

Policy Forum 05-47A: Same Bed, Different Nightmares: Diverging U.S. and South Korean Views of North Korea

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By L. Gordon Flake

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I. Introduction

L. Gordon Flake, Executive Director of the Mansfield Foundation, writes: "The U.S.-ROK alliance, however, was built on the foundation of a common nightmare, the threat from North Korea. How the two nations address that nightmare, and how the current crisis on the Peninsula is resolved, will ultimately determine what dreams Korea and the United States will share in the future."

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II. Essay by U.S. Representative L. Gordon Flake

- Same Bed, Different Nightmares: Diverging U.S. and South Korean Views of North Korea
by L. Gordon Flake

While the U.S.-Japan alliance has long been characterized as the United States' most important bilateral relationship in Asia, in reality, for most of the past few decades, it has been the U.S.-ROK alliance that has been rightly considered as the United States' closest or "best" bilateral relationship. The U.S.-ROK alliance was begun in the fires of war and strengthened by a common nightmare, the threat from North Korea. As the Cold War ended elsewhere in the world and as South Korea grew increasingly strong and confident, the focus of the U.S.-ROK relationship expanded into the area of shared dreams: a commitment to liberal democracy, market economics, the international free trade regime, and the rule of law. As these shared dreams grew, relative emphasis on our shared nightmare naturally declined. With the United States taking the lead in engaging North Korea through the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework, there was a noticeable shift in the relationship away from security issues and toward economic and other issues. That is not to say that security cooperation was weakened, merely that it was relatively de-emphasized.

With the election of the Bush administration and its comparatively distrustful approach to the North, the re-emergence of the North Korea nuclear issue accompanying the collapse of the Geneva Agreed Framework, and perhaps most importantly, a dramatic shift in the U.S. world-view following the events of 9/11, the U.S. focus on the Peninsula has again shifted to what was once a common nightmare. In the process, it has become increasingly apparent that U.S. and South Korean views of North Korea, and more importantly of how North Korea should be approached, are rapidly diverging. Both U.S. and ROK officials routinely insist that the bilateral relationship is as strong as ever and that alarm about the future of the alliance is exaggerated by over-active analysts. While it is true that day-to-day cooperation between the U.S. State Department and the ROK Foreign Ministry, between the Blue House and the White House, and even between the Pentagon and the Ministry of National Defense continues in a professional manner, to ignore the dramatic shifts in perception among the opinion leaders and political class in both Seoul and Washington is sheer folly.

For several years the U.S. media has paid particular attention to what is perceived to be anti-Americanism in Korea. Visiting delegations from Seoul to Washington often feel obliged to dismiss or downplay such reports. While such anti-Americanism is not new and is arguably more policy focused and less sweeping than similar sentiments in the 1980s, its impact has been felt in Washington. It is safe to say that in a post-9/11 world, the United States is increasingly sensitive to and less tolerant of international criticism, particularly from allies. This is of course not unique to Korea but part of the "with us or against us" mentality that has permeated much of the current U.S. administration's world view. It is in this context that a disturbing trend has emerged: the growth of anti-Koreanism in the United States.

The term "anti-Koreanism" may be too strong. It is really more of a growing distrust of, frustration with, and a declining commitment to the relationship. While it is important not to exaggerate such sentiments, neither should they be dismissed as they appear to be growing among analysts and the political community in Washington. Such antipathy appears to be particularly pronounced on Capitol Hill, is rife in the emerging blog community, and is even increasingly voiced in mainstream media reports.

Given the prevalence of such criticisms of ROK policy in the current debate over North Korea in Washington D.C., this analysis focuses on the most common complaints about the Roh administration's approach to Pyongyang. This is not intended to be a balanced comparison of Washington and Seoul's respective policies toward the North. There are certainly a long list of complaints and allegations that could be leveled against the Bush administration by Seoul and by detractors elsewhere. This examination is instead an admittedly one-sided view from Washington of South Korean policy. Also, rather than focus on the range of issues that factor into U.S. perspectives of South Korea ? the debate over Korea's Iraq deployment, South Korean relations with Japan and China, the disposition of U.S. troops on the peninsula, etc. ? this assessment will focus solely on the common nightmare that has long been the foundation of the alliance: ROK policy toward North Korea, and security policy in particular.

One final caveat: the allegations listed here represent perceptions, not necessarily fact. ROK policies or actions might differ in reality, but as with much in politics, it is perception that is the key. While not the result of any formal survey, the following views are widely held among Asia specialists in Washington. There is of course a full spectrum of opinions in Washington, including those far more hostile to Seoul than those listed here. Without claiming a consensus for these views, at a bare minimum they should be considered by Seoul to be representative of a serious number of policy makers and opinion leaders in Washington. Taken individually, each allegation below might be debated and dismissed; taken collectively they illuminate a growing divide in U.S. and ROK perceptions of the North that threatens the U.S.-ROK alliance if not addressed.

