

The United States and Korean Reconciliation

By

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The US-ROK alliance's fate hinges on the United States' willingness to adjust to South Korea's prosperous democracy and pursuit of reconciliation with North Korea. Changing circumstances have buffeted the alliance since its birth, but the shared goal of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula has sustained it. Success has been a consequence of each side's willingness to accommodate the other side's preferences. But since 1993, strategies to achieve their shared goal have diverged. Ultimately, the United States should adjust to South Korea's preference for reconciliation with North Korea.

The alliance was born out of the Cold War's mutual needs to contain communism and to deter North Korean aggression. Deterrence, rooted in superior conventional and nuclear forces, was the agreed strategy. South Korea provided US forces a base in Northeast Asia while the United States ensured South Korea's survival with military and economic aid.

Partnership replaced dependency as the alliance matured. Impressive economic development enabled South Korea to increasingly contribute to the alliance. It dispatched soldiers to Vietnam, provided host nation support for US forces, and paid the largest portion of cost to implement the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework that resolved the first nuclear crisis. Recently, South Korea dispatched troops to Iraq and provides it economic aid.

Major developments since 1980 have profoundly affected the alliance. South Korea's prosperity has garnered it international respect and a world-wide market. The Cold War's end transformed South Korea's enemies, China and Russia, into trading partners. Democratization followed.

Peace and stability remain the alliance's foremost goals, but the allies now disagree over how best to achieve this. The incumbent Bush Administration puts North Korea's disarmament first and prefers multilateral pressure to compel North Korea to unilaterally disarm. Seoul disagrees. It seeks reconciliation with North Korea using diplomatic and economic engagement. South Korea used this approach to convert former enemies like China and Russia into friends. It still champions deterrence, but Washington's unilateral decision to withdraw troops from South Korea jarred South Koreans' confidence in the alliance.

Paradoxically, Republican presidents since Nixon have employed engagement backed by deterrence to pursue peaceful co-existence with China and the former Soviet Union. Former President Bush even extended this approach to Vietnam and North Korea. The present Bush Administration, however, condemns engagement as "appeasement," an

attitude that sparked tension in the US-ROK alliance. South Koreans who oppose President Roh Moo-hyun's reliance on engagement labeled his supporters "anti-American" for criticizing current US policy. This political dueling within South Korea has further troubled the alliance and impeded reconciliation.

President Bush should demonstrate respect and support for the policy preferences of his ally and South Korea's democratically elected president. Doing so would bridge the deep divide between South Koreans over how to deal with North Korea. It would also convince all Koreans, both north and south, that the United States truly seeks peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. After all, this is the US-ROK alliance's ultimate goal.