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# America and South Korea: The Ambivalent Alliance?

VICTOR D. CHA

The alliance between South Korea and the United States remains one of the most successful political-military relationships forged in the cold war era. What started as the quintessential “realist” alliance—formed between two parties that knew little about one another and had nothing in common except a common threat—has developed into a prosperous and militarily robust relationship between two market democracies that stands as a model of cold war success.

No relationship is without its problems. Yet, for nearly 50 years after the alliance was formed, America’s role in inter-Korean relations remained relatively uncontroversial: the United States guaranteed deterrence against a North Korean attack. Equally indisputable was US–South Korean unity on a policy of diplomatic isolation of and non-dialogue with the North.

Recently, this basic American function of “co-container” has been called into question. The US role in inter-Korean relations is now contested, the spectrum of views ranging from supporters of the cold war template to dissenters who see America as fundamentally an obstacle to improving inter-Korean relations.

The contested nature of the US role became evident after the June 2000 summit between North and South Korea. While the meeting marked a detente that relaxed tensions on the peninsula, it did not deter President George W. Bush from designating North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” after September 11. The election in 2002 of a South Korean president with a history of avowedly anti-American views spotlighted how the distinction between the United States as security guarantor and as a spoiler of inter-Korean reconciliation had been muddled at best, destroyed at worst.

The alliance appeared to unravel even further with the decision this year by the US to pull back its troops from their tripwire deterrent position along the demilitarized zone. South Koreans viewed this plan both as American preparation for a possible preemptive attack on the North (pulling US forces out of harm’s way) and as malicious “punishment” for anti-American demonstrations in South Korea at the end of 2002.

Fortunately, the situation is not so simple or so bleak as it might appear. America’s role on the peninsula, both as co-container of North Korea and as impediment to reconciliation, has always been nuanced. For most of the alliance’s history, the US posture has encompassed not only containment of the communist North, but also restraint of America’s South Korean ally.

As for the alleged sea change in South Korean attitudes toward the United States, a close analysis shows more evidence of ambivalence than aversion, and there is cause to believe that the recent groundswell of anti-Americanism will not prove as permanent as popularly predicted. In the end, the forces of democracy, geostrategy, and market prosperity appear to support a continuing, significant, and constructive rather than obstructive role for the United States on the Korean peninsula.

## AMERICA AS CO-CONTAINER

America’s co-container role coincided with the cold war, when North-South tensions were at their height. Brief periods saw some warming of inter-Korean relations—a July 1972 North-South joint communiqué, for example, and exchanges in 1984

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and 1985—but these were short-lived and did not alter the predominant relationship, which was adversarial. The South Koreans had virtually no interest in improving relations with the North. Because of this, America's role in inter-Korean relations was by definition limited to supporting its ally's position.

On the rare occasion that Washington probed the possibility of a thaw on the peninsula, South Korea's reaction was swift and negative, highlighting acute fears of allied abandonment in Seoul. During the Nixon administration, Seoul objected when the United States hinted that it might lift travel restrictions on North Korea. In July 1972, Foreign Minister Kim Yong-sik filed strong protests against a US official's use of the formal designation DPRK—the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—when referring to the North. Seoul harshly criticized these actions as departures from past practice and the first steps toward American recognition of the regime.

Buttressing America's crystal-clear containment role during the cold war was an implicit social contract between the allies: the United States would provide the stability and security that enabled Koreans to prosper economically beyond their wildest expectations. South Koreans in turn would allow the United States to maintain a military presence in Korea (on terms favorable to the United States) and to project power in the region.

Even as it fulfilled this explicit function of co-container against the North, the United States also played an implicit and less well-known role during the cold war: containing its own ally's ambitions on the peninsula. The governments of both Syngman Rhee (1948–1960) and Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) were never shy about their desire for unification, and these ambitions raised serious concerns within the US government about entrapment in a second Korean conflict.

In the early cold war years, South Korea's desires for "unification by force" (*pukch'in t'ongil* or *songong t'ongil*) were illustrated in stories about Syngman Rhee deliberately trying to sabotage the 1953 armistice negotiations because he wanted to prosecute the Korean War to its end with American support. Park Chung Hee also sought to retaliate militarily in response to North Korean provocations, such as the failed commando raid on South Korea's presidential Blue House in 1968.

