

Americans for Korean Unification

A New Ordering Principle for Washington's Korea Policy

Leif-Eric Easley, Harvard University Department of Government

Issues and Insights, Vol. 6, No. 14 (September 2006), pp. 1-5.

There are three major problems today for the international relations of the Korean peninsula. They are in order: the North Korean regime itself, the growing perception gap between South Korea and the United States on how to deal with North Korea, and finally, the uncertain role of China in Korea's political future. This essay focuses on the second, because the best way for the United States to address all three is by strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance. The prescription for doing so is simple: the United States should declare and follow an active and genuine pro-unification policy. This will productively reorder American diplomatic tools for dealing with Pyongyang, bring Seoul and Washington onto the same page, and compel Beijing to play a more transparent and productive role in the political future of the Korean peninsula.

Increasing disparity between South Korean and U.S. policy visions is inhibiting productive coordination on North Korea's nuclear program, international criminal activities, human rights violations and nascent economic reforms. All these matters have great bearing on peace and security in Northeast Asia, and are better met with U.S.-ROK cooperation than a lack thereof. It is possible to level numerous criticisms against the Bush administration's Korea policy, the Roh administration's strategy for balancing alliance maintenance with North Korean engagement, and even China's role as facilitator of the Six Party Talks. But it is important to recognize that the principal problem is the North Korea regime. Arguments to the contrary distort reality. But it is also time to recognize that the U.S. emphasis on the evils of the Kim Jong-il government is not doing any favors for America or South Korea. North Korea's distinction as a rogue state and Cold War enemy is no longer a useful ordering principle for U.S. Korea policy. Waiting for the Kim regime to implode has proved an ineffective strategy. More aggressively pushing for regime change is too expensive and risky. A new tact is necessary.

To be effective, the new U.S. diplomatic approach should be focused on bringing Washington and Seoul onto the same page, without any serious costs to the U.S. or compromise of American security interests. For example, economic appeasement of Pyongyang or accepting North Korea's nuclear program are non-options. But there are other possibilities. To improve the United States diplomatic position and advance the strategic objectives it shares with allies in East Asia, it is first important to consider: what is at root of diverging U.S.-ROK views on North Korea? We must appreciate that South Korea is in the midst of consolidating an impressive list of transitions: from developing to developed country, from autocracy to democracy, from the object of historical geopolitical rivalry to an important international player. South Korean national identity has understandably witnessed great change in the process.

The most important change for the international relations of the Korean peninsula is the shift of South Korea's view of the North. After the Korean War, the South's identity vis-à-vis the North was focused on differentiation and denial – competitive development while deterring and preventing unification by the force of another invasion by communist North Korea. In this South Korean worldview, the United States was a clear ally, a resource for development and a necessary protector. Gradually after the end of the Cold War, and especially since the inter-Korean summit of June 2000, South Korean identity vis-à-vis the North has radically changed. Today, South Korean national identity is increasingly inclusive of North Korean "blood brothers," viewing the North less as a threat, and more as a destination for charity and source of uncertainty to be carefully managed.

The South Korean government now actively suppresses bad news about North Korea, in stark contrast to its anti-communist propaganda of the past. The government strategy now is one of enticement and incrementalism – opening up the North and growing its economy so that a Korean confederation and eventual unification does not mean bankruptcy for the South. But because of the speed of change in South Korea's identity and Seoul's policy toward the North, Washington appears sluggish to adjust. Suddenly, the U.S. looks like an impediment to unification instead of a guarantor of South Korea's independence and prosperity.

Anti-Americanism has long existed in South Korea, but mostly as a function of unfortunate incidents involving U.S. troops on Korean soil and perceived heavy handed behavior by the United States.¹ Like any proud people, Koreans resent being told what to do, and as a deep sense for a tragic history meets newfound confidence from rapid development, South Korea is less concerned with aligning its policy with the U.S. in the post-Cold War strategic environment. This is why present expressions of South Korean national identity are more serious than past anti-Americanism and why the U.S.-ROK alliance will drift if Washington does not adjust its policy to account for the post-Kims summit reality on the Korean peninsula.

