

Policy Forum 01-02G: Bush Should Listen To A Korean Elder Statesman

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Bush Should Listen To A Korean Elder Statesman

By Aidan Foster-Carter

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I. Introduction

This essay is by Aidan Foster-Carter, honorary senior research fellow in sociology and modern Korea at Leeds University, England. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune. This is the seventh in a series on the future of US relations with Northeast Asian countries under the administration of incoming US President George W. Bush.

Foster-Carter argues that to say the ROK-Russia joint statement on the 1972 Anti-Missile Defense Treaty is evidence of the ROK taking Russia's side in the missile defense debate twists the meaning of their statement. Rather, he argues, the US should take notice when such a pro-US leader does make such statements as a sign of how far from the global consensus the US is on missile defense.

II. Essay by Aidan Foster-Carter

"Bush Should Listen To A Korean Elder Statesman"

By Aidan Foster-Carter

On March 6, South Korean president Kim Dae Jung arrives in Washington for his first meeting with George W Bush. Ever an active summiteer, Mr Kim comes hot foot from hosting Russian president Vladimir Putin in Seoul - and trailing twisted headlines, from some unlikely quarters, that he could well do without.

"South Korea Takes Russia's Side in Dispute Over U.S. Missile Defense Plan". Thus the New York Times on February 28. "Moscow Finds an Unlikely Ally in Seoul", echoed the International Herald Tribune. Alarmist talk indeed, complete with digs at an ally "protected [by] 37,000 American troops" for daring to be so disloyal.

So what was all the fuss about? Simply a post-summit communique, in which the two leaders reaffirmed their commitment to international law. Specifically, they called the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABMT) a "cornerstone of strategic stability". They also urged full ratification and implementation of the Start II and III treaties.

These views are a consensus shared by almost every country on earth. Talk of taking "sides" is absurd. If Hitler ate no meat, does that mean vegetarians take Hitler's side? Dualist distortions (for or against us?) are no way to frame serious discussion of vital issues. Such egocentrism dismays America's friends. It suggests a bully, not an ally.

Rather, we should sit up and listen when the most pro-American leader ever in one of the United States' closest allies sends a signal like this. Kim Dae Jung is worried, and with reason. Just when his historic peace process with North Korea (rightly rewarded by a Nobel prize) is already reducing risk in one of the world's most dangerous spots, he sees this jeopardized by a gung-ho new US administration: riding roughshod over allies and tearing up treaties, in bizarre pursuit of a chimerical missile defense that no one else anywhere really believes is the way to go - and which doesn't even work.

This is not the place to rehearse the arguments for and against NMD. But Americans, especially conservatives, really must grasp just how far their idea of common sense on this issue - as on others, like capital punishment and gun control - is at variance with the civilized global consensus. Even misguided toadies like my own prime minister, Tony Blair, only pretend to believe in NMD because they are afraid to step out of line.

Thankfully Kim Dae Jung has more sense, and courage. South Korea's leader is also a skilled politician, who used his four year US exile in the 1980s to form useful ties - not least to the Heritage Foundation, which has helped to shape the Bush agenda.

And in an age of plastic politicians made by the media, Mr Kim is the genuine article: a wise elder statesman, with real beliefs he has suffered for, and an agenda driven by more than sound bites. A fighter for democracy and free markets, he deserves better than to be smeared as Moscow's man by so-called liberal newspapers. Back home he is making peace and making history: a delicate task which his key ally should support, not put at risk. Just for once, Mr Bush and his people should listen - and listen good.

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