1.) South Korea no longer views North Korea as a threat

Americans should have no cause to assume that Koreans are naïve about the potential threats posed by North Korea. After all, South Korea has lived in the shadow of the North Korean threat for over fifty years. Yet as successive South Korean governments have publicly de-emphasized the North Korean threat over the past seven years, polls in South Korea have shown a remarkable decline in perceptions of the North Korean threat. Such views are not unreasonable. As South Korea clearly surpassed the North economically, militarily, and diplomatically, North Korea has naturally ceased to be seen as a competitor. For decades under South Korea's military governments, all images of North Korea were heavily propagandized. As South Korean society democratized and as the press became increasingly free, there is some evidence to suggest that the South Korean public began to dismiss the North Korean military threat as merely part of past propaganda, effectively "throwing the baby out with the bathwater." This effect was accelerated among the younger generation, not only because they had no direct memories of the Korean War and had come of age in relatively prosperous and confident South, but also as a direct result of Korean government policy.

In its original conceptualization, Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" did not require the acceptance or cooperation of North Korea. The traveler in Aesop's fable of the north wind and the sun was not required to acknowledge either the sun or the wind, just to be influenced by their actions over the long term. However, in an effort to obtain short-term political gains from what was fundamentally a long-term policy, President Kim solicited and purchased North Korea's cooperation in his efforts to

"engage." The price he paid for such cooperation was not just financial, but perhaps more significantly the constraint of negative or sensitive statements about the North and a strong emphasis on the positive at the highest levels. While some aspects of this policy have changed under President Roh Mu Hyun, there is still an obvious effort on the part of the Blue House to avoid controversial, sensitive, or damning statements about the North. When coupled with the North-South Summit, visits to the Kumgang Mountains, and smiling North Korean cheerleaders, it is hardly surprising that the common threat perception of the North has declined.

The question then becomes whether or not South Korean perceptions track with reality in relation to actual changes on the ground in North Korea. In this regard, at least until very recently, views of the North Korean threat coming from U.S. military officials have differed little from statements coming from the Korean Ministry of Defense. However, the decision of the Blue House and national level Korean leaders not to publicly voice the same concerns has in effect left the United States hanging out to dry and painted the United States as overly hawkish and aggressive. When coupled with a genuine turn to a more conservative stance under the Bush administration, particularly after 9/11, it is little wonder that Koreans perceive the United States to be more a threat to their national security than North Korea.

While Americans were frustrated by the Kim Dae Jung administration's reluctance to speak frankly and publicly about the North Korean threat, such concern has only grown with the election of President Roh Mu Hyun and the emergence of a group of domestically focused, internationally inexperienced leaders in Korea, some of whom appear to genuinely discount any threat from the North. Of course living in the shadow of a North Korean threat for fifty years means that on some level this threat has had to be incorporated into everyday Korean life. Koreans for the past several generations have had to learn to live with the tyranny of proximity and should not be expected to be alarmist. The stability of South Korea's economy requires such a steady hand. However, in recent years, one might argue that many Koreans have gone from incorporating the North Korean threat to ignoring it. More damning still, a significant part of the Korean political spectrum appears to have moved from ignoring the North Korean threat to denying its existence.

Even presuming that the political leadership in Seoul remains realistic about the threat from the North, the fact that whatever recognition might exist is not articulated publicly will ultimately have consequences. If the time comes that North Korea must indeed be confronted, one might rightly question whether the South Korean public will be prepared to support such policies. After the regular casting of doubt and dispersion on the extent and intent of North Korea's nuclear program, how the Korean public will react to a North Korean nuclear test becomes an unknown factor.

2.) South Korea fears Washington more than Pyongyang

Americans have been shocked by polls coming from Seoul suggesting that Koreans see the United States as a greater threat to Korea's national security than North Korea. Few took comfort when Japan bumped the United States from its perch during the recent dispute over Dokdo. The reaction in Washington to such polls has ranged from feelings of bewilderment to a sense of betrayal. Few of the reports on such South Korean views are nuanced enough to explain that what Koreans fear is not any action against South Korea, but an aggressive U.S. approach that might provoke an unwanted and unthinkable conflict with North Korea.