Making Washington's Korea policy effective in light of South Korea's re-orientation toward the North requires a new ordering principle, a new fundamental doctrine that frames U.S. policy. The basic position that North Korea is an evil, threatening regime should be replaced with American support for Korean unification. The United States would announce that it stands squarely behind South Korea's desire for unification through gradual reconciliation, that it hopes the two Koreas can work out their differences as partners, and that the future configuration of the Korean peninsula is up to Seoul and Pyongyang. The immediate result of adopting and practicing this new ordering principle would be decreasing perceptions of the U.S. telling Koreans what to do. More importantly, it would put Seoul in the position of telling Pyongyang what it needs to do (stand down on nuclear weapons development, implement economic reforms) instead of painting the U.S. as the bad cop in inter-Korean relations. The United States would rhetorically assume a new role of unification supporter, instead of the post-Korean War role of

¹ For background on associated alliance politics, see Leif-Eric Easley, "Forward-deployed and Host Nation Interaction: U.S.-ROK Cooperation under External Threat and Internal Frictions," forthcoming in the *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*.

South Korean guarantor, or the present perceived role of obstacle to inter-Korean reconciliation. A pro-unification ordering principle will allow U.S. policy to advance American interests in light of the new South Korean identity, instead of making the United States a growing target of Korean nationalism.

This policy change is relatively cheap for the United States to implement because it would not require much in the way of economic or security measures than what Washington would do anyway. The major difference would be in the conducting of diplomacy, in how policy is framed and presented. The U.S. pro-unification stance can be pursued in three steps:

- First, we need to bring together a group of Korea scholars to author an Armitage-Nye style report for U.S.-ROK relations.² This report will clearly spell out how current U.S. policy is suboptimal because it has yet to adjust to the post-Kims summit reality on the Korean peninsula. It will emphasize the vast overlap in U.S. and South Korean values and interests. The report will be bipartisan and published in 2007 ahead of the American presidential campaign to provide policy vision for the next U.S. president and a list of Korea specialists from which the next administration can draw advisors.
- Second, the next U.S. president will host the next ROK president at the White House for a state dinner and announce the United States' genuine hope and committed support for Korean unification. Washington need not mention that it is in favor of a process of reconciliation and eventual reunification on Seoul's terms rather than Pyongyang's, as this goes without saying. Instead, the U.S. should be careful to avoid providing the Kim Jong-il regime with ammunition (e.g. "axis of evil" style statements) for the smearing of U.S. intentions. Before the announcement, Seoul and Beijing could signal to Pyongyang that a major opportunity for better relations with the U.S. is forthcoming, and North Korea should avoid squandering it.
- Third, support of unification will be consistently used to frame the United States' Korea policy. For example: the U.S. opposes North Korea's nuclear weapons program because it threatens regional stability and the international non-proliferation regime, and stands as an obstacle in the way of Korean unification. The United States is concerned about the lack of freedom in North Korea because of rampant violations of fundamental human rights and the impediments it causes for North-South reconciliation. And the U.S. supports economic reform and gradual opening of the North Korean economy to hasten and facilitate Korean unification. Even the transformation of U.S. troop deployments should be placed under the new ordering principle: USFK movements are aimed at reducing tensions along the DMZ and developing a climate for inter-Korean reconciliation by focusing the USFK on regional stability rather than countering North Korea.

² The Armitage-Nye report was a "bipartisan action agenda aimed at creating an enduring alliance," upgrading the U.S.-Japan relationship from its Cold War status to meet post-Cold War challenges. *The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership*, INSS Special Report, October 2000. An analogous U.S.-ROK initiative would focus on upgrading the alliance from post-Korean War terms to an effective partnership for the post-Kims summit Korean Peninsula.

I presented this three step proposal at the 9th Annual "New Directions in the ROK-U.S. Relationship" conference and appreciated the quantity and quality of feedback. Interestingly, Young Leaders generally received the proposal as a natural step for shoring up the alliance and a relatively low cost adjustment for U.S. foreign policy. In contrast, senior participants tended to respond with more caution, no doubt because of their greater experience. But I believe that the concerns they expressed, which I outline below, could be adequately addressed with careful diplomacy in the U.S.-ROK relationship.

