

U.S.-ROK: DIVERGING THREAT PERCEPTIONS OF NORTH KOREA?

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Same Bed, Different Dreams! This is becoming an increasingly popular way to describe the U.S.-ROK defense relationship, a relationship that each professes to embrace but which suffers from different priorities and perceptions, as well as different threat assessments. All too often, one side's dream has been the other's nightmare. Even where threat perceptions overlap, there is often serious disagreement over how best to respond to this threat. In fact, as this paper will argue, it is this difference in approaches, more so than difference in threat perceptions *per se*, that is the major source of contention. Nonetheless, different threat perceptions do matter and do play a part.

The “different dreams/nightmares” description unfortunately pertains to more than just the relationship between Washington and Seoul; it also describes the situation inside both capitals and inside both ruling parties as well. Differences within the Bush administration between the “internationalists” and the “neocons” are well-documented. Neither dismisses the North Korean threat, but arguments over the best approach – engagement versus isolation and pressure to bring about regime change – have until recently hampered U.S. efforts at addressing the threat or at cooperating with its ROK allies in developing a truly unified approach. For the moment, the “engagers” seem to have the upper hand, but there is serious question as to how long this might last, especially in the absence of positive movement from the DPRK.

In the ROK, the Roh administration is committed to engagement and the opposition begrudgingly goes along; the debate here is more over how tough one needs to be in the course of engagement – how much one is supposed to get in return for excessive giving. This issue of reciprocity haunted the originator of the Sunshine Policy, then-President Kim Dae-jung, and has hampered the efforts of Roh Moo-hyun's Peace and Prosperity Policy (which has proven to be little more than a renaming of his predecessor's approach, earlier promises of reciprocity notwithstanding). There has been some hardening in the ROK attitude of late – Seoul's refusal to deliver promised food aid until Pyongyang takes some step forward in implementing the Feb. 13 agreement – but this most likely reflects the pressure of local politics as much or more than a genuine belief that it is (finally) time to take a more hardline position vis-a-vis Pyongyang. (Whatever the motivation, the move is most welcomed in Washington.)

The real difficulty in the ROK is in *acknowledging* the threat. Ever since the day that Kim Dae-jung returned from his historic June 2000 Summit with Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang and declared that “war is no longer possible,” Korean leaders have been forced to downplay the threat, so much so that the Korean Ministry of Defense (or at least its uniformed members) seem increasingly frustrated over not being able to brand the North a threat, even while being charged to defend the nation against it. The fact that military exercises and military preparedness continue and that maintaining the alliance today remains a high priority, even within the Roh administration, demonstrates the recognition that a threat remains, and has gotten worse as a result of the North's progress in developing missiles and nuclear weapons. But it remains politically incorrect within the Roh administration to brand the DPRK a “threat” – remember the fuss over the

Defense White Paper? This, in part, can be attributed to not wanting to derail the North-South dialogue process – in more belittling terms, out of fear of “offending” the North, as critics love to proclaim – but also because this can be seen as undermining the accomplishments of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, invalidating the approach that Seoul has taken toward the North and thus handing the opposition a political victory.

(The cure to this problem is for both sides to agree on the need for a balanced policy of engagement and deterrence that would depoliticize the South’s relations with the North in the interest of national security, but what are the odds of that happening any time soon?)

Unfortunately, the ROK government has done a good job of convincing the average citizen that the North is more to be pitied than feared. As a result, the citizens of South Korea appear much less concerned with the threat from the North than reason would otherwise dictate. More seem to take perverse pride in Pyongyang’s nuclear achievements (or assume that they will one day inherit this capability when the North somehow peacefully fades away) than fear that such weapons may be used against “fellow Korean brothers,” the North’s periodic threats to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire” notwithstanding. There is, in short, a real disconnect between the people of South Korea and the military forces whose duty it is to protect them, a difference that is perpetuated by the Seoul government for political reasons (much in the same way that non-democratic ROK governments in the past seemed to overplay the threat to justify their policies).

