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# Policy Forum 05-93A: The United States and South Korea: Can This Alliance Last?



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# The United States and South Korea: Can This Alliance Last?

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Policy Forum Online 05-93A: November 17th, 2005

## "The United States and South Korea: Can This Alliance Last?"

By Don Oberdorfer

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### I. Introduction

Don Oberdorfer, Distinguished Journalist in Residence and adjunct professor of international relations at the Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, wrote:

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"Despite distrust on the part of some of their superiors in both capitals, these people will tell you, as they have told me, that they have worked well with one another in common purposes in the Six Party Talks, bilateral talks about the U.S. military deployments in Korea and in other instances. To sum up, I believe the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance is in trouble but that it will continue, at least for a while, depending in large part on choices that Koreans decide to make."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

## **II. Essay by Don Oberdorfer**

- The United States and South Korea: Can This Alliance Last?  
by Don Oberdorfer

A very old saying, derived from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is that the course of true love never runs smooth. The same can often be said of close relationships between nations. The U.S.-Korean alliance has encountered bumps in the road for many years, even decades. As a historian of U.S.-Korean relations I am aware of the tensions and occasional cross purposes between Seoul and Washington going all the way back to the R.O.K. leadership of Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, and continuing from time to time in U.S. relations with their successors. Recently, however the divergences on the societal and political level have become more serious than in the past. I believe they threaten the alliance in a more fundamental way and to a greater degree than was the case before.

The inescapable fact is that the U.S. and R.O.K. have been drifting apart as the United States and its body politic have moved to the right, and the Korean government and body politic have moved to the left.

Although the trend had been growing before, the defining moment for the shift to the right in the United States was the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which were dramatic shocks to the American psyche and sense of security. Under the leadership of President George W. Bush, U.S. policy took a more nationalistic and unilateralist path, especially concerning weapons of mass destruction.

In Korea the turning point, I believe, was June 13, 2000, 15 months earlier, when President Kim Dae-jung was greeted in Pyongyang by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, bringing about an immediate and dramatic change in popular and official views. Suddenly the D.P.R.K. was no longer seen as a threat by many people, especially the young, for whom North Korea's weakness rather than its strength was a matter of concern. I was impressed on this point during a week-long visit in the summer of 2002, when I had several meetings with members of a younger generation of South Koreans that I barely knew. In sessions with two groups of university students and a group of young journalists, I heard nothing about the North as a threat. The consensus of a group of Ewha University students was that North Korea was "more of a friend than an enemy." One student volunteered that "we don't think much about North Korea." A recent Korea University student, then working in a non-governmental organization, characterized North Korea as "a distant cousin - you know he's family but in a big family gathering you avoid him...We may have the same nationality, the same race, but they should go their own way." I found the word "distant" to be a good characterization of these younger generation views of the rival state just across the DMZ.

The implications of this attitudinal change for U.S.-R.O.K. relations are enormous. The belief that North Korea poses a serious military threat is the binding force of the military alliance with the

United States and the fundamental reason for the continued stationing of American forces in the South half a century after the end of the Korean war. If there is no serious threat from the North, as many young people in the South seem to believe, there would be little reason for tens of thousands of American troops and their operating and administrative bases to remain on Korean soil. If U.S. forces are more of a nuisance than an important protection, it is understandable that tragic accidents such as the deaths of two Korean schoolgirls under the treads of an American military vehicle - and the acquittal of the U.S. soldiers involved - can touch off unbridled and emotional protests.

As everyone here knows, the ethos of 6/13 clashed sharply with that of newly-installed President Bush when Kim Dae-jung paid a prematurely early visit to the White House in March 2001 to urge a quick return to U.S. negotiations with the D.P.R.K.. Bush made clear to Kim in strong terms his very negative view of North Korea and its leader, whom he said privately and publicly he did not trust. Even while the two presidents were meeting, Secretary of State Colin Powell was forced to duck out of the Oval Office to repudiate his declared interest in resuming negotiations where the Clinton administration had left them. When it was suggested in internal discussions that the United States should follow the guideline of Clinton's Secretary of Defense William Perry in dealing with "North Korea as it is, not as we would like it to be," a senior official of the new Bush team responded, "That was the last administration. This administration is into replacing governments."