Not wanting to enflame a second conflagration in Asia while the war in Vietnam raged, the United States became hypersensitive to the threat of entanglement in a new conflict by overzealous allied actions. This concern was evident in pointed messages that the Lyndon Johnson administration conveyed in 1968, on one occasion dispatching personal envoy Cyrus Vance to tell President Park that the United States would not tolerate any South Korean military retaliation for the failed North Korean assassination attempt on Park at the Blue House that year.

American archival records reveal the extent to which this preoccupation with restraining South Korea was interwoven with arguments that the United States should retain operational command authority within the alliance. The traditional rationale for America's holding command authority over US and South Korean forces was to enhance defensive war-fighting efficiency. But operational control also allowed the United States to keep a leash on its ally. Standing policy dictated that any unilateral military actions by the South would prompt a severe response by Washington, including immediate cessation of economic and military aid and even the use of American forces to impose martial law. According to records of White House deliberations in the late 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower went so far as to suggest that the United States would covertly support new leadership, forcibly remove Syngman Rhee, or even threaten to abrogate the alliance.

Admittedly, US concerns about a South Korean preemptive attack have abated considerably over the years, especially since democratization began in South Korea in 1987 and the United States transferred peacetime command authority to the South in 1994. The point remains, however, that the US role in inter-Korean relations during the cold war featured, explicitly or implicitly, containment of both North and South Korea.

## AMERICA AS SPOILER

The recent and more controversial role played by the United States on the peninsula, at least in popular perception, is as an "impeder" of improved North-South relations. A radical ideological fringe in South Korea has harbored this view for some time, but now it is playing a role in mainstream public opinion in the South.

Perceptions of America as an impeder became salient in 2000 and gained force after January 2001 with the confluence of two critical developments: the South's unprecedented engagement with the North, and a change in the military relationship between the United States and its ally.

President Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy," based on the principle of unconditional engagement with the North, facilitated the June 2000 summit

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meeting, which at the time far exceeded anyone's expectations. The summit's joint declaration, along with family reunions, joint infrastructure projects, and ministerial meetings, propelled North–South relations forward by leaps and bounds. All of this was a far cry from previous South Korean administrations' fixation on containment of the North. Not only did the South eschew any pretense of making engagement conditional, it also denied any need for dialogue channels to go through Seoul alone. The sunshine policy had no objection to world engagement with the reclusive regime.

However, Kim's policy did have the unintended consequence of fostering nationwide perceptions of America as an obstacle to better relations with the North. In his first meeting with George W. Bush in March 2001, Kim tried to lecture the newly inaugurated president on the wisdom of the sunshine policy, but the lecture apparently did not go well. President Bush called a "time-out" on President Bill Clinton's previous engagement with the North and his administration undertook a critical policy review. A US statement in June 2001 included an unconditional offer to meet with the North Koreans. But North Korea said it was not interested in meeting because of America's high-handed attitude. Of course, Bush's January 2002 "axis of evil" speech reduced chances for dialogue even further.

What emerged from the sunshine policy was a dual dynamic that put the United States in an unenviable catch-22. The policy's initial successes created the impression among many South Koreans that America's overbearing military footprint on the peninsula was no longer necessary. Indeed, during the summer of 2000, in the aftermath of the summit, demonstrations occurred at US military facilities to protest the American presence. For its part, the South Korean government ordered a toning down of celebrations marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Korean War; Seoul did not want to risk its new detente with the North by invoking memories of America's role as wartime savior. When the sunshine policy failed to elicit a reciprocal summit or other confidence-building measures from the North, the popular response was to look for scapegoats. The US presence and Bush's bellicose statements represented convenient targets.

Also contributing to the view of America as an impediment to reconciliation is a new dynamic in the military alliance: in effect, a decoupling of security interests. US and South Korean security interests have never been identical. While the South's top concern has been peninsular defense, America's worry is the danger of nuclear and missile proliferation (post-cold war) and the threat to homeland security (post-September 11) posed by the North. The allies share an interest in preventing a second North Korean invasion, of course. But with the effective deterrence of this contingency, gaps in the their views on proliferation have become clearer.