Another real disconnect appears on the surface to exist between the stated policies and actions of both governments. The U.S. continues to call the North a serious and growing threat but wants to reduce its force levels (if not pull out ground forces entirely) and accelerate the transfer of wartime OPCON; the South plays down the threat but worries about U.S. force reductions and wants to delay OPCON transfer. While there are explanations that make these positions seem somewhat more reasonable (see below for the U.S. and above for the ROK), a lack of public discussion regarding policy and perceptions adds to the confusion.

I believe part of the problem today is that the Korean Defense Ministry is more in step with the U.S. State Department than with the U.S. Defense Department, which perversely shares the views of many in Korea that the U.S. should draw down, if not leave entirely. This was the case at least during the Rumsfeld Defense Department. Hopefully (revealing my own bias on this issue), this could change under Gates and his successors, if and when they ever look beyond Iraq and figure out why Korea still matters. The other problem is that the Korean Unification Ministry seems out of step with everyone (with the possible exception of the president and his most ardent supporters and downright DPRK sympathizers), given its self-assumed role as Pyongyang’s defense attorney (a description shamelessly stolen from Gordon Flake).

It should be acknowledged that there are some among the (ultra-) conservatives, who believe that the President and/or a sizable number of his supporters are indeed communist sympathizers (or worse). Their approach adds more heat than light to the situation and makes the effort to find common ground that much more difficult.

The truth, then, is that there are different threat perceptions both within the ROK and U.S. as well

as between them, and this makes alliance management extremely difficult.

To address the apparent DoD disconnect, the Pentagon does not deny the threat, of course, but seems to believe that it can be deterred with considerably fewer forces, especially since there is a crying need for more ground forces elsewhere (Iraq and Afghanistan, in particular). It also believes, correctly, that the ROK armed forces are more capable of dealing with this threat with limited U.S. support. Add to this a bit of petulance over the political rhetoric in Seoul – both in terms of playing down the threat and occasionally playing an anti-U.S. card (which has not been the case recently but memories are long) – and you see the desire for reductions. There is the further logic of reducing the U.S. “footprint” in hopes of sustaining a long-term presence as well, but the timing could not be worse, since it sends (or reinforces) the signal that the U.S. is so consumed by Iraq that it is not prepared to honor its commitment elsewhere.

To make sure one of the above points, regarding ROK capabilities, is not missed, I do believe that the U.S. and ROK share the view that the South is increasingly more capable of handling the conventional military threat posed by the North, so in this instance, threat assessments coincide. There is general agreement that the North is not suicidal and therefore is not likely to launch an attack that would result in its destruction – of course, the alliance remains vital to the North believing that this would be the consequence. Where there remains a difference in perception, or perhaps more accurately a difference in priorities, is over the nuclear threat, as it pertains to proliferation rather than as a direct threat against the South.

I don't want to belabor the point here, but my experience as chairman of a Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) Study Group on Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction has led me to the conclusion that the ROK is not alone in Asia in viewing the nuclear challenge as America's (or the West's) problem, more so than their own. Even among those who acknowledge the seriousness of the nuclear threat, the attitude that it is Washington's problem – or that Washington, not Pyongyang, is the cause of the problem – prevails. The idea that proliferated nuclear weapons or (more likely and of greater concern) fissile material or “dirty bombs” do not really constitute a threat to Asia has resulted in a considerably higher priority being attached to counter-proliferation by Washington (among others) – especially the desire to keep such weapons and materials, which Pyongyang claims to possess, out of the hands of non-state actors who would likely not hesitate to use them if they could.

The ROK sees stability on the Peninsula as a more important goal than non-proliferation, which is somewhat understandable. Many in the ROK (progressives and conservatives alike) view the greatest threat as coming from a DPRK collapse, which could have severe political, economic, and socio-cultural consequences for the ROK. The costs of absorbing a chaotic North would be enormous and are easier to compute than the costs associated with keeping Pyongyang on life support or allowing it to pursue a nuclear weapons program.