It is now clear that Bush's initial impulse was to seek regime change in each of the three governments he singled out in January 2002 as an "axis of evil" - Iraq, Iran and North Korea. Subsequently the U.S. ousted the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq by military invasion, although at greater political, economic and human cost than had been envisioned. In the case of Iran, Washington applied political pressures in the hope, since proven to be forlorn, for regime change from within by non-military means.

As for North Korea, the Bush administration from the first was divided between advocates of regime change through the application of pressure alone and those who sought the more limited objective of ending the D.P.R.K.'s nuclear program through a combination of pressure and diplomacy. The struggle between the two groups of policy advocates produced an unproductive stalemate in Bush's first four years. Bush's diplomats initiated multilateral negotiations with North Korea but were forbidden to take even the most elementary steps, such as realistic proposals or serious bilateral contacts, that might have enhanced the chances for success.

In North Korea policy as in some other situations, Bush's second term has brought a mid-course correction. With the backing of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill has been permitted to meet extensively and bilaterally with his North Korean counterpart in the context of the Six Party Talks. In September, Hill was permitted to accept preliminary compromises regarding a future North Korean light-water nuclear reactor that made possible the statement of principles unanimously adopted by the six parties in Beijing. How much farther Hill will be permitted to go is unclear as the parties prepare for the next rounds of talks, but in my opinion it is not a good sign that he was unable to follow through in his well-known plan to visit Pyongyang for preliminary discussions.

As I see it, there are several reasons for the significant yet still indeterminate shift in U.S. policy toward North Korea in recent months. The second term of two-term U.S. presidents often brings course corrections as chief executives find that their ambitious initial goals are out of reach. In this case, Bush's foreign policy has been deeply affected by the continuing insurgency in Iraq, by the natural disaster on the U.S. Gulf coast, by sinking presidential popularity due to rising gasoline prices and by a host of other unexpected difficulties. From this perspective another international crisis brought about by an attempt at regime change in North Korea is a most unattractive prospect.

Another factor in the shift is a change of personnel dealing with the issue in the second term. Secretary of State Rice is a closer and more trusted adviser to Bush than was Secretary Colin Powell. Moreover, Assistant Secretary Hill made clear his view, even before he was tapped, that the chief U.S. negotiator should not be bound by the severe restrictions imposed on his predecessor, Jim Kelly, but must be empowered to engage in strong give-and-take with his counterparts. He was hired for the job on that basis.

Still another factor in the shift, in my view, is the increasing determination on the part of the partners in the talks, especially the R.O.K. and China, to make them a success. South Korea displayed greater initiative and played a more important role in recent rounds than in the past, and China surmounted the role of convener to force preliminary compromises among the parties. These countries, and Japan and Russia as well, appear to believe not only that acceptance of a nuclear-armed North Korea would be a disaster for Northeast Asia, but that this outcome may be preventable through diplomacy. The statements of Kim Jong-il to Minister Chung Dong-young last June have reinforced that hope, and made the nuclear issue an accepted subject in North-South diplomacy for the first time in recent years. <sup>1</sup>

While shifts have been taking place in U.S. policy, a sea change has been underway in the R.O.K. in the presidency of Roh Moo-hyun. Led by the progressive majority of the 386 generation and empowered by computers and the internet in the hands of even younger voters, the election of December 2002 brought to office a man who had little previous policy experience and who was almost unknown in Washington. On July 29, 2002, I became one of the few Americans to meet Roh before his election. At the time few gave him much chance to be elected, which may have been why he found time for a discussion with me on at Millennium Democratic Party headquarters. In retrospect my notes, while sketchy, suggested some of the directions he would take as president.

