

An Overview of U.S. Policy on Korea

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1. A House Divided – By the U.S.

With the end of World War II in 1945, the victorious U.S. emerged as a new player wielding great influence over international politics in Northeast Asia. It divided Korea in two parts and sponsored the creation of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south with pro-Japanese turncoat pro-Americans as its leaders. This was followed by the birth of a Soviet-supported Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north with anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters as its core group. Both U.S. and Soviet forces then withdrew from Korea leaving two antagonistic regimes behind. Thus, the outbreak of a civil war on the peninsula was widely predicted as inevitable and imminent.

In June 1950, North Korea, on enticement or miscalculation, began full-scale invasion of the South. The U.S., with the endorsement of the U.N., quickly came to the rescue of the South. After repelling communist soldiers back to the North in three months, it went on to invade North Korea with an aim at obliterating Pyongyang regime. When the Chinese came to salvage North Korea, however, U.S. forces had to pull back to near original dividing line. Two and half years of military stalemate ensued, and an armistice was signed in July 1953.

2. South Korea - A U.S. Military base

The kernel of U.S. policy on Korea since the end of Korean conflicts has been to maintain its forces in South Korea as a bulwark for protection of Japan from Soviet threat and as an unmistakable symbol of U.S. presence in Asia. To this end, the U.S. signed a Mutual Security Treaty with ROK government, providing legal basis for an indefinite stationing of U.S. forces. The U.S. was also awarded the right to freely deploy its military personnel, equipments and weapons anywhere in South Korea. Under separate agreements, U.S. soldiers are entitled to enjoy extraterritorial rights in South Korea, while war-time commanding authority over South Korean military is vested with a U.S. general.

The U.S. extended huge amount of aid to help South Korea's efforts to reconstruct war-torn economy. South Korea's post-war economic developments unquestionably owe very much to U.S. aid. The U.S. also gave advices for South Korea's political advancement. U.S. role in the democratization of South Korea, however, is rather disputable, as it staunchly backed up brutal military dictators for more than three decades for simple reason that they were determinedly anti-communistic and spinelessly pro-American.

3. Unending Enmity With North Korea

a. “Ignore It” Policy

To North Korea, the U.S. simply applied an “ignore it” policy for three decades after the ceasefire. Except for perennial exchanges of bitter accusations at Panmunjom between generals of the two hostile armies on the implementation of the Armistice Agreement, the U.S. stubbornly refused to have any political dialogue with the North. For example, when the U.S. deployed nuclear weapons in South Korea from late 1950s on in violation of the Armistice Agreement, North Korea repeatedly protested against it and proposed to work on a nuclear free Korean peninsula. But North Korean outcries always fell on deaf U.S. ears.

b. Reluctant Engagement

The U.S., however, could no longer politically ignore North Korea when it had sensed that Pyongyang might be pursuing nuclear weapons programs. So began reluctant contacts in late 1980s between mid-level diplomats of the two countries stationing in Beijing. In 1993, diplomatic engagement between Washington and Pyongyang had to be formalized and upgraded as the need for holding North Korea in the nuclear non-proliferation regime became more pressing and urgent. Year-and-half-long tumultuous negotiations produced the 1994 Agreed Framework.

The agreement, in a nutshell, contained two sets of deals: (1) The North would mothball two graphite-moderated reactors in exchange for U.S. promises to build two light-water reactors (LWR) by 2003 and to supply heavy oil pending the completion of one LWR. (2) The North would abandon its nuclear ambition and remain in nuclear non-proliferation regime in exchange for improved relations with the U.S., especially for U.S. formal assurance against threat or use of force, including nuclear weapons.

The U.S., however, did not really want to implement the agreement all the way to the end, as it thought that Pyongyang regime would collapse or implode well before 2003, thereby relieving Washington from all obligations under the agreement.

c. Toward Normal Relations

North Korea, however, did not show any sign of collapse or implosion. Instead, it test-launched a ballistic missile over Japan in August 1998. Thereupon, Washington had former Defense Secretary William Perry reevaluate its North Korea policy. Based on Perry’s recommendations, Washington negotiated a deal with Pyongyang to curtail the latter’s missile activities and then pursued a path for normalizing its relations with Pyongyang. In October 2000, a joint communiqué was issued between then Secretary of State Madeline Albright and a visiting North Korean Special Envoy, Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok.

The two sides agreed in the communiqué, among others, to remove mistrust and hostile intent and build mutual confidence, to replace 1953 Armistice Agreement with permanent peace arrangements, to respect each other's sovereignty, not to interfere in each other's internal affairs, and to take steps to fundamentally improve bilateral relations. Two weeks later, as Secretary Albright was airborne for Pyongyang to prepare for President Clinton's possible visit to North Korea, half-century-old inimical relations between the U.S. and North Korea was about to be over and the realization of genuine peace on the Korean peninsula finally seemed to be on the horizon.

d. North Korean Nuclear Crisis Redux

The U.S.-North Korea joint communiqué, however, had become just a piece of paper as George W. Bush became the new President of the United States. He called off U.S.-North Korean dialogue in its entirety. He said he loathed North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il. He called North Korea an "axis of evil" nation along with Iraq and Iran. The Pentagon designated North Korea as one of the targets for preemptive nuclear attack.