South Koreans question America's hard-line policy toward the North because the sunshine policy, in their view, reduces the primary threat posed to the South by diminishing the possibility of another conventional invasion, even if it fails to appease US worries about longer-range threats still posed by the North. This decoupling of America's nonproliferation interests from South Korea's security concerns feeds the view that the United States has been unduly spoiling the inter-Korean party since the June 2000 summit.

## America as permanent impediment?

Is the perception that America is an obstacle to North-South reconciliation now a permanent fixture of Korean public opinion? A snapshot of the political scene at the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003 might lead one to believe so. Political maverick and former labor activist lawyer Roh Moo-hyun was elected president in December 2002 on a clear wave of anti-Americanism. His campaign rhetoric, highly critical of Bush's "axis of evil" designation of North Korea, appeared to resonate with a broad-based constituency in South Korea. Perhaps for the first time in the South's political history, it appeared to many, particularly young Koreans, that the Americans were more threatening to their country than the communist threat from across the demilitarized zone. December 2002 polls showed that more South Koreans harbored negative images of the United States than of North Korea.

A Gallop Korea survey taken a fortnight after Roh's election painted a picture of a changing demographic in which a younger post-Korean War generation informed with a less grateful, more critical view of the United States had risen to political significance. While 26 percent of middle-age South Koreans held negative images of the United States, an astounding 76 percent of young people in their twenties and 67 percent of those in their thirties responded in a similar fashion. Moreover, 51 percent of South Koreans polled believed that North Korea's nuclear intransigence was the result of the Bush administration's hard-line policy. Only 25 percent attributed the problem to North Korean actions and intentions.

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On New Year's Eve 2002, 23,000 Koreans gathered in the vicinity of the American embassy in Seoul for a candlelight demonstration protesting the Bush administration's policies and alleged US military abuses. On February 8, 2003, a *60 Minutes* CBS television segment caught a group of young Koreans self-righteously responding to a loaded question that President Bush was scarier to them than North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

Perceptions of America as spoiler grew worse after the March 2003 announcement that the United States would pull back its troops from the DMZ to rear positions on the peninsula. Anger at the United States, in some people's minds, turned to genuine fear that America might be pulling forces out of range of North Korean artillery in order to press forward with a preemptive attack.

## NOT YET

A deeper and more nuanced analysis would look at longer-term trends beyond the heat of the 2002 presidential election campaign and would find less irreversible anti-Americanism than poll results and popular impressions suggest.

*Is the perception that America is an obstacle to North-South reconciliation now a permanent fixture of Korean public opinion?*

If the perception of America as the impeder in North-South relations is to prove a permanent fact of life, one would expect to observe two continuing trends. At the "street" or general public level, which presumably embodies the attitudes of the post-Korean War generation, dissatisfaction with the US military presence would be unconditional and growing. At the elite level, a widening gap in policy toward North Korea between Washington and Seoul would be evident as President Roh pursues engagement in defiance of the Bush administration's harder line.

Neither of these trends is indisputably evident. First, at the street level, there is an undeniable groundswell of dissatisfaction with the US military presence, expressed through the burning of flags and effigies of Bush and demonstrations in downtown Seoul. The proximate event fueling this movement was the acquittal, by a US military jury, of two servicemen for the accidental vehicular death of two South Korean schoolgirls in November 2002. Popular outrage over this outcome, fueled by the heat of presidential campaign rhetoric, turned one dimension of the election into a choice between the "pro-American" Lee Hoi-chang and the "anti-American" Roh Moo-hyun.

What is most interesting, however, is that the public anger and demonstrations at the end of 2002 were soon followed by counterdemonstrations by other South Korean NGOs expressing support for the US presence in Korea and calling for continuation of the long-standing alliance. These demonstrations, organized by Korean War veterans and religious groups and numbering in the tens of thousands, sought to make clear that the protests seen by the world at the end of 2002 did not represent all of Korean public opinion, and that a silent majority of Koreans still strongly supported the United States.

The counterdemonstrations suggest that anti-Americanism is more contested and less one-dimensional than it might seem. The reality in South Korea is that one can strongly support America and its presence in Korea despite disagreeing with its policy toward North Korea. Likewise, one can oppose inequities and perceived abuses in US–Korean relations while still supporting the alliance. Civic group leaders who organized the pro-US demonstrations in December 2002 noted exactly this point. Indeed, polls at the height of anti-American sentiment in December still showed a clear majority of respondents (55 percent) supporting a US troop presence.

