

Point Counterpoint on the Korean Peninsula

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I have just returned from a week in Korea to attend two conferences and to speak at the opening of the Kim Dae-Jung Presidential Library. This sojourn brought new evidence of the changing patterns of influence and close association in Northeast Asia that I had first directly observed at a six-party meeting in Qingdao two months earlier. China, Russia and South Korea are drawing closer together, with their shared concerns about North Korea as the catalyst. Japan, feeling more directly threatened by North Korea's missiles, and under strong United States (US) pressure to support the hard-line Bush policy, remains somewhat removed.

Resentment of the US in South Korea is on the upswing. This I heard directly from conference participants on Cheju Island and in Seoul. On October 31, at the Cheju conference, President Roh Moo-Hyun was asked by former Secretary of Defense William Perry what could be done to halt the striking decline in Korean-American trust and mutual understanding.

President Roh replied that it is only on the question of how to deal with North Korea that there is disagreement between Seoul and Washington. He said that 50 years ago Korea had gone through a terrible fratricidal war, and that there must not be a repeat of that tragedy. Roh said that most Koreans believe that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons programs once its security is assured. He urged the US and Japan to do more to engage in dialogue with North Korea, and closed his remarks by asking rhetorically, "Why does the US insist on a hard-line North Korean policy when it can cost so many lives?" This policy, Roh stated flatly, is the cause of rising anti-American feelings in South Korea.

Evgeny Primakov, former Russian Prime Minister, and Dr. Mei Zhaorong, former President of the Chinese Institute of Foreign Affairs, both spoke in a similar vein at Cheju. They expressed the strong hope that President Bush's statement at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting might breath life into the six-party meeting process hosted by the Chinese in Beijing in April and August. Pyongyang's positive response on October 26 to the possibility of another six-party meeting was also seen by many as a hopeful indication of future progress.

A highlight of the November 5 Seoul conference was the presentation of Dr. Alexander Vorontsov, head of Korean studies at the Russia Academy of Sciences. Vorontsov had been in Pyongyang the day before, having completed a documentary film on life in North Korea outside of Pyongyang. He had been allowed to travel freely, and been able to film North Korean army units in their bases. He cited strong evidence of economic improvement in the agricultural sector, growing out of policy changes allowing small "market gardens" to be privately developed. He spoke positively of President Putin's

relationship with Kim Jong Il of North Korea, and said he had heard Putin refer to Kim as “an absolutely modern person.” There was virtually unanimous agreement among Russian, Chinese and South Korean conferees that North Korea is making a concerted effort to achieve significant economic reform.

During my week in Korea, there was a trickle of events indicating that the Bush administration may not have markedly changed its thinking about North Korea. The decision to end construction in North Korea of two light water nuclear reactors by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was depicted in Washington as killing an organization that the Bush administration had never liked. In Seoul, the decision was described as a one-year suspension, which Korean officials hope can allow the resumption of KEDO operations in the future.

The visit to Washington of 80 year old North Korean defector Hwang Jang Yop was given heavy media play by conservative press outlets. Hwang, who defected in 1997, continued to express admiration for Kim Il Sung, with whom he had been long associated, and blamed Kim Jong Il for virtually all of North Korea’s problems. He blithely stated that no one had starved in North Korea under Kim the elder’s rule, and that Kim Jong Il should be blamed for food shortages and for the notorious gulags now receiving much attention from human rights groups. (David Hawk, author of the recently released study on North Korean concentration camps, cites a 1972 statement by Kim Il Sung as the origin of the notorious “guilt by association” policy that has caused the imprisonment of many North Koreans. Kim said, “Factionalists, or enemies of class, whoever they are, their seed must be eliminated through three generations.”) Urging that Kim Jong Il’s rule be ended as soon as possible, Hwang stated that America’s war on terrorism was essentially a human rights issue. This wildly inaccurate assertion was featured by *The Washington Times*, and endorsed by the Bush administration’s hard-line supporters. The State Department made it clear, however, that Hwang’s visit had in no way undercut the US intention to work through the six-party process toward a solution of the North Korean nuclear weapons issue.

In a major speech on November 6, President Bush called for the establishment of democracy throughout the Middle East, with a free and stable Iraq playing a key role in what he hopes will be a regional transformation. The President named four other non-Islamic countries, Burma, Cuba, North Korea and Zimbabwe as also being ripe for change. Significantly, the President voiced his belief that evolution or revolution within these countries, new leaders and new ideas, not externally imposed regime change, would lead the way to better times for their oppressed people.

This formulation holds hope for the Korean peninsula. President Bush will never refer to Kim Jong Il as “an absolutely modern person,” but he seems to have removed North Korea from the “axis of evil.” Now it remains to be seen whether or not the pragmatists within the Bush administration can work out a substantive negotiating strategy for the next six-party meeting in Beijing. It is my fervent hope that they can.