In October 2002, President Bush sent his special envoy James Kelly to Pyongyang, presumably to explore the possibility of resuming bilateral talks. There in the course of heated debates, Kelly was able to extract some words from North Korean officials that could be interpreted as an acknowledgement of clandestine uranium enrichment programs. This triggered a new round of North Korean nuclear crisis.

Accusing Pyongyang of breach of agreement and demanding an immediate, verifiable and irreversible scrapping of North's nuclear program, Washington suspended the monthly supply of heavy oil to the North. On its part, Pyongyang, counter-charging the U.S. for breach of agreement, reacted resolutely by reopening the mothballed reactors, expelling IAEA inspectors, and finally withdrawing from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Most recently, it even admitted the possession of nuclear weapons and announced the completion of reprocessing of 8000 spent fuel rods.

North Korea, meanwhile, offered to scrap its nuclear programs in exchange for a U.S. non-aggression pledge, if Washington agreed to direct talks with Pyongyang. Washington rebuffed Pyongyang's bid for direct talks insisting that North Korean nuclear ambition is a matter of serious concern to all neighboring countries and, therefore, it should be discussed and resolved in multilateral settings. It further stressed that there would be no rewards for bad behavior and no negotiations before verifiable dismantling of North's nuclear capabilities. In a breakthrough of the impasse, however, North Korea last week agreed to the convening of six-party talks, involving the two Koreas, the U.S., China, Russia and Japan.

Even if the six-party talks are convened, the prospect for an easy solution is rather dim, although both the U.S. and North Korea have lately begun showing some signs of flexibility.

4. Wrong Assumptions

During the past half century, except for the last year of Clinton administration, the U.S. policy on Korea was carried out on the basis of two assumptions: 1) South Koreans are utterly pro-American and, therefore, the U.S. can maintain its forces in South Korea indefinitely as long as it wants; 2) North Korea is a rogue state controlled by a group of bad guys and the regime is condemned to fail. These assumptions are wrong.

Truly, South Koreans have been very pro-American. Indeed, pro-American South Koreans still outnumber anti-American ones. But most of them are of older generations. And younger generations view Americans with more critical eye. They are gradually but steadily replacing older generations. It is clear that time will come, perhaps within a decade, when American soldiers are no longer welcome in South Korea, especially as South Korea's relationship with the North ameliorates year by year.

The notion that North Korean leaders are bad guys comes from the ignorance of Korean history. Since around the 17th century, Koreans, enlightened by progressive scholars, gradually began staging organized resistance against ruling elites. At first, their demand was "social equality". To this, "modernization" was added in the 18th century. In the 19th century, they embraced concept of "national sovereignty" as foreign powers were competing for dominance in the Korean peninsula. By the time Japan colonized Korea in 1910, the movement of these forces was transformed into anti-Japanese armed resistance.

Those people who established DPRK in 1945 were among the most valiant warriors who had engaged in fierce armed resistance against Japanese colonizers under extremely trying conditions. They set up Pyongyang government with the pride of upholding glorious revolutionary traditions. They certainly have their own legitimate place in Korean history.

It is unfortunate that they chose communism, an ideology doomed to fail, as their ideology. But it is not right to categorize them as villains simply because they are communists. They are patriots. They firmly believe that they have the right to live as they like in their own land. To them, the U.S. is an unwelcome foreign intruder in their motherland. Therefore, they will never capitulate before American might, however awesome it may be. They will rather die in the last ditch.

5. Some Suggestions

While North Korea is unlikely to collapse under American pressure, South Korea will become more assertive in its efforts to seek independence from American domination, especially as two Koreas try to get closer and closer. And some day American soldiers will be no longer welcome there. If the presence of American soldiers in South Korea is vital to the U.S. interest, the determining factor of the future American policy on Korea should be how to redefine the role and redesign the new structure of U.S. forces in South Korea.

Washington should take certain concrete measures so that the presence of U.S. forces in South Korea no longer poses any threat to North Korea and functions counter-conducive to Korean peoples aspiration for reunification. More specifically, Washington should first remove the enmity with Pyongyang by replacing the Armistice Agreement with permanent peace arrangements and end the alliance with South Korea by repealing the Mutual Defense Treaty. Under such circumstances, the new American forces in South Korea should be restructured as a regional peacekeeping force. This, however, cannot be done with unilateral American decision or bilateral agreement with South Korea alone. It should be done with the consensus and cooperation of all relevant countries of the region, such as North Korea, China and Russia besides South Korea, Japan and the U.S. Otherwise, U.S. forces in Korea would become a source of trouble and conflicts, rather than a guarantor of peace.

The U.S. is currently trying to resolve North Korean nuclear crisis in a multilateral formula. It will be wise and to its long-term interest for the U.S. to take advantage of this opportunity to sponsor a Northeast Asia peace regime in cooperation with other relevant countries of the region. Such arrangements, if materialized, could more efficiently take care of the problems like (1) securing permanent and verifiable forswearing of North Korea's nuclear ambitions, (2) providing North Korea with adequate non-aggression assurances from the U.S. and neighboring countries, (3) supervising mutual arms reductions in South and North Korea, and 4) transforming the nature of U.S. forces in South Korea from a belligerent military apparatus of joint U.S.-South Korean confrontation with the North to a regional peace keeping force. Furthermore, all other issues relevant to the peace and security of the region could be discussed and resolved within the framework of such regional peace regime.