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## CHANGING MILITARY DYNAMICS IN EAST ASIA POLICY BRIEF 3, JANUARY 2012

### *Grand Strategies on the Korean Peninsula*

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### SUMMARY

The consideration of grand strategies on the Korean peninsula entails looking both at the approaches of North and South and at the dynamics between them. South Korean grand strategy is still anchored by its alliance with the United States; North Korean grand strategy is still struggling with the collapse of the Cold War alliance structures and the pursuit of reformist paths in China and Russia. The recent leadership transition in North Korea does not seem to offer much hope for improved relations between North and South or between South Korea and the United States.

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## OVERVIEW

South Korean grand strategy is still anchored by its alliance with the United States and deep integration with the world economy. Some politicization of the alliance has occurred since the transition to democracy in 1987, with swings in policy between periods of closer alignment with the United States and more willingness to engage with North Korea and China. Both political dynamics—namely, the election of a conservative government under Lee Myung Bak—and North Korean behavior since 2009 have served to strengthen the alliance. But the limited returns on the administration's hardline stance toward the North are likely to tilt policy back toward more engagement regardless of which party prevails in the National Assembly and presidential elections of 2012.

With respect to the North, grand strategy is still struggling with the collapse of the Cold War alliance structures and the pursuit of reformist paths in both China and Russia. China has replaced the Soviet Union as North Korea's main protector, but has not provided adequate assistance to bail the North Korean leadership out of its underlying economic difficulties. Following the death of Kim Jong-il, the new and untested North Korean leadership faces two fundamental questions. Is it willing to seriously negotiate an end to its nuclear ambitions? And is it willing to embrace a more reformist economic course that would provide security assurances through other means? At present, the answers to these two questions appear to be “no,” in part due to the uncertainties associated with the succession process and the reliance of the new leadership on the military.

## THE SOUTH KOREAN SYSTEM: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ALLIANCE

The place of South Korea in America's postwar hub-and-spokes system in the Pacific is well-known (for example, Cha 2009/10). Nixon's Guam doctrine no less than Jimmy Carter's efforts to withdraw troops introduced substantial uncertainties. Nonetheless, Carter's efforts were beaten back from within his own administration, and the transition to democratic rule in 1987 obviated his human rights preoccupations. Democratization introduced some politicization of the relationship in South Korea, but no U.S. administration since Carter has fundamentally questioned the value of the alliance. Calls for a serious reduction of the American presence are confined largely to the fringes of the U.S. policy debate, thanks largely to North Korean behavior.

The U.S. debates were most heated during the years when the Bush and Roh presidencies overlapped (January 2003–January 2008) and were about whether and how South Korea would play the changing roles the United States has envisioned for it. The Rumsfeld Department of Defense made the most intrusive demands, partly as a result of the “transformation” process, partly because of the political demands of the Iraq war and the global war on terrorism. In a somewhat different guise, these debates were classic alliance burden-sharing ones.

These debates were related to the subtle politicization of the alliance in the post-1987 South Korean political order. The new politics of the alliance were driven in the first instance by some fundamental demographic changes. The generation that lived through the Korean War, and whose views of the United States were shaped positively by the U.S. intervention in it, started to slowly fade from the political scene. This generation was replaced in part by a cohort that viewed the United States with much greater skepticism, at least among its left political flank. The term “386 generation” was coined in the 1990s to refer to this cohort, which was born in the 1960s, attended university in the 1980s and entered adult life—and politics—in their 30s just as the political transition occurred. This generation had no memory of the war, but was aggrieved by U.S. support for Park Chung Hee, the waffling response to the events in Kwangju in 1980, and the tacit support for the transition to the authoritarian Fifth Republic under Chun Doo Hwan.

The first two post-transition governments were conservative. In the case of Roh Tae Woo, the line of descent from Chun Doo Hwan was direct, as he had served as one of Chun's most trusted confidantes. Roh skillfully exploited reform in the Soviet Union to pursue his so-called Nordpolitik. Like Brandt's Ostpolitik, Roh's policy included gestures of détente toward Pyongyang. But the underlying purpose was to engineer a fundamental realignment in the Northeast Asian status quo: diplomatic recognition of the South by the Soviet Union and China. To North Korea's great distress, this objective was achieved in the early 1990s, as first Russia, then China, saw the economic and political significance of normalization with South Korea.<sup>1</sup>

The next great innovation in South Korean grand strategy came under the third democratic president, Kim Dae Jung.<sup>2</sup> Despite the changes in the Cold War order in Europe, it took nearly a decade before an op-

1. The best treatment of these diplomatic developments remains Oberdorfer 1997.

2. For a good summary, see Levin and Han 2002.

position Korean president would take office in the Blue House and articulate an alternative to the Cold War order on the peninsula.

