

Policy Forum 03-09A: ROK-DPRK Engagement and US- ROK Alliance: Trade-off or Complementary



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By Chung-in Moon

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I. Introduction

The following paper is by Chung-in Moon. Moon outlines several cooperative schemes to aid the ROK and US in coping with North Korean uncertainty. Concurrently, they also serve as confidence building measures between the ROK and US. Chung-in Moon is professor of political science at Yonsei University and vice president of the International Studies Association (ISA) in North America. This paper was presented at the US-DPRK Next Steps Workshop, organized by Nautilus and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 27, 2003, Washington, D.C.

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II. Essay by Chung-in Moon

"ROK-DPRK Engagement and US-ROK Alliance: Trade-off or Complementary"

by Chung-in Moon

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"The current structure of confrontation on the Korean peninsula is between Korean peoples of North and South and the United States.... We should counter American imperialists' irrational and conspiratorial war maneuver with unified forces of the Korean people."

- New Year Joint Editorial, Nodong Shinmun

"In his quest to win election, Mr. Roh suggested that South Korea may stay on the sidelines if war broke out between the United States and North Korea.... We will not stay where we are not wanted."

- Richard Allen

"The big problem we have today is with South Korea. They got this left-wing president in who wants to mediate between the U.S. and North Korea... What I think we ought to do, let them deal with the North Koreans. They think they can. Let's pull those troops out."

- Robert Novak

The year 2003 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the ROK-US alliance. The joy and celebration of the gold anniversary are turning into suspicion, distrust, and even anger. Let's admit that were it not for American blood and the alliance of fifty years, today's tranquility, security, and prosperity in South Korea could have not been conceivable. Despite the pivotal contributions of the ROK-US alliance and American forces in South Korea, the alliance of fifty year is in jeopardy.

The core of bilateral friction lies in perceived trade-off between inter-Korean engagement and the ROK-US alliance in dealing with the North Korean nuclear fiasco. The North Korean nuclear problem has been deteriorating from bad to worse as the North undertook a series of brinkmanship measures by unsealing the frozen Yongbyon nuclear facilities, expelling IAEA inspectors, and withdrawing from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). President-elect Roh Moo-hyun has joined the Kim Dae-jung government in calling for the peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis through

dialogue. But such a stance, coupled with soaring anti-American sentiments in South Korea, has heightened concerns in the U.S., particularly among its conservatives. Some have even advocated a new doctrine of "abandon Korea", by contending that Seoul has seriously breached its ties with Washington by getting into the 'neutral zone' and even siding with the North. They go so far as to demand that South Korea should choose between the U.S. and North Korea. Indeed, the North Korean nuclear crisis has precipitated the unintended (or perhaps intended for Pyongyang) consequence of a strained ROK-US alliance at its fiftieth anniversary.

However, these concerns are over simplified and grossly misleading. South Korea is with the U.S. President-elect Roh has made himself clear on the North Korean nuclear issue by declaring three cardinal principles: absolute non-tolerance of a nuclear North Korea, no war on the Korean peninsula, and negotiated settlement through dialogue and peaceful means. He firmly believes that the emergence of a nuclear North Korea is not compatible with his ideal of peaceful co-existence on the Korean peninsula, precisely because of its formidable threat to the South. He is equally well aware of its nightmarish implications for regional nuclear arms races. Neither a nuclear Japan nor a regional nuclear arms race can be tolerated. However, Roh would not accept any military actions in coping with the North Korean nuclear issue because of the anticipation of the inevitable massive collateral damage to the South. Given the structure of the military confrontation along the DMZ, even a minor surgical strike would escalate into a full-scale war, jeopardizing peace and prosperity on the entire Korean peninsula. Estimates of war casualties up to over half million at the beginning stage of a full scale war, as presented by William Perry and Ashton Carter, are well ingrained in his mind. For him, a negotiated settlement through dialogue and peaceful means is the only viable and desirable path. Roh calls for prudence and patience, open and candid cooperation, coordination between Seoul and Washington, and the flexible utilization of multilateral cooperation in resolving the current standoff.

In light of the above, no profound divergences can be detected between the ROK and the U.S. They converge not only in the goal of preventing 'a nuclear North Korea,' but also in operational modes of dealing with North Korea. New leadership in South Korea has now realized that being a party directly involved in the North Korean nuclear problem, South Korea cannot play a third-party mediator's role and that South Korea should work closely with the U.S. That is why Roh issued immediately after his election to the presidency, the statement that North Korea should not try to undercut ROK-US ties in the name of inter-Korean cooperation (minjok gongjo). He is a prudent pragmatist. What matters for him is the resolution of the problem, not who gets credit for it. He supports whatever routes, be they through the US, ROK, Japan, China, Russia, the UN, or any other forms of multilateral cooperation, as long as they resolve the current crisis. He favors proactive and positive role for Seoul because its survival is at stake, but does not necessarily require its leadership or initiative.

President-elect Roh is not 'a left-wing anti-American.' It is true that he has made some anti-American rhetoric in the past and that he has called for a more balanced and constructive relationship between South Korea and the U.S. But it is unfair to label him anti-American. His leadership role model is Abraham Lincoln, about whom he once wrote a biography in Korean. He appreciates the American values of liberty, democracy, unity, and human rights. He also understands well the vital contributions of American forces in South Korea in securing military deterrence on the Korean peninsula, assuring strategic balance in Northeast Asia, and preventing the instability and uncertainty which would follow from US disengagement. Such a stance has been evidenced through Roh's plea, "North Korea nuclear first, SOFA later," his efforts to defuse anti-American sentiments, and his repeated emphasis on the importance of the ROK-US alliance in the past and present, as well as in the future. Thus, the new leadership should not be automatically equated with an anti-American stance or with new tension and discord between Seoul and Washington.

