The North Korean "Wedge" in the US-Republic of Korea Alliance

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Introduction

The more than half a century of successful cooperation and collaboration between the United States and the Republic of Korea has always included areas of disagreement. Candid consultation and adjustments on both sides eventually have overcome the sources of this irritation. This certainly proved to be the case in the 1980s regarding South Korea's democratization and substantive differences over bilateral trade. We witnessed another example of the two allies' resolution of their differences earlier this week when they reached an accommodation over the phased withdrawal of US troops from the Korean Peninsula. Despite this impressive record, constantly changing circumstances require continuous effort to sustain the alliance's past success.

Resolution of differences over the US troop withdrawal, however, is more a symptom than a cause of the underlying friction in the relationship. Actually, the source of today's differences is much more fundamental and dates from the 1990s. Also, it is primarily a consequence of the alliance's success, not its shortcomings.

Between 1950 and 1990, the same security concerns and distrust of North Korea bonded the United States and South Korea as allies. The allies maintained two fundamental goals: deter a North Korean invasion of South Korea and promote a process of peaceful reconciliation between Seoul and Pyongyang. Since1990, changing circumstances in Northeast Asia have buffeted these shared goals. North Korea's pursuit of a "nuclear deterrence capability" and the quickening pace of North-South reconciliation have greatly complicated the situation. Paradoxically, the allies' separate success in these two distinct areas has ignited friction between the allies and their goals. This friction has manifested itself in several bilateral US-South Korea issues that include the timing for the US troop withdrawal and how best to deal with North Korea's nuclear intentions.

The "North Korean" Wedge

Today, the orthodox view is that Pyongyang since US-North Korea nuclear talks commenced in 1993, has been driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul. Close scrutiny of this contention suggests that the wedge is a consequence of fundamental differences between the allies over how to deal with North Korea. It is not necessarily Pyongyang's invention. Washington and Seoul share essentially similar goals regarding North Korea. Both want a nuclear free, peaceful and stable Korean Peninsula. They differ, however, over how to achieve these goals. It would be folly to ignore the fact that North Korea obviously attempts to manipulate the "wedge" to its advantage. Yet vacillation in both allies' capitals facilitates Pyongyang's efforts. At the same time, duplicity in North Korea's dealings with Washington and Seoul further complicates the situation. At the wedge's core are North Korea's nuclear intentions.

Vacillation in Washington's strategies work to Pyongyang's advantage. Between 1993 and 2001, the United States significantly altered its strategy. The past Clinton and present Bush Administrations pursued profoundly different strategies. The previous administration preferred an essentially unilateral strategy that combined military

deterrence (nuclear and conventional) plus economic sanctions with inducements. The aim was to convince North Korea vis a vis diplomatic dialogue that its national interests were best served by foregoing its nuclear weapons ambitions, allowing complete transparency of its civilian nuclear programs and resolving its differences with South Korea via peaceful dialogue.

The Bush administration since 2001 has preferred a continuation of military deterrence and economic sanctions, but shifted to a coercive diplomatic strategy that strives to concentrate multilateral pressure on North Korea in the hope of convincing it to unilaterally disarm itself of all weapons of mass destruction. Diplomatic dialogue has been ruled out as a tool to achieve a resolution. Instead, it is included in a package of rewards that Washington promises to bestow on Pyongyang once it has satisfied US demands.

Seoul's Shifting Strategies

During the same short period, Seoul's strategy underwent the reverse transformation. The Kim Yong-sam Administration (1993-1998) vacillated between either achieving reconciliation or toppling the North Korean regime. This frequently put it at odds with the Clinton Administration's efforts to achieve a diplomatic solution with Pyongyang based on economic and diplomatic inducements. Pyongyang did not create the differences between the two allies, but it certainly exploited them to its advantage. Kim Yong-sam's reluctant support for the US-North Korea nuclear agreement delayed its implementation. His administration's efforts to undermine political stability in North Korea also compounded the difficulty of implementation. Both probably eroded Pyongyang's confidence in the accord and may have contributed to its eventual demise.