Kim Dae Jung's policy is widely misunderstood. A long-standing champion of human rights and opponent of the Park and Chun dictatorships, Kim had no illusions about North Korea, or no utterly implausible ones at least. In articulating his Sunshine policy toward the North in his rightly-famous Berlin speech of 2000, he began with a reiteration that the South would not tolerate provocations and that the alliance was the cornerstone of the country's security. Nonetheless, on that foundation he was willing to try to build a new relationship of détente with the North. This would occur in part by easing the way for private business to engage in trade and investment ("the separation of economics and politics"), in part by the provision of substantial humanitarian assistance.

The legacy of the 2000 Kim Dae Jung–Kim Jong-il summit was later muddied by revelations that the administration had paid substantial sums to get North Korea to host it, but the underlying logic of engagement bears closer scrutiny. Engagement always had two dimensions. One was a "tit for tat" component: it was hoped that economic exchange would build the trust required for political or even military deals, such as standard confidence-building measures. But engagement had a longer-term component: the hope that the process of economic exchange and political dialogue would gradually moderate North Korean political interests and ease the transition to a more reformist, less confrontational, and even politically-open posture.

The Roh Moo Hyun administration largely continued this approach, but with a much less modest view of what such engagement might bring. Grand plans for a Northeast Asian sphere of peace and prosperity ran almost immediately into the Bush administration's no-nonsense post-9/11 view of the world. The alliance became more overtly politicized as Roh went so far as to suggest that Korea would play a "balancing" role between the United States and the region. These differences carried over into how to approach the emerging Six Party Talks and into divisive talks on the future of the alliance and the transfer of operational control of South Korean forces from the integrated Combined Forces Command to separate national command structures.

Despite the shock of the nuclear test in October 2006, the negotiation of some limited denuclearization measures in 2007 set the stage for engagement's last hurrah in the second North–South summit at the end of that year. But South Korean voters had tired of the two liberal administrations, and North Korean policy

was at least a part of that exhaustion. Nearly a decade of engagement appeared to have yielded precious little and the South Korean electorate backed Lee Myung Bak, who promised that any assistance to the North would be extended only after Pyongyang showed signs of serious cooperation on the nuclear front. Ironically, this posture put Seoul at odds with Washington during 2008, when the Bush administration was seeking to negotiate a nuclear deal with the North Koreans.

Under Lee Myung Bak the alliance once again became the explicit, as opposed to implicit, cornerstone of the country's national security strategy, cemented in 2011 by long-delayed U.S. passage of the Korea–U.S. Free Trade agreement. Lee Myung Bak's policy toward the North is often interpreted as confrontational, but this is misleading. The policy is more rightly interpreted as a kind of benign neglect, in which the South would pursue other global foreign policy objectives and not focus so single-mindedly on engaging the North. Yet the North made it extremely difficult to pursue this path, using provocations to raise the costs of the administration's approach. By the end of his term, the public remained divided on North Korean strategy, but a substantial share of the electorate saw the Lee administration's approach as a failure.

Both the Roh and Lee governments provide lessons for their successors. "Unconditional engagement"—the term critics use to tar the Roh approach—is likely to be moderated with a more robust attention to deterrence, and thus to the alliance. But the Lee Myung Bak approach has little to show, either. Within the Grand National Party (GNP), there are voices arguing for more moderation in dealing with the North, if only for electoral reasons. The next government, whether a new GNP administration or a Democratic administration, is likely to take at least some steps to moderate North–South tensions. This will take the form of initiatives with respect to North–South dialogue, including on the humanitarian front, and a more forthcoming posture with respect to the Six Party Talks, about which the Lee Myung Bak government has been skeptical.

Although South Korea's grand strategy remains a legacy of the Cold War division of the peninsula, China is now coming to play a more central role in strategic thinking in Seoul. A growing concern is that the rise of China will inevitably pull South Korea into its political–economic orbit. But this assessment assumes that countries' foreign policies run lockstep across issue areas. In fact, South Korea can engage China economically and still hedge its security relationships by relying on the alliance (Kang 2007). Indeed, China's fundamental unwillingness to rein in North Korea, protestations of impotence notwithstanding, have only

cast doubt on the utility of “bandwagoning” with China and have thus re-enforced the significance of the alliance with the United States. This might change were China to “deliver” North Korea, but to date China has proven unwilling to do so.