However, there is cause for some concern on the growing gap between the ROK and the U.S. American handling of the North Korean nuclear crisis in 1993-1994, which deliberated on military actions without due consultation with South Korea, has renewed anxiety and fear of Seoul's incumbent and newly elected leadership over potential U.S. unilateral military actions. There are also divergent views on the perception of the urgency in dealing with North Korea's HEU program and on the ways in which it has been managed in the immediate past. There are those in Seoul who believe that a more prudent handling by Washington, through close consultation and cooperation with South Korea and Japan, could have brought about different results without necessarily going through a vicious circle of accusation, brinkmanship, and standoff. Such rhetoric as the axis of evil, win-win strategy, and tailored containment have equally provoked serious concerns in South Korea. More importantly, there seems to be a growing gap in trust between the leadership of the two countries.

What then should be the desirable pattern of ROK-US cooperation? It depends by and large on how North Korea behaves. If North Korea shows a cooperative behavior by restoring freeze on the Yongbyon facilities, giving up its HEU program through inspection, verification, and dismantling, and returning to the NPT regime, there will not be any conflicts between the US and South Korea. However, frictions could arise under the two circumstances. One is that North Korea seeks the nuclear option, defying international pressures. The other is much worse scenario in which North Korea attempts to pursue both dialogue and nuclear bombs. Both developments should be prevented. In so doing, the ROK and the U.S. should work together very closely. I would like to suggest the following cooperative schemes in coping with such developments.

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First

, there must be a renewed understanding and trust between the two countries. Both should understand the domestic political changes occurring in each respective country. The U.S. in the post-September 11 era is not the same U.S. we used to know. South Korea has also undergone profound changes, and the outcome of the December presidential election is the most vivid testimonial to them. It might be difficult for Seoul and Washington to forge a new consensus without understanding mutual changes. More important is a shared understanding that a firm and unmistakable cooperation between Seoul and Washington is the surest way to ensure the resolution of the current standoff. Rupture between the two will further complicate the situation, yielding to negative sum outcomes. In this regard, close consultation and consensus-building between the two seems to be the most critical virtue. I hope that the forthcoming summit between Bush and Roh will make a fresh new start in that direction.

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Second

, there must be a better institutional mechanism for ROK-Japan-US trilateral coordination and cooperation. The existing TCOG mechanism has been a valuable mechanism in coping with the North Korean problem. But it should be further strengthened in order to enhance a more effective trilateral policy coordination. In this regard, upgrading the TCOG to a higher level (e.g., ministerial level) could be deliberated on.

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Third

, there must be close bilateral cooperation and coordination on the formulation of a joint strategy between Seoul and Washington. In so doing, attention should be paid to a more comprehensive strategy that can bring about a fundamental solution to the North Korea's past, present, and future nuclear problem. In addition to the resolution of the future (HEU) nuclear problem through inspection, verification, and dismantling and the present one through the restoration of the Yongbyon facilities and compliance with international nuclear regimes, the past nuclear problem (one or two nuclear bombs) should also be raised and resolved. Otherwise, suspicion of the unresolved past nuclear issue will make the current nuclear fiasco a recurring pattern. In return, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan should construct a clearer road map involving step-by-step incentives and disincentives to the North. North Korea's cooperation on inspection, verification, and dismantling should be rewarded with the resumption of the supply of heavy oil, a permanent solution to North Korea's energy shortage, economic assistance and cooperation including the lifting of North Korea from the list of terrorist sponsoring states, the assurance of North Korea's regime and national survival, either through a joint-communiqué on non-hostile intent, mutual respect, and non-interference with domestic affairs, or a non-aggression treaty, and ultimately diplomatic normalization. This can be done either within the Geneva Agreed Framework or through a new comprehensive agreement which would be guaranteed by third parties such as the United Nations or China, Japan, and Russia.

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Fourth

, the ROK and the U.S. should formulate common indicators on what would constitute the red line (e.g., reactivation of graphite-moderated reactors and reprocessing) and what punitive actions should be undertaken jointly. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that in dealing with the North, positive re-enforcement is always better than negative re-enforcement. Cooperation begets cooperation, while denial begets denial. For this reason, North Korea should be given a chance for dialogue and negotiation before it is contained and sanctioned. It is my observation that the new leadership in South Korea will be more than willing to cooperate with the U.S. in sanctioning the North when and if North Korea continues to show non-cooperative, deceptive, and erratic behavior. By then, North Korea must choose between the nuclear option and economic survival.

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Fifth

, there should be a more flexible and multi-layer approach to the problem. All venues should be explored, regardless of bilateral, tri-lateral, and multilateral approach. Given the clash of approaches between North Korea's preference for direct deals with the U.S. and Washington's preference for multilateral deal on the North, proactive, all directional approach must be pursued as an alternative option.

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Finally

, there should be a firm shared understanding that the North Korean nuclear problem should be

resolved through dialogue and peaceful means. Closer cooperation and coordination between the two direct parties, namely Seoul and Washington, will be able to make a major breakthrough for negotiated settlement of the North Korean nuclear crisis.

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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