



Northeast Asia: Korea at Center of Major Shift

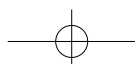
By Devin Stewart

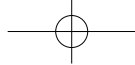
The North Korean nuclear test comes as the alliance between the U.S. and South Korea grows more tenuous

North Korea's nuclear test in October 2006, long threatened, nonetheless came as a shock. Pyongyang's decision to go ahead with the nuclear test in defiance of the wishes of the international community, and specifically of China, represented one of the major punctuation marks of history, according to John J. Hamre, president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

For China, it marked the tipping point where North Korea has become more of a liability than an asset, Hamre said in a weekly commentary that he circulates to CSIS staff and other policy experts. At the same time, South Korea's growing independence from the U.S. makes a reunified Korea under Seoul's control a genuine alternative, he suggested.

In fact, tremendous political and economic change in South Korea over the past several years has brought





about a major change in its relationship with the U.S. Combined now with the new nuclear capacity in North Korea, this change could indeed herald a possible shift in the power structure of Northeast Asia.

It has been, paradoxically, South Korea's economic liberalization and growth, as well as its democratization and more active role in world politics – all policies

experience is the same – they are concerned with education, pop culture, etc. The irony is that the U.S. and ROK are more similar than ever, but this common experience shared by industrialized nations could be a source of increased nationalism.”

Korea's rising national sentiment and confidence has led to medium- and long-term tensions. The return of

military control to the Koreans has become a point of controversy and a test of sorts for the health of the relationship. Some Koreans are resisting an earlier deadline because they feel it suggests a betrayal of the long-term alliance with the U.S. As a U.S. administration official noted on the condition of anonymity: “With the rise in nationalism in South Korea, you'd think that a shift in the command structure would be

popular, but it has become a political football. Korean political parties are reading into it as an end of the U.S.-ROK alliance, so it is always labeled as too early.”

In the economic realm, arguably the principal driver of its new-found confidence, South Korea has become more admired and less dependent on the U.S. for growth. The South Korean economy has grown steadily for several years and is now the world's 11th largest, and many Koreans believe the country should be treated as such. What Koreans want, in Snyder's words, is affirmation that they have arrived, that they are the U.S.'s “star pupil” – particularly after the reforms implemented by Seoul as a reaction to the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

But the sources of tension go much deeper. The fundamental strategies of the two countries differ in their approach toward major foreign policy issues. As Snyder puts it, the Korean and U.S. national security strategies are “documentations of the countries' differences.” While Korea sees China as the emerging leader of Asia, for example, the U.S. seeks to maintain its dominance. According to Snyder, the U.S. national security strategy is “a realist document, while the Korean strategy is idealist or constructivist on opportunities of making the region into what we want it to be.”

Says one U.S. administration official: “Korea and America have different realities – mostly coming from



Photographer Elsa Ruiz

“Deep-seated differences over history, political and economic systems, ethnicity, religion, and cultural traditions have prevented the countries of the region from seeking a shared destiny”

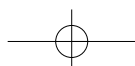
Ban Ki-moon, South Korean foreign minister and UN secretary-general-designate

encouraged by Washington – that have created what some call turmoil in the alliance between South Korea and the U.S. The influential scholar Bruce Cumings has gone so far as to say that the current state of the alliance is at its worst since the 1950s.

While Northeast Asia is now one of the world's economic powerhouses, relations between the region's three major countries are anything but harmonious as South Korea is caught between an ascendant China and a more assertive Japan. South Korea, formally known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), has relied on its strong bilateral relationship with the U.S. to anchor its position in the world, and the shifting power structure may now be changing that relationship.

The problem is that as South Korea and the U.S. move away from a patron-client relationship, several persistent factors in the economic, sociological, political, and security realms may delay the two countries from regaining sure footing in their alliance, making the balance of power equation in Northeast Asia rather open ended.

“The U.S.-ROK relationship is at a crossroads,” says Scott Snyder, a senior associate at the Asia Foundation. “Critical issues coming up have implications beyond the issues themselves. In the long term, American and Korean societies are converging. Korea and the U.S. are industrialized, and the Korean and American youth



generational change and different threat assessments. The Koreans seem to want to engage North Korea by osmosis, pushing the North toward reform. I am less optimistic about North Korean reforms – most of them are marginal. Kim Jong Il is simply not ready to reform.”

The North Korean nuclear test has thrown a spotlight on the whole situation. Hamre's memo suggested that China would now be willing to see a peaceful absorption of North Korea by its southern neighbor. However, this is not likely to happen immediately and explains Beijing's restraint in the debate over UN sanctions, Hamre said.

Despite its new distance to the U.S., South Korea is increasingly wary of China's growing influence, many experts say. For this reason, the U.S.-Korea alliance will probably survive for years, as Seoul recognizes the value of keeping ties with a big power that is comfortably far away. Scott Rembrandt of the Korea Economic Institute likens the current problems to a bumpy plane ride: “Does turbulence in the relationship mean a crash is imminent? I would say, no. The U.S.-ROK alliance will be around for a while, but a big shift is under way. Does a divergent threat perception kill the alliance? I would say, no – it is in both countries' interests to maintain the alliance.”

Several ambitious policy initiatives are in the works that may help redefine the relationship. One initiative that has been getting a lot of press attention, especially in Seoul, is the possible U.S.-South Korea free trade agreement (FTA) currently being negotiated. While the trade zone could help make the relationship more balanced, as ties would move away from being primarily military, the FTA is meeting increasing resistance within South Korea. Some Koreans see the prospect of an FTA with the U.S. as humiliating, especially if it did not cover goods produced in the ancient Korean capital of Kaesong, which is located in North Korea. Meanwhile, agriculture is certain to be a sticking point.

Another proposal, floated in an article by Ian Bremmer, Choi Sung-hong and Yoriko Kawaguchi in the winter 2006 issue of *The National Interest*, is to assemble South Korea, the U.S., Japan, Russia, and China toward addressing practical issues such as energy security.

In a September 2006 speech at the Asia Society in New York – before Pyongyang's announcement of its nuclear test – Ban Ki-moon, then South Korea's foreign minister and later selected to become UN secretary-general, emphasized that the Asia Pacific region is lagging far



Image above: South Korean foreign minister and United Nations secretary-general-designate Ban Ki-moon (right) greets U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs Nicholas Burns at Ban's office in Seoul November 7, 2006

behind in regional cooperation. “Deep-seated differences over history, political and economic systems, ethnicity, religion, and cultural traditions have prevented the countries of the region from seeking a shared destiny,” Ban said. He stressed the importance of leadership by the U.S., “the essential power in the region,” in promoting greater regional cooperation.

While the nuclear test injected new uncertainty into the prospects for regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, North Korea subsequently announced its intention to rejoin the six-party talks that bring together North and South Korea, the U.S., Japan, China and Russia to discuss North Korea's nuclear weapons capability. It is very possible, Hamre suggested in his memo, that the six-party talks – even without North Korea – could evolve into the de facto instrument for managing the process of the major transition in Northeast Asia.

Devin Stewart is a program director at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs in New York and served as chairman of the Korea Japan Study Group in Tokyo and Washington, D.C.