A final risk that worries some conservative analysts is that the new Korean assertiveness with respect to the alliance—symbolized in the demand for OPCON transfer—will have deeply damaging effects. These concerns are real. Divided command is inferior to combined command. Burden-sharing and modernization debates will continue and perhaps even become more intense as U.S. resource constraints become more apparent. But these are fundamentally debates in the alliance rather than any fundamental challenge to it. Ironically, as long as North Korea continues to pose a security challenge to the South and China pursues its uncooperative course, the alliance will remain a pivotal component of U.S. grand strategy.

## THE NORTH KOREAN SYSTEM: ABANDONMENT

It is hard to overestimate the geostrategic challenges that North Korea faced in 1990. The Soviet Union had moved from reform to slow-moving dissolution, in the process demanding hard currency in lieu of “friendship prices.” The Eastern European satellites could no longer be called on to provide additional support. With diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union normalized, China quickly followed suit, also demanding that a larger—although still uncertain—share of trade proceed on commercial terms. This collapse of external support was at least the proximate cause of the great famine of the mid-1990s that killed at least 600,000 people, or 3 percent of the population (Haggard and Noland 2007).

From a strategic standpoint, the 1990s were an absolute low point. Not only were external supports kicked away but the country did not have the domestic wherewithal to defend itself either. The profound domestic decline of the mid-1990s must have raised fears—including within the military—that the country’s weakness could be exploited.

The central issue of debate is whether there has been continuity in the desire of the North Koreans to pursue the nuclear option in response to these constraints. If so, much of the diplomatic to-and-fro is a tactical sideshow—an effort to buy time, retain options, and simply deceive. The alternative view is that Pyongyang has been willing to trade the weapons off if the price were right. My interpretation is that they could have been bought out earlier but that since 2008 strategy has shifted.

The first nuclear crisis (1992–94) cannot be interpreted in simple stimulus–response terms. The conflicts with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that fueled the crisis were not simply the reflection of a strategic turn to nuclear weapons in lieu of Soviet protection. The North Koreans had long sought nuclear weapons, as the Soviet and Eastern European archives now demonstrate decisively.<sup>3</sup> But clearly, the nuclear option must have looked a lot more attractive in the absence of assurances from the United States than they were with it. The Agreed Framework that ended the crisis, however, ultimately provided such assurances and enmeshed the United States, Korea, and Japan in a costly project—the construction of two light-water reactors—that served as a kind of policy hostage.

The United States had a hard time moving forward on its promises under the Agreed Framework, however, partly for political reasons and partly because the North Koreans made things more difficult for themselves by testing a long-range, potentially inter-continental missile in 1998. We still do not have a full timeline on North Korea’s uranium enrichment program, which is now in full operation. Was it initially just a hedge, or have the North Koreans been pursuing this option all along? Whatever the answer to that question, the North Koreans clearly violated a number of commitments—a North–South agreement, the Agreed Framework, promises to return to the NPT—in order to pursue it.

On the other hand, the United States and North Koreans came tantalizingly close to reaching a deal on missiles in 2000 that could have generated wider momentum in the bilateral relationship, and perhaps on the peninsula as well. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright actually went to Pyongyang—an utterly unthinkable option today—and there was even serious discussion that Clinton himself might go.

There remains substantial debate over whether the crisis that began in late 2002 could have been averted or not (Haggard and Noland 2011). The North Koreans appear to have experimented with a brief opening in 1998–2000: reaching out to South Korea in the summit; trying to revive relations with Japan; engaging the United States; and initiating modest economic reforms in the summer of 2002. But the Bush administration showed a complete aversion to negotiations. With 9/11, the Axis of Evil speech, and the ineluctable United States march into Iraq, North Korean inclination to compromise was gone. The early phases of the crisis may have still been tactical, feeling out whether the

3. Recent reviews of the historical evidence include Clemens 2010 and Pollack 2011.

United States was willing to pay to settle. But as U.S. grand strategy settled in to its highly confrontational phase under the post-9/11 Bush administration, there was neither room for nor incentive to compromise. The lessons of Iraq for North Korea—like the current lessons from Libya—were exactly the opposite of those that the United States would have liked Pyongyang to draw: namely, that nuclear weapons in fact do have deterrent value even if you don't really have means of delivering them or indeed any clear sense of how they fit into military doctrine and strategy.

