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COMMENTARY

Bolstering American
 Influence in Asia

By **DEVIN T. STEWART** and **JAMES C. FARRER**

The United States is losing the "image" war. And the theater of this battle has extended beyond the Middle East to Asia. Yet the U.S. has the tools necessary to ensure it remains at the center of gravity of the region. It's just a matter of using them.

Washington now spends only a fraction of what it used to in the 1960s on nonmilitary means to promote American influence abroad, such as with foreign aid to show and convince people of the virtues of American liberal values. While freedom, democracy and human rights are not hard sells, the packaging must be right.

Nowhere in Asia is American influence sagging more than in South Korea. So it is all the more imperative that this is the first place to repair the breach. The first step may seem like going backwards: The U.S. should start by offering to withdraw most of its troops from South Korea, negotiating this in exchange for a permanent peace treaty with North Korea. Indeed, if during the Cold War the American presence acted as a tripwire against North Korean aggression, today with Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons U.S. troops in the South function as potential hostages for Kim Jong Il.

But if it withdraws from South Korea, won't the U.S. be ceding influence to China? On the face of it, a troop reduction would appear to mean less influence. But "noninterference" is now the foreign-policy principle providing China more influence and appeal in East Asia. As such, the U.S. should be promoting the whole panoply of liberal ideals to give it an even keener edge against China.

At the same time, however, Asians need to be reminded that what remains of American military power in the region is still the best guarantor of peace and stability -- rather than a threat to any nation's sovereignty. On the other hand, the U.S. needs to act with a vision of the future of Asia, rather than simply defending Cold War positions no one believes to be relevant anymore. In some parts of the region, such as Okinawa and South Korea, residents see the U.S. military as an occupation force and a nuisance.

What needs to be done? The U.S. should support President Roh Moo Hyun's efforts to put South Korea in charge of inter-Korean politics. As part of this shift, the U.S. needs to firmly state its commitment to a unified and democratic Korea where U.S. troops will no longer be needed. Then, North Korea would have to stop using the pretext of the U.S. military presence for its belligerence. The U.S. commitment to South Korea's security would remain intact through an expanded and strengthened regional alliance that might eventually include Japan, a united Korea and possibly even a democratic China.

What else can the U.S. do to build ties with Korea? It can extend a hand to the North Korean people, treated so miserably by their own government. By doing more to help North Koreans directly and allowing North Korean refugees to enter the U.S. in large numbers, Washington will strengthen ties with Koreans, both in the North and South, in a way that China cannot.

Even if China were radically to change its policies and stop forcibly repatriating refugees from North Korea, China would never allow Korean refugees to become citizens the way the U.S. lets millions of refugees from all over the world do so. The U.S. treats them as equals and allows them to succeed in their new country in ways China likely won't. Asians appreciate this of America.

Some American policy analysts caution that an American withdrawal from South Korea would lead Japan to

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conclude that the U.S. commitment to Asia is ebbing, so it must fend for itself. Given that North Korea has lobbed missiles over Japan, and with China seeming reluctant to stop Kim Jong Il's nuclear program, Japan then might decide it must develop a nuclear program of its own. This logic is dubious.

For pacifist Japan to go nuclear would represent a revolution in the country's domestic politics. From a very young age, Japanese schoolchildren are taught that the atomic bomb is a horrible thing. But even if the Japanese public were suddenly to support a homegrown nuclear-weapons program -- out of a real fear of the North Korean threat, for example -- a nuclear-armed Japan would certainly tip the scales of influence toward the U.S. rather than away. So either the Japanese remain dependent on American military strength or the U.S.'s tightest alliance structure in Asia becomes even more fearsome.

In the past, the U.S. had not wanted to be perceived as making policy based on the wishes of other countries, particularly when dealing with enemies. To defuse the Cuban missile crisis, former U.S. President John F. Kennedy agreed to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey; but the deal was kept secret to avoid the appearance of caving in to Soviet pressure.

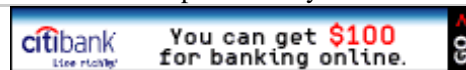
In the case of the North Korean nuclear program, South Korea is a U.S. ally asking the U.S. to act moderately. Washington should show a public willingness to comply with South Korean wishes. The message the U.S. should be trying to send is that America leads the international system with the best interests of community members in mind, not simply its own.

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