South Korea's next president, Kim Dae-jung, adopted almost the oppose approach to North Korea. His "Sunshine" strategy for dealing with North Korea was much more compatible with that of Washington at the time. It accented a balance between armed deterrence and intense diplomacy assisted with economic and diplomatic inducements. The effort achieved notable success best symbolized by the first North-South Korea summit of 2000. But no sooner was the North-South reconciliation process picking up speed than the Bush Administration, ignoring its ally's concerns as became evident at the US-ROK summit Washington in the spring of 2001, adopted a strategy largely incompatible with the one Seoul was pursuing. Again, North Korea had nothing to do with this shift of strategies. It was entirely a consequence of US domestic politics. It also perpetuated the "North Korea wedge" in the US-ROK alliance.

Shared Goals – Differing Strategies

Washington and Seoul have continued to share the goal of a peaceful diplomatic solution to the nuclear problem on the Korean Peninsula. They also agree that the best forum for attaining this goal is the so-called Six Party Talks, a consequence of China's intense diplomatic effort that brings together the two Koreas and their neighbors - China, Japan

and Russia, plus the United States. But at this point, their perceptions of the Korean Peninsula's nuclear problem and fundamental strategy for achieving it diverge.

The Bush administration since having completed its review of North Korea policy in June 2001 has preferred an "all or nothing" approach that accents three basic features:

- the United States will determine unilaterally the conditions for engaging North Korea in any negotiations, ;
- other nations, including South Korea, are to play a supporting role in resolving the nuclear problem in Northeast Asia, and
- North Korea must first unilaterally disarm itself of all weapons of mass destruction before it could expect any "rewards."

It is vital to note that the Bush Administration's "multilateral" approach is essentially unilateral. President Bush insists on directing the effort to achieve US priorities – disarming the "axis of evil" nations of weapons of mass destruction. His approach is multilateral only in that he strives to focus multilateral pressure on Pyongyang to compel its submission to his demands. This makes it essentially coercive.

Multiple Problems – Marginal Gains

President Bush's preferred strategy has caused numerous problems and achieved marginal progress toward its goal of disarming North Korea. It split his administration, a well known and document situation that continues today and need not preoccupy us here. More to the point, it has caused considerable friction between the White House and the Blue House in Seoul. South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun on his way to Washington, D.C. in May 2003 for his first summit with President Bush outlined an agenda to journalists that highlighted some differences in their preferred approaches to dealing with North Korea. Roh on May 12, 2003 told the *Washington Times* that he wanted "... to discuss with President Bush that the circumstances on the Korean Peninsula may not be appropriate ..." to apply his principle of pre-emptive counter proliferation. The Bush Administration had announced this strategy in December 2002 and promptly cited it when a shipment of North Korean ballistic missiles en route to Yemen was seized on the high seas.

Then on May 13, Roh told the *Wall Street Journal*, "I think coercive measures have to wait until we have exhausted all possible efforts at dialogue with North Korea." Roh added, "If the U.S. makes up its mind to resolve this issue through diplomacy, it can do so." This, he concluded, "might require concessions." Roh made these comments after the April 2003 "three party talks" that China hosted in Beijing and before the six party talks that commenced in June 2003, but Roh's position remains Seoul's preferred strategy for dealing with North Korea as reflected in its "economic cooperation" policy toward Pyongyang.

Straddling the Divide

But at the 2003 summit, the two presidents agreed to gloss over their differences so as to deny Pyongyang any opportunity to exploit their divergent preferences. In their joint

statement, they accented the positive. Regarding North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the two leaders agreed that they want "the complete verifiable and irreversible elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program through peaceful means based on international cooperation." President Bush's one possible concession to Roh may have been the joint statement's reference to the possibility of Russia and other nations playing a "constructive role in multilateral diplomacy." Until this point, the Bush Administration, like the Clinton Administration before it, had been leery of including Russia in any strategy to end North Korea's nuclear program. Seoul, however, after 1998 grew comfortable with the idea and China championed Russia's inclusion.