In response to my questions about international affairs, Roh said he does not believe in domination of Asia by any single power. Decisions shouldn't be "the exclusive choice of the US or China," he said, "but based on a balance of power." I was surprised by the "balance of power" concept and found it to be interesting in the circumstances, even though he did not describe Korea as the balancer. When I asked how he would work with the United States if elected, he responded that Korea changes very rapidly, and US-Korea relations should change accordingly. The younger generation, he said, has strong pride and reactions to inequality, and therefore strongly demands that unequal situations be corrected. When I asked what he had in mind, he said it was mostly the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which he said was "unfair" compared to those of Japan and Germany and should be changed. He said that there may not be a deep difference between what he wants to see in U.S.-Korea relations and what young people want, but he added, they are emotional and he is more cool-headed and rational. The interview, it should be noted, took place six weeks after the death of the two school girls but before the massive demonstrations which followed acquittal in a U.S. military court of the American soldiers involved.

Regarding dealings with North Korea, Roh told me there should be no armed conflict under any circumstances and that the South should not encourage collapse in the North. The South is not able to absorb the North nor deal with its collapse, he said, but should encourage North Korea to open up. The most important thing in the relationship, he said, is mutual trust. When I asked about South Korea's diplomacy regarding the North, Roh responded that the basic principle must be close cooperation with the United States based on a consensus with Russia, China and Japan. The Six Party Talks involving all these parties were not even envisaged for nearly a year after this conversation.

It was clear to me from even this early encounter that Roh Moo-hyun was a very different figure from Kim Dae-jung, even though he had inherited some of the same bases of political support.

Although never a favorite of U.S. administrations, Kim Dae-jung owed much to the United States, which had played a role twice in saving his life - when he was kidnapped from Japan by Park Chung-hee's KCIA in August 1973 and in late 1980 when Chun Doo-hwan was weighing the decision whether to execute Kim or commute his death sentence for treason. In the latter case the outgoing Carter administration and the incoming Reagan administration in Washington worked in a unique instance of cooperation to save Kim. In 1982 Kim was exiled for three years, most of which he spent in Alexandria, Virginia, in the suburbs of Washington, where I met him several times. In that period he was working hard - and successfully - to learn English. As president, Kim had far more experience with America and Americans than any of his predecessors except Syngman Rhee, and was fundamentally pro-American.

Roh Moo-hyun, in contrast, had never been to the United States when he was elected and seemed hesitant at best about the U.S. connection. It was not surprising that Washington officialdom and the community of U.S. Korea-watchers, most of whom knew little about him, were apprehensive when he was elected and put off by some of his public statements and by his personnel selections, many of whom were unknown to Americans. It was quickly apparent that a generational revolution had taken place in the governmental leadership in Korea. Senior statesmen who had long experience and represented continuity in U.S.-Korean relations were shunted aside, while new faces and new attitudes abounded. It took longer to understand that a social revolution with deep historical roots, pitting progressives against conservatives within South Korea, was also taking place.

Many in Washington have little understanding and even less sympathy for the demographic and policy changes in Seoul. Some are deeply concerned that in these circumstances the R.O.K. is cutting loose from the moorings that have connected our two countries for half a century. This came home forcefully to me in mid-summer when I attended a meeting of three dozen Korea watchers, including several with military backgrounds. It had been called to discuss U.S. policy toward North Korea, not South Korea, but the discussion around the long U-shaped table highlighted concerns about the position of the R.O.K.. Some of those who spoke suggested that the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance was already a thing of the past.

Fortunately for the alliance, developments in Seoul are not now an issue of widespread resonance in the United States. Except for the candlelight protests and the flag burnings in response to the death of the schoolgirls, few provocative statements or incidents have made much of a splash in the American press. Even the recent demonstrations against the statue of General Douglas MacArthur at Inchon, which would be shocking to most Americans, drew little attention, essentially because of the distraction of other domestic and international issues including the continuing war in Iraq.