But one needs to keep in mind that a radiological attack by some terrorist group on the West could seriously disrupt peace and stability on the Peninsula, if source materials were traced back to the DPRK (and perhaps if they could not be traced back to anywhere else and Pyongyang seemed the most likely suspect). Should the North get caught in the act of transferring such material, this could

also have extreme consequences. Of course, the impact of a radiological attack anywhere on the global economy must also be taken into account. There is also the question of President Roh's credibility, both with Washington and with Pyongyang. He is on record repeatedly asserting that he "would not tolerate" a nuclear weapons-equipped DPRK, but it remains "business as (if not better than) usual" when it comes to many aspects of North-South interaction.

As an aside here, it is worth mentioning the biggest change in threat perception affecting events on the Korean Peninsula: namely, Pyongyang's perception that the threat of direct U.S. action is so low, given the enormous drain on U.S. military forces caused by the Iraq War – most of the 25th Infantry Division's forces, earmarked as the first responder if "the balloon goes up" in Korea, are either in Iraq or Afghanistan (or getting ready to go there again) – that it can afford to push the limits without fear of serious unilateral retribution. While the Bush administration continues to proclaim (as it should) that "all options are on the table," few in Pyongyang seemed really worried today about a major U.S. military action, and this impacts Pyongyang's bargaining position (and tactics) in ways that do not serve Washington's interests – yet another unintended consequence of Iraq. I think Pyongyang does realize, however, that nuclear proliferation would increase considerably the likelihood of serious U.S. and broader global retribution – UNSCR 1718 helped reinforce this message, although loose adherence to it will have a negative impact on its deterrent value.

The greatest implication of Seoul's downplaying the threat posed by the North is not to U.S.-ROK defense relations (since the realists on both sides continue to maintain military preparedness) but in justifying the alliance to the public in Korea. This has implications for alliance management both today and in the future. Why should the ROK people put up with the inconvenience and costs associated with a sizable military presence if there is no real threat to defend against? Why, for that matter, should the U.S. want to stay, if not needed – remember, the standard answer to the question of "How long will U.S. forces remain on the Peninsula?" has traditionally been: "As long as the Korean people want us there."

While attempts to deepen the relationship, such as the recent effort to establish a Free Trade Agreement – which could have serious security implications if either side pulls out at this point – are good and, if successful, can have some residual effect on alliance maintenance, what is really needed is a long-term vision for the alliance, based on the future rationale, even in the absence of a North Korean threat, for a close ROK-U.S. security alliance relationship. It is not the purpose of this paper to go into these arguments – I have written extensively on the topic and would be pleased to provide my own thinking to those who are curious upon request – but I felt it necessary to insert this point, to put the discussion of different threat perceptions and approaches in broader perspective.

Speaking of broader threat perceptions, let me end with a discussion of the other "threat" over which perceptions and misperceptions abound: namely, the threat posed by a rising China. Logic and proximity (not to mention history) would tell you that the ROK has more to fear of a rising China than does the United States. Despite (or perhaps because of) this, Seoul seems hesitant to discuss China as a threat and fears that today's or any future alliance relationship will be cast in anti-China terms. This fear is exacerbated by the perception (and here I would argue

misperception) that the U.S. is pursuing a generally confrontational approach toward the PRC.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance, today or in the future, is not and could not be used to “contain” China’s peaceful rise. It does help reinforce China’s pledge to not abuse its increased power vis-a-vis Korea, something ROK citizens should (and seemingly do, at least on occasion) take seriously, given disputed interpretations of history and historical claims. Kim Dae-jung used to argue, I believe correctly, that a continued strong and viable alliance relationship with the U.S. is essential to permit Seoul to have simultaneous good relations with all its other neighbors, both today and even post-reunification. Unfortunately, this argument is seldom heard today in either Washington or in Seoul.

Taking its place, in some quarters, is an argument that I find disingenuous – one in which the alliance relationship is described as an attempt to create a “hegemonic order under American influence” aimed at countering both the DPRK and PRC. This is put forth by advocates of multilateral cooperation as a replacement for the bilateral U.S.-ROK relationship. No one is a bigger supporter of multilateralism in Asia than I am, but I do not see alliances and multilateral cooperation as “either-or,” but as mutually reinforcing and instrumental in dealing with whatever real or potential threats may evolve in the future.

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