- Many Korean participants' comments seemed to reflect a concern for how China would perceive and respond to a U.S. pro-reunification policy. I replied that by bringing South Korea and the U.S. onto the same page, a change in ordering principle from "North Korean threat" to "Korean unification" will gradually encourage China to update its role from that of intermediary to that of partner in dealing with North Korea. In other words, being a "responsible stakeholder" would come to include supporting Seoul's vision for a reunified Korean peninsula. I argued that balance of power expectations for a re-run of Cold War tensions – with North Korea, China and Russia on one side and South Korea, Japan and the U.S. on the other – are outdated. An obvious reason is how Russia is a much more benign actor than the Soviet Union. But more importantly, the PRC-ROK relationship has totally changed. Beijing sees its relations with Seoul as increasingly important, while its relations with Pyongyang have become focused on managing a source of uncertainty and instability. PRC willingness to protect and support North Korea at the risk of Chinese development is low. No doubt Beijing can be expected to manage its relations with Pyongyang and Seoul in a way that best serves its own security interests and aspirations for economic influence on the Korean peninsula. But the precise Chinese strategy appears undecided. A new ordering principle for U.S. policy, that makes South Korean and American approaches to North Korea complementary, is more likely to see Beijing's strategy develop as cooperative to Seoul and Washington because the primary interest of stability is shared by all three and Beijing is unwilling to isolate itself for the benefit of Pyongyang.

- A second point of concern, expressed by both Korean and U.S. participants, was that Washington should avoid seriously changing its policy for the sake of aligning with Seoul's, because the latter's current approach toward North Korea is dangerously flawed. Some Korean participants suggested Seoul's policy looks too much like appeasement and effectively sacrifices global norms in dealing with Pyongyang (human rights). Several Americans stressed that the U.S. should not overreact to domestic criticisms within allies and should focus on consistent U.S. policy rather than trying to please volatile Korean public opinion. I found these points to be locked in the current (and unproductive) Bush-Roh dynamic which is exactly what my proposal seeks to get beyond. My proposal is not for the U.S. to support South Korean "appeasement" of the North. Rather, it aims to reassure Seoul that Washington supports its long-term vision for the Korean peninsula so that South Korea can demand more reciprocity in its relations with Pyongyang. Moreover, I make no suggestion that Washington should allow its Korea policy to be written by South Korean public opinion. What I argue is that the United States needs to adjust its policy in light of the new South Korean identity. Naturally, there was disagreement at the conference about the content, trajectory and implications of South Korean identity. But I

maintained that this new identity features more confidence in the ROK position in the world and a greater sense of "one-ness" on the Korean peninsula, both which are increasingly being expressed in ROK policy and both which the United States should account for in its diplomacy.

- The third set of apprehensions focused on domestic politics in the U.S. and South Korea. Several American participants argued it would be politically impossible for a U.S. administration to be so deferential to South Korea's policy approach until North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons programs. Korean participants expressed concerns for how the "new left" in the ROK would respond, suggesting that progressives would make accusations that the new U.S. policy is a veiled attempt at destabilizing North Korea. Discussions of these political considerations made me realize that in addition to a new ordering principle, U.S. policy needs to further engage Seoul's approach on specific points. It is unlikely that Washington will buy into a roadmap that looks too much like a second Agreed Framework. That being said, I think it is possible for the U.S. and South Korea to work together to put in motion pieces of the September 19, 2005 joint statement of the Six Party Talks. In particular, the U.S. and ROK could articulate policy details and make preparations for the following: new opportunities for trade and investment with North Korea (perhaps including U.S. support of Kaesong and U.S.-ROK discussion with the PRC regarding the development model China is encouraging for the North); ROK direct provision of electric power to the North; and protocols for negotiations on a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

While further policy coordination will be necessary and require sustained attention, these efforts will be energized by a new brand of U.S. diplomacy toward the Korea peninsula. The key implication of making Korean unification the guiding principle of U.S. policy is to bring Washington and Seoul onto the same page with complementary, although certainly not identical views of North Korea. U.S.-ROK relations will be revitalized and the allies' dealings with Pyongyang will be mutually reinforcing and more effective. Without compromising on U.S. security interests, the next administration can undertake bold change in U.S. policy on the Korean peninsula by clearly articulating support for reunification. A diplomatic risk perhaps, as benefits from the change will hinge upon responses from both Koreas. But a steadier and more effective partnership with post-Roh South Korea is well worth the risk, because the U.S.-ROK alliance is important for the interests of both countries and indispensable for stability in Northeast Asia.