Wellesley College political scientist Katherine Moon helpfully distinguishes between *banmi* anti-Americanism and *bimi* anti-Americanism. The former term refers to a deeper, ideological aversion to US hegemony. Had this been the prevailing opinion in Korea, then the US role as "impeder" would be permanent. The latter terms refers less to an ideological opposition to the United States and more to a critical, yet supportive view. Arguably, not only is this latter view less severe, it is actually healthy for the alliance.

*Bimi* anti-Americanism can be seen as a product of South Korea's development and democratization. It reflects the emergence of a young, affluent, educated generation that views quality-of-life issues such as the environment, labor, and the rule of law as critical to the national agenda. This generation's views will naturally tend to bump up against some of the more anachronistic aspects of a cold war alliance that puts a major foreign military presence in the heart of the host nation's capital. Much like the experience in Japan and Germany during the 1960s, South Korean complaints in this sense represent growing pains within the alliance as the

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junior partner matures and not a permanent fissure in the relationship.

The backpedaling in the South Korean viewpoint on US troops, evident particularly since March 2003, offers another lesson about the supposed depth of anti-Americanism. A number of prominent American conservatives filled the commentary pages of major newspapers with columns criticizing the South Koreans as ungrateful allies and calling for the pullout of US troops after the anti-American demonstrations at the end of 2002. This was followed, in early March 2003, by reports that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was considering "adjustments" in the US deployment in South Korea as part of a movement within the Defense and State Department bureaucracies to undertake a serious review of America's presence on the peninsula.

If the United States were viewed as a permanent impediment to inter-Korean relations, the popular response would be somewhat welcoming of these steps. Instead, South Koreans from all walks of life expressed vehement opposition to talk of US withdrawal. In an unusual public plea, Prime Minister Koh Kun, on behalf of the new Roh government, asked Ambassador Thomas Hubbard on March 6 that the United States not remove forces from South Korea.

Meanwhile, fears that the announced troop redeployment might signal preparation for an attack on the North subsided after the initial shock. US officials assured that the first phase of force rebalancing entailed repositioning rather than withdrawing troops, in which case they would still be vulnerable to North Korean counterattack. A repositioning of some 17,000 US soldiers away from the DMZ would still leave thousands of American expatriates, not to mention millions of South Koreans, acutely vulnerable to North Korean artillery.

President Roh, who had called during his campaign for a more equal relationship with the United States and pointedly asked top military officials whether they had prepared for self-reliant defense, now called for an end to anti-US vigils in Seoul. As Doug Struck noted in a March 14, 2003, *Washington Post* story, "The anti-American demonstrations here have suddenly gone poof. US soldiers are walking the streets of Seoul again without looking over their shoulders. The official line from the South Korean government is: Yankees stay here."

If South Korean resentment of America's military presence is less clear-cut than many would suggest, so, too, are the policy differences supposedly dividing American and South Korean leaders. A permanent role for the United States as impeder of peninsular reconciliation would suggest greater gaps between the Roh government's policies toward North Korea and those of the Bush administration. Campaign rhetoric certainly gave the impression that the gaps would be wide. Yet, since Roh has taken office, these gaps have closed with a distinct moderating of the Roh government's attitudes toward both the United States and North Korea.

For his foreign policy advisers, the new South Korean president chose experience over ideology. He also chose experts with substantial understanding of and interaction with the United States. Just after the December elections, Roh lectured anti-American civic groups to moderate their behavior. He has publicly supported the US war in Iraq and, in a controversial decision, agreed this spring to dispatch to Iraq a contingent of noncombatant forces.

More to the point, Roh acknowledged that "US troops are necessary at the present for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and will be in the future as well." And in an extraordinary public admission, Roh admitted during his first summit trip to the United States that his decision to sign a declaration in his past activist days calling for the removal of American forces from the peninsula was a "mistake."

