

**Summary of
The U.S. Role in Korean Reconciliation**

**Remarks by
Dr. C. Kenneth Quinones
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The future of the U.S.-Republic of Korea alliance hinges on the ability of the two partners to adjust successfully to changing circumstances in Northeast Asia.

North Korea is the common cause for this divergence. Since at least 1993, some have claimed that the allies' common enemy, North Korea, has driven a wedge between Washington and Seoul. This may have been true a decade ago, but not now. Today North Korea, particularly its nuclear programs, remains their shared concern, but of greater concern is that how to deal with North Korea.

President Bush's priorities are to replace despotism with democracy and eliminate the threat of weapons of mass destruction and their proliferation.

South Korea shares Washington's and preference for a diplomatic solution. At this point, however, Seoul parts company with Washington. Its priorities are regionally, not globally oriented. Its long term aim is the promotion of reconciliation with North Korea, not the transformation of North Korea into a democracy. Seoul prefers diplomatic and economic engagement with North Korea, not Washington's more coercive strategy. Also, Seoul, unlike Washington, is willing to allow Pyongyang to retain a civilian nuclear program.

Actually, every US president since the alliance's birth during the Korean War has found it challenging to deal with his South Korean ally.

The US-ROK alliance came under intense stress even before it was formalized in 1953. South Korea's President Rhee Syng Man tangled repeatedly with US President Dwight Eisenhower. Rhee's priority was national unification while Eisenhower had promised the American people that he would end the war. Eisenhower won this tug-of-war.

A child of the Cold War, the alliance was nurtured by the mutual need to contain communism and to deter North Korean aggression. Deterrence, anchored in the United States' 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.

Major developments since 1980, however, have profoundly affected the alliance.

The Cold War's end ushered in an extensive realignment of relations in the region.

South Korea lunged ahead of North Korea. It expanded economically into a global trading power. Politically, South Koreans converted their government into a stable, maturing democracy while North Korea clung to its archaic autocracy. Similarly, the balance of military power on the Korean Peninsula underwent a virtual reversal after 1980.

Pyongyang had lost its primary champion, the Soviet Union. This superpower's collapse robbed North Korea of its nuclear umbrella and extensive military assistance. In the first Gulf War of 1991, the United States' superior weapons technology rendered obsolete the former Soviet Union's arsenal of conventional weapons. Pyongyang's once mighty conventional military prowess, almost entirely of Soviet origin, likewise was rendered impotent. Having lost its nuclear umbrella and economically unable to modernize its conventional weaponry, North Korea opted to build its own nuclear deterrence capability. The effort, however, blocked improvement of relations with its adversaries, the United States and Japan. Ever since, North Korea has confronted the dilemma of either nuclear disarmament to improve relations with the United States, or retain its arsenal and risk co-existence with its nemesis.

The end of the Cold War initiated a global realignment of alliances around the world, except between the United States and the ROK.

While the global tendency has been for the United States to render its allies both a greater voice and responsibility for their security, the opposite has been true on the Korean Peninsula. In 1993, the Clinton Administration quietly asserted its supremacy over the administration of President Kim Yong-sam regarding policy toward North Korea. Until that time, the United States had played a supporting role vis a vis the government in Seoul. Washington had supported Seoul's lead in determining how best to deal with Pyongyang. Beginning in 1993, the roles were reversed, a consequence of the US nuclear negotiations with North Korea.

The Korean Summit of June 2000 was a watershed in the two Koreas post-Korean War efforts toward reconciliation. The general trend ever since has been hesitant progress toward reconciliation between Seoul and Pyongyang. National reunification remains, and seems destined to remain into the foreseeable future, a distant hope. But peaceful coexistence and economic cooperation are slowly becoming a reality. The United States, however, persists in insisting that it must determine how best to deal with North Korea, and similarly asserts that South Korea much play the supporting role.

This reversal of roles has intensified stress in the US-ROK alliance.

The Bush Administration has been particularly adamant in this regard. Washington prefers coercion over engagement, and confrontation over diplomacy. Seoul seeks reconciliation with North Korea using diplomatic and economic engagement. Seoul still champions deterrence, but Washington's unilateral decision to reduce its troop level on the Korean Peninsula jarred South Koreans' confidence in the alliance.

President Bush should demonstrate respect and support for the policy preferences of his ally and its democratically elected president. The United States, long the alliance's dominate partner, should initiate an adjustment process. The aim must be to achieve a new balance between the two partners' national security needs and their people's expectations. Doing so would bridge the expanding wedge that now separates the two governments while also divides South Koreans over how best to deal with North Korea. It would also convince all Koreans, both north and south, that the United States truly supports the Korean reconciliation process. After all, the US-ROK alliance's ultimate goal is to achieve peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, the half century old alliance will retreat into history.