Policy Forum 02-01A: Avoiding War on the Korean Peninsula

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Avoiding War on the Korean Peninsula

By Peter M. Beck

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I. Introduction

The following article was contributed by Peter M. Beck, Director of Research at the Korea Economic Institute of America. Beck argues that the Bush administration's current campaign against North Korea has more to do with political convenience than it does with combating terrorism. Consequently, Beck asserts that if the Bush administration has decided to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution, then it is ultimately up to the North and the South to determine the fate of the Korean Peninsula.

The views expressed are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect the views of KEI.

(This article originally appeared as a column in the South Korean Newspaper Dong-a Ilbo on February 14, 2002)

II. Essay by Peter M. Beck

"Avoiding War on the Korean Peninsula "
by Peter M. Beck, Director of Research, Korea Economic Institute of America

The rhetoric coming out of Washington since President Bush gave his State of the Union speech two weeks ago signals that the Bush team has decided to adopt a hardline policy toward North Korea. With less than a week before President Bush visits Seoul, there are growing fears that the summit could prove to be a diplomatic disaster.

It is increasingly clear that the coalition-building Washington led after 9/11 in the war against terrorism was just a charade. Cowboy unilateralism to rid the world of evil (now being called the "Bush Doctrine") is alive and well. But why did Bush single out North Korea as the first member of the "axis of evil" while at the same time fail to mention the U.S. allies under greatest threat from North Korea, namely South Korea and Japan? The Korean Peninsula rarely captures Washington's attention, except when the peninsula can serve some ulterior motive. More than 10 years ago, Secretary Colin Powell, then serving Bush Sr. and currently the lone moderate in the Bush Jr. Administration, announced that the United States was running out of enemies after the fall of the Soviet Union, but fortunately, we still had Iraq and North Korea. North Korea is one of the few countries both conservatives and liberals can all agree on to vilify. If North Korea did not exist, the hawks in Washington would have to create one.

How else can the Bush Administration justify a $250 billion missile defense system that does not work, nor would defend the United States from the kind of attack launched on September 11, even if it did work? Threatening North Korea also diverts attention from domestic scandals and international setbacks. In his January 29 speech, Bush failed to mention America's own Daewoo debacle, Enron, which touches the highest levels in the White House. In Afghanistan, not only are "evil-doers" numbers one and two (Osama Bin Laden and Mullah Omar) still at large, but Nogun-r--style killings of innocents are becoming a disturbingly frequent occurrence. North Korea also helps make it appear that the Bush Administration is not at war with the Islamic world.

The Bush Administration's efforts to capture "evil-doers" and bring them back "dead or alive" as well as wipe out an imaginary "axis of evil" would be laughable if the consequences for the Korean Peninsula were not so deadly serious. The term is reminiscent of President Reagan's "evil empire" description of the Soviet Union, but Reagan never threatened the Soviets with a preemptive strike the way Bush is threatening North Korea. Given that the North has been on its best behavior since 9/11, it is as if the Bush Administration is looking to pick a fight with the North. South Korea's big

brother, the United States, now seems ready to be the big bully. It is easy for Washington's hawks to contemplate first strikes against North Korea on real or imagined targets (Kumchang-ri proved to be a hole in the ground) because they are unlikely to have any family members that could suffer the consequences, but does the Bush team really want war? At this point, Iraq is next in line, with war at least months away. One of the few things worse than issuing a threat to North Korea is issuing an empty threat because the North could force the United States to take steps it is not prepared to take. The Administration claims that it is still willing to meet with North Korea "anytime, anywhere" but almost no one in Washington believes that.

Koreans have good reason to worry that Bush's hardline approach could lead to a conflict spiral with North Korea. If you force a well-armed country into a corner, it will lash out. Since 1994, North Korea has learned that the benefits of engagement outweigh the cost of confrontation. The 1994 Agreed Framework, the cornerstone of North Korea's engagement with the outside world, is under threat in Washington like never before. This is despite the fact that the North has upheld its end of the bargain. Members of Congress are ready to urge Bush to walk away from the framework, leaving South Koreans to hold the bag after hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent. If this carrot is taken away, Washington and Seoul will have to prepare to use their remaining sticks. At the very least, rising tensions could threaten South Korea's fragile economic recovery and scare away badly needed foreign investors.

Expectations could not be lower for the upcoming summit between Presidents Bush and Kim. At this point, President Kim is just trying to avoid the kind of embarrassment he suffered during the first summit last March. At the time, I thought the two leaders would just smile and exchange pleasantries while Bush assembled his foreign policy team, but instead, as the Council on Foreign Relations' Korea Task Force leaders recently put it, Bush decided to stab Kim Dae-jung in the back. Will Bush stick to the script being prepared by the State Department? Given that the White House ignored the State Department's advice in preparing the State of the Union address, anything is possible, especially if Bush speaks off the cuff. Bush faces the delicate task of remaining faithful to his administration's hardline policy while at the same time at least pretending to show support for his South Korean ally.

The Sunshine Policy has become increasingly unpopular in Seoul as a result of the North's failure to respond to the Kim Administration's overtures and perceived largesse. Yet, does anyone want to return to the days of 1993 when tensions with North Korea came close to reaching the boiling point? The Bush Administration is now presenting an alternative that no Korean should want. Sunshine may not be working, but the Bush alternative is downright dangerous. It is time to find an approach that all Koreans can support. The government should use Washington's shift to the hard right as an opportunity to forge a new consensus with the South Korean people on dealing with North Korea, one that is less top-down and more transparent. If Washington has decided to be part of the problem rather than part of the solution, then it is up to Koreans to find a solution on their own.

Ultimately, peace and reconciliation will depend on North Korea. The North has already seen its window of opportunity with the Clinton Administration slam shut on it its fingers, proving once again that the North can be its own worst enemy. Rather than giving Washington a lesson in name-calling and brinkmanship, the North should seize the opportunity to accept the hand of friendship being offered by the South, as it did in 1991 and 2000. The United States had little to do with either breakthrough. Ultimately, Seoul and Pyongyang will determine the fate of the Korean Peninsula.

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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