


Policy Forum 02-24A: Response to Alexandre Mansourov's essay "North Korea Goes Nuclear, Washington Readies for War, South Korea Holds Key" posted on NAPSNet of December 9, 2002.

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by Timothy Savage

CONTENTS

[I. Comments On Alexandre Mansourov's Essay by Timothy Savage](#)

[II. Nautilus Invites Your Responses](#)

I. Comments On Alexandre Mansourov's Essay

Response to "North Korea Goes Nuclear, Washington Readies for War, South Korea Holds Key"

By Timothy Savage

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Dr. Mansourov's evaluation of the situation surrounding North Korea's nuclear is quite insightful. In particular, he is correct in arguing that South Korea holds the key to any chance of war on the Korean Peninsula. The United States simply cannot go forth unilaterally with an attack against North Korea without South Korean acquiescence, a point often lost in debates here in Seoul, where the myth of American omnipotence is perhaps stronger even than in Washington.

The upcoming presidential election will certainly have major ramifications on the future of US-ROK relations. The timing of the acquittal of the two American soldiers has bolstered the chances of Roh Moo-Hyun, who reportedly is still leading in the polls, although poll results cannot be released during the final three weeks before the election. Turnout factors may favor Lee, however. The near absence of absentee voting procedures in South Korea requires voters to return to their home districts to cast their ballots, a task that is difficult for students preparing for exams, but possible for well-off middle aged businessmen living abroad. Given that polls consistently show a strong preference for Roh among younger voters and an equally strong Lee advantage among older people, the returning voter phenomenon could heavily favor Lee, and would not be reflected in the polls. The election is likely to be quite close.

With a relatively robust economy and the general lack of scandal that has plagued previous ROK elections, the questions of North Korean policy and relations with the U.S. have emerged as key issues in the presidential campaigns. Nonetheless, it would be overly simplistic to paint the election as a contest between the pro-U.S. Lee and the anti-U.S. Roh. Both candidates, predictably, have been moving to the middle in recent days, with Lee trying to blunt Roh's advantage by promising changes in the U.S.-ROK relationship, while Roh promises continued support for U.S. troop presence to counter accusations that his presidency would be destabilizing.

Certainly, if Lee is elected, Washington would find greater support for a policy of "malign neglect": isolating North Korea in the hopes of inducing its collapse. I think it would be a mistake, however, to

think that a Lee administration would go as far as to back the U.S. in the use of military action. The idea that the "revolution in military affairs" will somehow negate North Korea's ability to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" may have great resonance within the Washington think tanks, but it provides little comfort on the Korean street. South Korean citizens enjoying unparalleled quality of life are not going to want to risk all that to force regime change on their impoverished Northern brethren. No South Korean president is going to want to preside over a war, least of all one seen as imposed by U.S. foreign policy.

The challenge for the next ROK president, be he Roh or Lee, will be to try to repair US-ROK relations--currently at their lowest point since the Carter administration--while not being seen as a stooge for U.S. interests. But in the long run, the current troubles may foreshadow a historical divergence of interests in the five-decade old alliance. This is indeed a critical election.

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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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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