The twists and turns of the Six Party Talks are beyond the scope of this brief, except to underline the very different perspectives of the United States and the other parties with respect to them. For the Bush administration, multilateralism meant lining up the five parties to support U.S. demands for denuclearization. But the administration always overestimated support for that course of action. For China, Russia, and South Korea until 2008, the talks were a mechanism to get the United States to talk to the North Koreans.

The United States was forced to change course gradually over the course of 2005, resulting in the pivotal Joint Statement of September 2005 that outlined the grand bargain: denuclearization in exchange for economic support, normalization, and some security guarantees. The first nuclear test of October 2006 now appears almost like a speed bump as the parties quickly returned to talks and negotiated two more road map agreements in 2007 that began the gradual process of nuclear disablement in 2008.

But in 2008, the entire process unraveled. Theories abound as to why. Some argue that the North Koreans miscalculated what they needed to deliver to sustain political support for the negotiations in the fractured Bush administration. Critics argue that the United States overreached in pushing the North Koreans too hard on verification and that the North Koreans were constrained by their own hardliners as well.

But a third possibility is that with Kim Jong-il's stroke in August 2008 and the highly uncertain process of succession that it triggered, North Korea simply felt it was better off with a nuclear option than without it. This interpretation seems bolstered by the surprising unwillingness of North Korea to respond to the overtures of the Obama administration. The missile and nuclear tests of spring 2009 may have been an egregious miscalculation but it seems more likely that they should be read at face value: as a clear statement that North Korea had no serious intention of negotiating away its nuclear capability, as Foreign Ministry statements in fact said.

Prior to the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, the consensus on North Korean grand strategy was highly pessimistic. The North Korean regime had crossed every single "red line" that the United States had drawn, from reprocessing, to testing, to proliferation (the Syrian reactor and cooperation with Iran), to HEU, to testing again and even to attacks on South Korean military assets and sovereign territory. Until 2011, there appeared to be no urgency in Pyongyang to resume the Six Party Talks.

I have emphasized the crucial role that abandonment played in North Korea's grand strategy. But how exactly do China, and to a lesser extent Russia, fit into the equation? For American negotiators, Chinese behavior has been an exercise in frustration. Beijing is willing to step up just enough to host and mediate talks, without really delivering much with respect to North Korean behavior.

But from the perspective of Pyongyang, Beijing's support looks less than rock-solid. China has done little to bail North Korea out of the ongoing economic difficulties it faces, beyond through largely commercial trade. Food shortages have not been met with particular Chinese generosity and it appears that oil shipments are also largely on commercial terms. The Chinese do provide political support by encouraging ongoing dialogue but cannot be counted on to provide the sort of unconditional assistance that the South Koreans used to provide. Put differently, China looks like a more consistent partner to Washington that it does from Pyongyang.

North Korean grand strategy going forward will depend very much on the course of the transition. Kim Jong Eun was associated with both the *Cheonan* sinking and the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island in 2010 as well as an ongoing effort to discredit the hardline approach of the Lee Myung Bak administration. Kim Jong Eun would appear to be even more dependent on the military than his father, which would seem to augur poorly for talks. The regime is much more militarized than China, much more challenged militarily and above all ideologically. It is harder for North Korea to embrace reform given the presence of South Korea; why be a second-rate South? The constraints on a fundamental shift in strategy for this regime seem enormous.

Even if talks resume, North Korea will continue to enjoy a prolonged period as a de facto nuclear state because of the tremendous complexity of negotiating away all that now needs to be addressed. The issue is no longer just the stock of fissile material, the actual nuclear devices, or Yongbyon, even if reprocessing

appears to be suspended. The agenda must now also address the harder-to-detect HEU efforts and ongoing problems posed by the missile program and proliferation. UN sanctions and the Proliferation Security Initiative have clearly crimped the weapons trade, but not necessarily what might be called “services” cooperation. And this is quite apart from the complex North–South security issues.

Yet despite these constraints, the United States and South Korea should again make the effort to engage. A hostile stance will only push the regime further to the right. If overtures fail, we cannot be worse off than we are, namely, the Cold War containment strategy that has long characterized the fundamental strategic setting on the peninsula.

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