

Washington's View of Korea's Strategic Significance

by

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Change is permanent, or to put it another way, reality is constantly changing. The same can be said of the U. S. - Republic of Korea alliance, and the Korean Peninsula's strategic significance to the United States. On the one hand, the two nations' desire to remain close allies remains unchanged, but the geo-political context of their alliance continues to undergo significant change. Washington and Seoul remain tied through their mutual defense treaty, impressive commercial trade and the links between the growing communities of Americans residing in Korea and Koreans who now live in the United States. At the same time, however, developments elsewhere in the world compel the United States to assign higher strategic significance to other areas of the world. Recognition of this reality among Koreans should temper their frustration with Washington and better prepare them to shoulder greater responsibility for their nation's defense.

East Asia as Number Two

East Asia, of course including the Korean Peninsula, has long been of secondary importance to the United States. During World War II, President Roosevelt put the defeat of Hitler in Europe before Japan's defeat. President Truman and his successors, regardless of their political party, continued this tradition. The containment of communism in Europe took priority over the containment of communism in East Asia. The United States fought "limited" wars in Korea and Vietnam to contain communism, but in the end accepted Korea's division and Vietnam's unification under communism because Washington wished to avoid a global war.

From Containment to Engagement

One can argue that East Asia and Korea's strategic importance to Washington have been receding since President Nixon and former Secretary of State Kissinger shifted US global strategy from containment to engagement of "communist" China in 1972. Their foremost strategic aim was to ensure that communist China and the Soviet Union remained more adversaries than friends. This profoundly changed US global priorities. The Nixon Administration initiated the gradual withdrawal of US ground forces from East Asia beginning in South Vietnam and South Korea. Subsequent U.S. administrations continued this process by eventually withdrawing all US forces from Southeast Asia, including the Philippines.

Washington's Present Priorities

President Bush today continues to de-emphasize East Asia's strategic significance to Washington. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2002 convinced him of this need. Soon after, he proclaimed the "war on terrorism" the United States' foremost global priority. This continues to be the case today. Militarily, East Asia and Korea's strategic significance has declined further as President Bush felt compelled to increase US military forces in the Middle East and Central Asia, i.e. Afghanistan. Early in this new war, he and his close advisors grossly over estimated the United States military strength and underestimated the strength of the resistance they would encounter from America's new adversaries. They also erred by believing they could use the threat of "pre-emptive" attack of potential US enemies to deter members of the "axis of evil" from further development of weapons of mass destruction. Actually, it can be argued that this strategy convinced America's adversaries like North Korea to quicken their weapons development programs.

Washington's Recognition of Reality

One consequence has been President Bush's reluctant recognition that he cannot threaten North Korea with a "military option" while confronting the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, he has had to moderate his rhetorical threats aimed at North Korea while authorizing the "redeployment" of US ground forces away from South Korea. Additionally, he has become increasingly dependent on the nations of Northeast Asia, particularly China, to play a greater role in restraining North Korea. This enables Washington to concentrate its military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan to train these nations' new armies while fighting the insurgencies there. Also, the Bush Administration is forced to focus its diplomatic efforts on the Middle East, especially now that another war has erupted in the Middle East, this time between Israel and Lebanon. Meanwhile North Korea's provocative conduct receives secondary attention.

Other Contributing Factors

Factors other than Washington's strategic priorities are also redefining Korea's importance to the United States. Today South Korea no longer is an impoverished nation facing possible conquest by communist North Korea and China. The Republic of Korea is a prosperous and respected member of the international community. Its sophisticated military is supported by a strong economy. Seoul's successful diplomatic and commercial engagement strategy has largely neutralized its former foes China and Russia as a threat to South Korea's national security.

Similarly, the joint efforts former President Bush and South Korean President Roh Dae-woo initiated to engage North Korea were continued by South Korea's subsequent presidents. Unprecedented North-South reconciliation has been achieved, and the threat of war has subsided on the Korean Peninsula, at least until now.

South Koreans would do well to recognize that the Korean Peninsula's global significance actually remains unaltered. It is still the only place in the world where the interests of all the world's superpower come together. This, combined with Korea's division into two rival nations, makes the Korean Peninsula potentially one of

the world's most volatile places on earth. Yet for Washington, the Korean Peninsula continues to be of secondary strategic significance. Communism has been discredited and the Soviet Union has collapsed. But President Bush has replaced these past preoccupations with the war on terrorism and his focus on the Middle East.

Being Number Two is Best

Much has changed globally and in East Asia since the Korean War, but the strategic bottom line remains the same. Global geo-political changes continue to alter the region that most preoccupies Washington, but East Asia retains its place as being of secondary significance to the United States. Washington continues to consider the US-Republic of Korea Mutual Defense Treaty vital for ensuring peace and stability in Northeast Asia. Nevertheless, South Korea's prosperity, combined with its successful engagement of its former foes, better enable Seoul to care for its own defense.

Ultimately, the most significant factor defining East Asia's strategic importance to Washington is whether peace and stability can be sustained in the region. Pyongyang's continued development of weapons of mass destruction give it the ability to abruptly and radically redefine Washington's strategic priorities by dramatically increasing the risk of war on the Korean Peninsula. Should this happen, Korea would promptly become Washington's primary strategic concern. Koreans therefore should be pleased to be Washington's area of secondary strategic significance.