At first glance, such South Korean concern is understandable. Given President Bush's repeated personal criticism of Kim Jong Il, North Korea's inclusion in an "Axis of Evil" that is now trimmed to two nations, North Korea's inclusion on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terror during a global war

on terror, and the promulgation of the U.S. doctrine of preemptive action, Koreans might justifiably be paranoid. However understandable, such views exaggerate the risk from Washington, and as an ally South Korea might also be expected to have deeper understanding of U.S. interests.

The presumption that the United States would callously provoke a war with North Korea without consideration for the Korean people or for American lives and interests in Korea is almost offensive. Such a presumption does not take into account the shared interests the United States has in avoiding a conflict in Korea. Korea is no longer the country it was in early 1950. It is the world's eleventh largest economy and the United States' seventh largest trade partner. With tens of thousands of Americans living in Korea and with American firms having invested billions of dollars in the Korean economy, to say nothing of the impact on the broader regional economy of Northeast Asia, the United States has every reason to seek a peaceful solution in Korea.

Of deeper concern than public opinion polls are statements from and policies of the Korean government that suggest that the Roh administration perceives the need to blunt or block U.S. pressure on the North. The underlying implication is that South Korea has more to fear from U.S. policy than from the misdeeds of the North. Indeed, blame for North Korea's behavior is commonly placed at the feet of the Americans. In recent months, any suggestion of possible punitive actions from Washington are met, or even pre-empted, by statements from the top in Seoul declaring such pressure unacceptable.

3.) South Korea acts as an advocate for North Korea

One consequence of the concern about the risks of U.S. aggression against the North is that South Korea apparently feels obligated to act as an advocate or a lawyer for North Korea in order to reduce the perceived risk of U.S. action. Statements from Pyongyang are regularly "interpreted" in the most benign possible light by Seoul, doubt is cast upon U.S. intelligence, and South Korean delegations to Washington and even President Roh himself urge understanding of North Korea's situation and perspective. Similarly, South Korean calls for "both" Washington and Pyongyang to exhibit flexibility are seen by some in the United States as moral relativism that calls the very nature of our alliance into question.

4.) South Korea is all carrot and no stick

Yet another possible policy consequence of the South Korean misreading of the risks of U.S. aggression against the North is an apparent unwillingness on South Korea's part to even discuss the possibility of coercive measures, presumably out of a fear that to do so would open the door to U.S. hardliners. South Koreans rightly point out that the Roh administration has not expanded the inter-Korean economic relationship, and even withheld some assistance to the North. Yet, to an American perspective, merely withholding a carrot hardly seems a response commensurate with the seriousness of North Korean moves. The underlying policy difference is that the United States remains convinced that the current crisis cannot be solved by inducements alone, but only by the simultaneous multilateral application of both pressure and inducements, whereas to date, South Korea has eschewed any consideration of pressure as too risky.

5.) South Korea's approach increases the risk of a North

Korean miscalculation

There continue to be a number of observers in both Korea and the United States who persist in viewing North Korea as somehow smarter-by-half than the rest of the world. They see Kim Jong Il as a crafty negotiator who has played a bad hand very well and in so doing stymied the world's sole remaining superpower. More specifically, they see North Korean provocations as carefully calibrated. A cursory review of North Korean decisions over the past decade can also produce a starkly different assessment. Why assume that the output of a closed society with poor resources and poor information flows will somehow produce superior results? Rather than carefully tiptoeing around redlines, North Korea has rushed past nearly every red line set out in the past decade save one, the export of nuclear weapons materials, and has even flirted with that. Likewise, North Korea's handling of the kidnapping issue with Japan, its partial economic reforms of July 2002, and even its approach to South Korea all evidence some level of miscalculation. Not only is North Korea an isolated regime hard-wired for paranoia, but its decisions are often bound more by the particular sensitivities regarding respect for the "dear leader" than by national interest.

Given such a propensity for North Korea to miscalculate one might fairly examine the relationship between ROK policy and North Korean miscalculations. Do statements from the South Korean president that suggest the North Korean pursuit of nuclear weapons is "understandable" deter or encourage the North? What about rifts between Korea and the United States, or more recently Korea and Japan? Do repeated statements that war is not an option actually deter war, or do they convince the North that there will be no consequences for its actions? A strong case can be made that South Korea's advocacy on North Korea's behalf, and in particular its repeated, vocal insistence that coercive measures or force are not an option, might actually increase the likelihood of further North Korean provocations.

6.) South Korea is in denial about North Korea's nuclear program

South Korean officials commonly repeat the mantra that South Korea will not tolerate a nuclear North, but hasten to add that force is not an option and that the issue must be solved peacefully. While the United States shares the desire for a peaceful resolution, the South Korean articulation seems to be internally contradictory. What does it mean when South Korea says nuclear weapons are intolerable, but rush in same breath to confirm that both pressure and force are not options and that the South remains committed to its policy of engagement?