Those of us who have known Korea for a long time do not wish to pass judgment on the merits or the outcome of the struggles in your country. That is for Koreans to do, and my guess is that it will take the next presidential election, or perhaps even the one after that, for a clear decision on Korea's political directions.

Both North and South Korea, in my view, are in a period of flux, with the future course of both far from certain.

Due to the totalitarian nature of the D.P.R.K., from the outside it appears as if nothing has changed since the death of Kim Il-sung 11 years ago - but I think this is not the case. Internally there are many signs that Kim Jong-il does not possess the same degree of unchallengeable authority as his father wielded in the latter decades of his life. The younger Kim appears to be at the top of a looser, more decentralized power structure. The Military Commission which he heads has replaced the Workers Party as the central locus of policy formation on many issues, and outsiders know even less about its personnel and its workings than they did about the Workers Party. At the same time, a new

generation of technocrats is exercising authority in the three-year-old effort to revive the moribund economy by engaging market forces. Money has become a greater determining factor and the state a smaller one in the lives of many North Koreans. Corruption is a serious and growing problem.

The great question in my mind is how much North Koreans know about the world outside, and how they will react as they know more, as they inevitably will. Try as their leaders might, there can be no hermetically sealed Hermit Kingdom in the 21st Century. According to a recent estimate, close to 85 percent of the areas in the D.P.R.K. have been reached by aid workers from the outside, which is why Pyongyang is worried about their influence. A person who was in frequent contact with students at North Korea's elite Kim Il-sung University told me recently that despite a lifetime of indoctrination, many students can think for themselves and are doing so. There is a huge demand among them for education about business, which is where the children of the elite see their future.

In these circumstances the reliance of North Korea on nuclear weapons as the central fact of its external relations is a tragic error. Its viability in the long run depends on stable economic interaction with the world outside. Its self-proclaimed status as a "full fledged nuclear weapons state" earlier this year is a massive roadblock in the way of international acceptance and cooperation. This is why South Korea's growing economic assistance to a nuclear-armed D.P.R.K., even though restrained and carefully targeted, is a sensitive matter for those who want to see the North shift away from these ghastly weapons and make the Korean peninsula again nuclear-free.

Meanwhile, South Korea, it seems to me, is undergoing an identity crisis in the current era. No longer poor, the vast majority of its people are better off than before but are not yet securely comfortable or rich. The R.O.K. is a very significant economic power, 12th or even 10th in the world by some statistical standards, but even so is not in position to contest the greater economic powers of Japan and China close by, or of the United States or European Union far away. Geographically, militarily and politically it is still dwarfed, as ever, by the larger neighbors which have surrounded it throughout history. The upwardly mobile people of a middle power, it seems to me, are faced with a world of choices.

One of those choices is its future relationship with the United States, as the two countries drift apart and the solid U.S. connection is waning. At the popular and leadership levels, I believe, the longstanding alliance is in trouble in both countries. As of now, the mid-level diplomatic and military professionals, who know each other better than most and who remain committed to working together, are the saving grace of the alliance. Despite distrust on the part of some of their superiors in both capitals, these people will tell you, as they have told me, that they have worked well with one another in common purposes in the Six Party Talks, bilateral talks about the U.S. military deployments in Korea and in other instances. To sum up, I believe the U.S.-R.O.K. alliance is in trouble but that it will continue, at least for a while, depending in large part on choices that Koreans decide to make.

Finally, if you will indulge some moments of personal reflection, I must tell you that today's Korea is in startling contrast to the country that I saw when I first landed at Pusan as a young 2d lieutenant of artillery, in August 1953, two weeks after the signing of the armistice that ended the war, and boarded a troop train headed for the replacement depot at Yongdungpo.

"Our first impressions, at Pusan, were miserable and pathetic," I wrote in my little cloth-covered diary that I still have. "The dirtiest children I have ever seen evaded MPs around the train to try to beg from GIs. One boy crawled around the train on his only leg - what had been his left one was off at the thigh. When the MP jeep went past him, he threw stones at it. When our train pulled out, several boys threw rocks at the train.