Reluctant Participants

In May, 2003, Washington's adamancy, President Bush's strident rhetoric and Pyongyang's resumption of its nuclear weapons program convinced China and South Korea that unprecedented effort was vital to head off a second Korean War. President Roh's meeting with leaders in Tokyo and Washington facilitated Beijing's intense efforts to convene the so-called Six Party Talks in Beijing at the end of June 2003. Ever since, the United States and North Korea have been reluctant participants in these talks.

Initially, this multilateral forum forged a broad consensus on the central issues. All the participants agreed that the Korean Peninsula must remain a nuclear free zone. They also agree that the solution must be a peaceful diplomatic solution. At this point the consensus ends. The past year's deliberations have revealed that the United States is out of step with the talks' other participants. All except the United States agree that diplomatic negotiations are the best route to a solution. Washington adamantly refuses to engage North Korea in diplomatic negotiations until it has unilaterally disarmed and dismantled its nuclear weapons program. The other nations, particularly North Korea, insist that bilateral negotiations are the preferred forum and all of them are engaging North Korea in bilateral negotiations. Washington also distinguishes itself from the other participants by ruling out the use of diplomatic and economic inducements to achieve a negotiated settlement. Instead, President Bush insists that he will not "reward North Korea's nuclear black mail." His preference is to "let China take care of North Korea," as the president stated in the first US presidential debate on September 30 debate with Senator Kerry.

Faltering Multilateralism

While the Bush administration has "talked the talk" of multilateralism, it has yet to "walk the walk." Instead, it has used the multilateral forum mainly for diplomatic shadow-boxing, rather than actually dealing with North Korea on substantive issues. Unfortunately, this strategy has not only met resistance from its partners, particularly South Korea, in the Six-Party Talks, but, more importantly, it has failed thus far to make meaningful progress toward the joint US-ROK goal—the nuclear disarmament of North Korea.

The Bush Administration's strategy also ignores the fact that the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula is no longer unique to North Korea. South Korea is now part of the problem. It's admission of "small" nuclear indiscretions since 1982, not to mention its earlier admissions regarding its nuclear weapons program in the 1970s, has greatly complicated the situation in Northeast Asia and efforts to halt nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. To begin with, Seoul's hesitant admissions have excited suspicions about its credibility and future intentions, particularly in Pyongyang but also in Tokyo and Beijing. It has also given North Korea reason to put off, if not drop out of the Six Party Talks.

The Roots of Proliferation

The even more profound consequence is what Seoul's misdeeds say about the underlying cause of nuclear proliferation on the peninsula. The admissions underscore the fact that national interests drive security strategy, regardless of which nation we are discussing. Loyalty to allies and commitments to international treaties are considerations, but they are not the decisive ones. Security comes first. These forces equally motivate decisions in Seoul and Pyongyang.

Seoul's admissions have also highlighted a second decisive factor that drives the two Koreas security strategies. Seoul and Pyongyang share a deep distrust of the "big" powers on their borders, specifically Japan, China and Russia, plus the distant United States. Koreans' common historical legacy taught them in the 19th Century not to trust a collapsing China and an expanding Japan. Koreans transferred their distrust to other big powers in the 20th Century. In 1943 , the World War II allies promised Korea independence "in due course." But in 1945, the Soviet Union and the U.S. divided Korea, and then each occupied half of the nation. The Korean War compelled Koreans to turn to separate superpowers for survival, crystallizing Korea's division.

The Cold War's end intensified Koreans' sense of insecurity and distrust. North Korea's benefactor collapsed, and with it the Soviet nuclear umbrella. This nurtured an appetite for a "self reliant" defense posture that came to include a "nuclear deterrence capability." South Korea meanwhile remained under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. However, its strategists saw U.S. congressional grumbling about Seoul's earlier authoritarian government as a threat to the U.S. defense commitment.