Rather than articulate what it means to not "tolerate" a nuclear North, at each stage of the current crisis South Korean policy makers have sought instead to discredit or ignore developments they didn't like. When North Korea admitted in October of 2002 to James Kelly that it had a highly enriched uranium (HEU) weapons development program, South Korean officials instead focused on ambiguities in definitions contained in subsequent public statements ignoring the clarity of those officials actually in the room about what actually transpired. When, North Korea crossed previous redlines by kicking out International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, restarting reactors, and moving spent fuel rods from the cooling pond at Yongbyun, ROK officials conjured up the most benign possible interpretations. They posited that the DPRK was bluffing, that this was all a tactic designed to get the United States to return to the table. Why else would North Korea pull its trucks up to the spent fuel storage facility in broad daylight when U.S. satellites could monitor them? When later delegations confirmed that the pond at Yongbyun was actually empty, the response from Seoul was of course muted. Another example was the apparent explosion and satellite images of a

mushroom cloud near the Chinese border that garnered international attention last year. Ultimately, the internal reporting gymnastics and contradictory conclusions in South Korea regarding what had happened were far more interesting than the actual event.

Most recently North Korea's February 10 declaration of its nuclear status and its March 31 declaration that seems to suggest that its nuclear status is no longer on the table were interpreted quite differently in Washington and Seoul. Not surprisingly, many in Washington see these statements as an indication that the six-party process is dead while many in Korea persist in the belief that such statements are just a negotiation tactic by North Korea, despite an increasing disparity in North Korea's external and internal rhetoric regarding its nuclear status. There is a growing concern in Washington that North Korea is pursuing a Pakistan-style nuclear breakout scenario. The debate is shifting from whether North Korea will test a nuclear device to when they will test, hence the recent spate of U.S. media reports about possible test preparations. While there have recently been some positive signals, particularly in the form of warnings from the Foreign Ministry, South Korea remains remarkably sanguine about the current crisis.

Ironically there are some in Washington who believe that the nuclear crisis will have to get worse before it can get better. Such a belief is based on the logic that North Korea won't seriously consider abandoning its nuclear ambitions unless it is forced to do so, something that is impossible without active South Korean and Chinese participation in applying pressure to accompany any inducements that might be constructed. As risky as it may be, this line of thinking contends that it may take something of the magnitude of a nuclear test to shock Korea and China into action. However, as an indication of how serious the level of distrust in Washington has become, there is considerable doubt that even a North Korean nuclear test would be sufficient to alter the basic South Korean position.

The Tyranny of Perception

For Koreans reading the perceptions elucidated above, the greatest frustration is likely to be the allegations' arguable inaccuracy, lack of nuance, and failure to account for the unseen and unarticulated elements of South Korean policy. Therein lies what it perhaps the most serious problem facing the alliance today. For decades, the U.S.-Korea relationship was carried on the backs of a group of remarkable, internationalist, and primarily U.S.-educated government officials and opinion leaders. The considerable continuity of this core group of players in Korea contrasted sharply with the generations of U.S. officials who rotated in and out. While there is now a small group of U.S. policy makers and specialists who are deeply committed to the U.S.-Korean relationship, their numbers are relatively few.

With the considerable political tumult in the last few years, most of the "old friends" of the United States are now out of the circles of influence in Korea. The younger and considerably more domestic-focused leaders of the Roh Mu Hyun administration have few established relationships in the United States, and indeed have had little opportunity to develop such ties over past decades. With nearly 80 percent of the National Assembly having served one term or less, the lack of relationships and trust on a legislative level is even worse. Likewise, the analyst community in Washington, D.C., lacks significant ties with the new generation. Instead, most maintain good relations with those segments of Korean society that are now out of power and who would tend to agree with many of the allegations made above.

The tyranny of perception is that impact and implications are independent of fact and nuance. There is a serious and growing crisis regarding U.S. perceptions of Korea and more particularly of Korean policy toward the North. Some of the harshest and most emotional sentiments have not even been

addressed here: South Korea's perceived lack of support for human rights in North Korea, the debate regarding South Korean troop deployments to Iraq, and the sensitivities surrounding the disposition of U.S. troops on the Peninsula. The U.S.-ROK alliance, however, was built on the foundation of a common nightmare, the threat from North Korea. How the two nations address that nightmare, and how the current crisis on the Peninsula is resolved, will ultimately determine what dreams Korea and the United States will share in the future.

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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