of both countries for the past half century and will continue to do so in the future if current misgivings are overcome. President Roh and the South Korean leadership should reassess their priorities and-given how much South Korean and regional security depends on the alliance-make every effort to lead their country toward a positive and enthusiastic embrace of the relationship. President Bush and his Administration should work toward understanding the immense changes that have occurred in South Korea and exhibit greater sensitivity to South Korean concerns. Both sides need to commit to improving dialogue and communication across all levels of the government and society if the alliance is to thrive and prosper.

What Should Be Done As President Bush begins his second term, he should focus on narrowing the gap in public opinions regarding the importance and centrality of the alliance by:

Inviting President Roh to the White House for a summit as early as possible. The purpose of the summit should be to reaffirm clearly and unequivocally that the alliance will remain one of the most important pillars of stability and security on the Korean peninsula and in the region. President Bush should also seek an equivalent endorsement from President Roh. This message is crucial for establishing the tone of the relationship in the next four years, and it would send a strong signal to North Korea that its efforts to undermine the alliance as part of its nuclear brinkmanship will be futile.

Ensuring that the leadership in both countries endeavor to reinforce this commitment by agreeing on a unified position. At the diplomatic level, both sides insist that the bilateral relationship remains strong and united. Yet, at home, political leaders in Seoul and Washington sometimes express contrary and negative opinions to their domestic constituencies, fueling dangerous misperceptions among the public. Presidents Bush and Roh should work with their principal advisors in relevant agencies to strive for uniformity of message. They should also seek a mutual commitment that rhetoric will not be used to serve domestic political goals. Kim Jong Il and his regime have likely gained great sustenance from the mixed messages emanating from Washington and Seoul.

Establishing an interagency task force to identify areas of weakness and strength in the bilateral relationship. This task force should offer concrete recommendations for establishing a new and positive dynamic. The ROK government should be encouraged to establish a similar task force. These task forces should involve officials from all of the major agencies in both countries that address issues on the Korean peninsula. The U.S. task force should include the Department of Defense, the Department of State, the National Security Council, the Department of Commerce, and

the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative. The two task forces should then meet together regularly to share their findings.

Combating anti-American rhetoric in South Korea through vigorous public diplomacy outreach efforts. Anti-Americanism in South Korea is easily misunderstood in the United States, but nevertheless poses serious impediments to the future of the alliance. Both countries must commit concerted attention and resources to public diplomacy efforts to educate the South Korean public to correct insidious misperceptions about American motives and policies. Such efforts should include the following:

- The U.S. embassy should increase U.S. participation in Korean Internet sites, which are a primary source of information for South Korean citizens. Christopher Hill, the new U.S. Ambassador to the ROK, has already spearheaded such an effort, but the State Department needs to be committed to providing the financial support to expand these efforts.
- U.S. government officials should be more active and visible in engaging in dialogue- particularly with the younger generation- through lectures and forums conducted at universities throughout South Korea. The State Department should also invite non-governmental experts on U.S.-South Korea relations to South Korea for regular visits, particularly at universities. The State Department should also consider expanding the U.S. Information Agency's presence and activities throughout South Korea.
- The ROK government should be encouraged to establish an international visitor's program that will invite American experts on U.S.- South Korea relations to come to Korea to participate in public forums.
- The U.S. embassy in Seoul should be more vigilant in monitoring the South Korean media, particularly Internet outlets, in order to respond to and refute misinformation and misrepresentation of the United States and its policies.
- The U.S. government should seek the ROK government's commitment to correct inaccurate information about the United States and monitor its own behavior that may be contributing to negative attitudes about America.

Urging Seoul to finalize agreements with Washington as quickly as possible about opening a new U.S. embassy facility in Seoul. Controversy about providing the grounds for a much-needed new U.S. embassy has caused unnecessary friction in the bilateral relations in recent years. Seoul is deserving of a U.S. representative office equal to those already present in Beijing and Tokyo.

Recommending that the State Department prioritize granting visa waiver status to South Korea. Currently, the United States has visa waiver agreements with 27 countries, but has yet to grant the same status to South Korea because policy requires that a country have a visa denial rate of 3 percent or lower to qualify. However, lack of a visa waiver agreement has greatly contributed to strong negative attitudes toward the U.S. government and sends the wrong message to a U.S. ally that its citizens are unwelcome in America. Granting this status to South Korea would go far in improving American public diplomacy with South Korean citizens.

Encouraging greater bilateral exchanges at the congressional level. Several formal organizations already exist within the U.S. Congress to promote bilateral exchanges, including the Korea-U.S. Exchange Council (KORUSEC), the Korea Caucus, and the U.S.-ROK Interparliamentary Exchange. They should be encouraged to expand their activities to include vigorous and more frequent dialogue with their counterparts in the ROK National Assembly, including establishing study groups on specific topics of mutual interest. Furthermore, study groups should be established at the

congressional staff levels in both countries to target issues of mutual concern and cooperation.

**Conclusion** The United States has much to gain from maintaining its formal alliance with the Republic of Korea, as well as the broader bilateral relationship. However, to do so, both sides must work to overcome the serious gap in public perception that has emerged in recent years. Both sides should endeavor for genuine communication and mutual understanding that immense changes have occurred on both sides of the Pacific. Reinforcing relations will serve the national interests of both countries. Establishing a new and positive tone between the two alliance partners at the outset should be an important priority for the Bush Administration as it faces what could be its thorniest foreign policy challenge of the next four years- resolving the North Korean nuclear issue.

Notes:

[1] For further details, see Balbina Y. Hwang, "Defusing Anti-American Rhetoric in South Korea," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 1619, January 23, 2003, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/bg1619.cfm> .

[2] "U.S. More Dangerous Than North Korea," Chosun Daily, January 12, 2004. See also Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, "Comparing South Korean and American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy," in Global Views 2004 (Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, 2004), at <http://www.c CFR.org/globalviews2004/sub/usakor.htm> (December 13, 2004), and William Watts, "Next Generation Leaders in the Republic of Korea: Opinion Survey Report and Analysis," April 2002, at [www.keia.com/William%20Watts.doc](http://www.keia.com/William%20Watts.doc) (December 13, 2004).

### **III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses**

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