Today, the two Koreas distrust the U.S. for opposite reasons. North Korea sees America as its worst enemy, while South Korea fears the U.S. will abandon it. Washington's recent redeployment of infantry units to Iraq is the latest in a series of troop reductions dating from the Vietnam War. Each time the U.S. has considered or withdrawn troops, South Korea has quickened progress towards a self-reliant defense, and resumed nuclear weapons related experiments.

Needed – A Realistic Strategy

The Bush Administration's current strategy for dealing with nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia has failed. Since 2001, it has intensified friction with its ally in Seoul and allowed its enemy in Pyongyang to develop a "nuclear deterrent capability." The strategy also ignores the need for a more comprehensive approach to deal with South Korea's sense of insecurity and nuclear inclinations, ending the Korean War by replacing the armistice with a peace treaty, as the two Koreas agreed to do in 1992, ending ballistic missile production, development and exports, reduce conventional military forces, and promote human rights. Progress in all these areas would also promote the US-South Korea alliance.

Washington should give keener consideration to developing a more realistic and less moralistic approach that is more closely aligned with the peculiarities of Northeast Asia and Seoul's preferences and priorities. This means pursuing a strategy that accents diplomacy which, by definition, requires negotiations and concessions on both sides. Despite the Bush Administration's claims, progress on ending Libya's and Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs was preceded by diplomatic negotiations with major European powers plus the promise of numerous economic incentives and acceptance back into the international community. For Libya, where the most significant progress has been achieved, this meant substantial economic and security gains in the form of normalized commercial and diplomatic relations. Such an approach has proven far more effective than current US effort in Northeast Asia.

The U.S., Japan, China and Russia should band together to present both the Koreas a two-phase package deal. First, the four superpowers should give the two Koreas equally comprehensive security assurances. This would involve ending the Korean War and replacing the armistice with a peace treaty, a shared goal of both Koreas. This would also require that the two Koreas recognize that no foreign power will intervene in any way if they engage in hostilities with each other.

Next, the powers would formulate a joint Marshall Plan designed to revive the North Korean economy and to link it to South Korea's. This too is consistent with both Korea's priorities. But before it is implemented, both Koreas must give up their nuclear-weapons development programs in a complete and verifiable manner and all related equipment and facilities, accept comprehensive inspections, and initiate conventional-arms reduction talks. Disbursement of economic development funds would be linked to progress on the disarmament front. After all, the two Koreas want exactly what everyone else wants – peace, prosperity and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The absence of one threatens the others.

Replace Idealism with Realism

The U.S. strategy for dealing with problems on the Korean Peninsula is long over due for an overhaul. That strategy clings to Cold War assumptions and perceptions. Increasingly is its out of step with South Korea's efforts to pursue reconciliation with North Korea and

North Korea's continuing efforts to engage the international community. The U.S. strategy also clings to a moralistic dichotomy that America's idealists half a century ago imposed on their Cold War strategy. Beginning with the Korean War and the fall of China to communism, the United States and its allies divided the nations of East Asia into "good" non-communist and "bad" communist societies. The United States has learned to live with China and Vietnam, both still authoritarian communist societies, but no longer designated "bad." Only North Korea retains the label "bad." South Korea, however, discarded such labels when in the 1980s it initiated its '*Nordpolitic*" program to normalize diplomatic and commercial relations with all communist societies. A similar effort was launched with North Korea in 1988 and has redefined relations between the two Koreas.

Washington alone perpetuates this dated Cold War dichotomy. Discarding it and adjusting its strategy toward North Korea accordingly would not only strengthen its alliance with South Korea but also improve prospects for achieving the Bush Administration's avowed goal of achieving a peaceful diplomatic resolution to nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, Pyongyang will continue to manipulate and benefit from the "wedge" that Washington and Seoul are maintaining in their relationship.