After North Korea tested cruise missiles three times in February and March 2003, Roh criticized the tests and called the prospect of a nuclear North Korea unacceptable. Despite explicit pledges to maintain a primary role for the South Koreans in "mediating" talks between the North and the United States, Roh not only acceded to North Korean demands that Seoul be excluded from the US–North Korea–China talks in Beijing, held April 23–24, 2003, but also defended the format by saying that substance was more important than form.

## FORCES OF CONTINUITY

The Roh government is still new, and events could change rapidly. US–South Korea relations have yet to be fully tested by the North Korea nuclear crisis. Still, it is clear that since December 2002, expectations of strains in US–South Korea relations have been replaced by a new confidence in the relationship. Why has the moderation in Roh's position been so marked, and contrary to what many experts had predicted? A variety of explanations offer themselves, including the difference between campaign promises and presidential decisions, and the tendency of new leaders to discover that policies they have criticized are the

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way they are for a reason. Three longer-term factors also deserve consideration.

First, and perhaps most important: South Korea is now a vibrant democracy. Roh Moo-hyun, as chief executive, is required to carry out policies that represent the majority of the country rather than a narrow local constituency. This dynamic is common to most liberal democracies and resonates with recent Korean political history. Many were deeply concerned when Kim Dae Jung took office in 1998 that his past views would lead to extremely difficult relations with the United States. But Kim made appointments across the political aisle, moved toward the center, and ended his term in office as perhaps the most pro-American president in South Korea's political history. Similarly Roh, although a political maverick, is not immune to the democratic system's moderating impulses. Public regard for the sunshine policy has diminished, meanwhile, in light of recent revelations about side payments the Kim government made to North Korea in exchange for its participation in the 2000 summit.

Second, while political leaders change in South Korea, geography does not. South Korea remains a relatively smaller nation in a region of great powers contending for influence on the peninsula. Historically, Koreans have contended with this geostrategic environment with one of two grand strategies. One has been a policy of isolation or neutrality (hence, the "hermit kingdom"), trying to withdraw from the region's power politics. This proved relatively unsuccessful (and arguably is still practiced in North Korea today). The other strategy has been to ally with one of the great powers. This approach was fairly effective with regard to China before the twentieth century. It was clearly successful in the postwar era, turning the South into the most vibrant liberal democracy in Asia and the third-largest economy in the region and the eleventh-largest in the world. A powerful geostrategic logic pushes South Koreans to continue placing their bets on a relationship with the great power in the region that is most distant and that shares their political and economic values—that is, the United States.

Third, Roh's moderation is intimately tied to economic development imperatives, particularly regarding policies toward North Korea. At the beginning of 2003, it was clear that the crisis over North Korea was having a vastly negative effect on the South Korean economy. Roh's desire to continue his country's slow but steady recovery from the financial crisis of 1997–1998 is perhaps his most important domestic objective, and South Korea has made serious efforts to implement economic reforms. Yet North Korean agitations have undermined much of the international confidence in these efforts. The North Korean missile tests carried out earlier this year saw sovereign credit outlook downgrades by Moody's and Standard and Poor's, along with a stock market slide and a drop in investment from the United States.

The economics alone of the North Korean threat would suggest, then, that gaps between US and South Korean policies may narrow. Seoul and Washington may not share identical interests with regard to North Korean weapons proliferation, but they still could care about the same thing for different reasons.

## WHO IS TO BLAME?

Roh's term of office under the Korean constitution will last five years, but his immediate tenure is one year before the next general elections in 2004. And the primary issue for voters is how to continue the slow but steady economic recovery since the 1997 financial crisis. If North Korea continues to act in ways that hurt growth and international investor confidence in South Korea, then surely there is a limit to which the South Korean public and elite can continue to blame America, rather than North Korea, for their problems.

Although these imperatives could push South Korea in the direction of appeasing the North to avert further destabilizing actions, the opposite appears to be taking place. During Roh's May 2003 visit to the United States, he acknowledged that he was not naive about North Korea's record of ignoring agreements, noting that he did not "trust North Korea that much."

While a strengthened alliance is not the assured direction in which US–South Korean relations will go, it is likely that Washington's and Seoul's perspectives on North Korea will grow closer. Indeed, the first year of the Roh presidency offers confirming evidence. All of this lends credence to the view that America's perceived role as impeder between the two Koreas may prove less abiding than many of the younger generation are prone to believe. ■

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