"As we pulled out of Pusan we saw the unbelievable lean-to hovels along the railroad tracks where hundreds and perhaps thousands of people are packed into shacks made of anything that will stand up. These are the displaced persons of Korea and you could feel the bitterness and hostility in the air. Out of the city the picture is better. The Korean countryside is quite mountainous with villages in the little stretches of valleys between the rugged, unadorned crags. The people till the soil and wash in muddy water holes. Many smile and wave from their fields in the villages. The only silent ones are the old men who look on and think to themselves."

Three days later I passed through Seoul en route to my assignment in the 57th Field Artillery Battalion of the 7th Infantry Division near the DMZ. "Seoul is in ruins that are as complete as anything I can imagine," I wrote. "We only got a superficial view by truck, but there was hardly a permanent building standing or, to be more accurate, hardly a permanent building standing with four walls and a roof...The city is teeming with people - washing clothes in the drainage ditch on the side of the street, squatting in that comfortable Oriental way, haggling and selling. They have seen so many soldiers that our convoy went across the Han River bridge and through Seoul with the siren of a lead MP jeep blaring and hardly anyone even looked up. The devastation is terrible."

As I look around this metropolitan capital of a prosperous and democratic nation, with skyscrapers, streamlined trains and one of the world's greatest concentrations of internet users, it is in another world as well as another century from the devastated, war-ravaged country of 1953. Yet the past is worth remembering, not to rekindle the internecine struggles of the Korean War but to realize how far and how fast, and against what odds, the people and polity of South Korea have come. The country that led the world in misery in 1953 now leads the world in stem-cell research and high-speed internet access. The country that scraped out a bare existence with an average income of far less than \$100 a year per person in 1953 now boasts an average per capita income of nearly \$20,000. The country that bowed to heavy-handed military rule from 1961 for more than a quarter century is now a thriving if fractious democracy.

For all these remarkable achievements, Korea, it seems to me, is still evolving, as I wrote in my journal at the end of a visit in August 2003, exactly half a century since I first landed on a troop ship in Pusan. In between I visited Korea two dozen times as Northeast Asia bureau chief of the Washington Post in the early 1970s, and at least a dozen times as Washington Post diplomatic correspondent from then until my retirement from the paper in 1993. This is my 25th visit to South Korea since I retired from the Post and became an academic. Over the years I have also visited North Korea three times for discussions with its leading diplomats.

As I rode to the glossy new airport at Incheon in August 2003, I wrote in my journal, "Korea for all the tremendous increase in its wealth and status, is still a country in the process of becoming. It is unsettled, its fate and fortunes not determined, the future of its people and to some extent the country itself not yet determined..."

"As a result of [the turn toward] democracy in 1987 and beyond, and especially the surprising elections and reign of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, it is a society riven between past and present, between tradition and new arrangements, between conservatives and progressives. This is the south/south conflict which is more on the mind of many people than the north/south conflict. Cohesion is lacking to a greater degree than before."

"I have not lost my affection for the country that I first saw as a devastated, poverty-stricken place in 1953 and for its people, who continue to try to make their way in the world, nor have I lost the suspense with a touch of anguish as I leave Korea for the wider world after a visit, including this one. If one is to be emotionally as well as intellectually involved with a successful country still in the process of becoming, Korea is not a bad one to have chosen, or to have been chosen for you by

history and fate."

That was and is my take on Korea.

Thank you very much.

<sup>1</sup> Kim Jong-il reportedly told Chung in Pyongyang on June 17 that the D.P.R.K. would return to the Six Party Talks if the United States recognizes and respects his country and that Kim Il-sung's "dying wish" was for a non-nuclear Korean peninsula. Moreover, he was quoted as saying that the D.P.R.K. will end its nuclear weapons program, return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and permit international inspectors to verify his country's compliance if he is able to normalize and have friendly relations with the United States. The conversation also marked a breakthrough in the resumption of South-North discussions of the nuclear issue.

### **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](mailto: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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