

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

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**THE UNITED STATES AND THE KOREAS—ADDING SUBSTANCE TO
SUNSHINE**

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Thesis

For fifty years, the United States pursued a “status quo” strategy on the Korean peninsula, almost oblivious to evolution in the regional and strategic environment. Thousands of US servicemen spent their year on the “ROK”¹ and thousands are there now, serving as America’s symbol of commitment to maintaining, and if necessary, restoring peace. Today, multiple factors suggest both the opportunity and the requirement for a change in strategy. These include the development in South Korea of strong democratic institutions, a vibrant economy, and a professional military, juxtaposed to North Korea, variously described as a failing or failed state, its people starving while leadership focuses on maintaining a huge military, threatening its neighbors and the world with missiles and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Regionally, Korea’s neighbors--Russia, China and Japan--all recognize the success of the South and are concerned with the potential ills posed by the North. Internationally, the end of the Cold War, growth of a global economy, and recognition of the threat of transnational terrorism provide an unprecedented environment for consensus. All these factors combine to provide an opportunity for positive change through a more regional diplomatic focus, a less intrusive American military presence and multilateral balance of power, and greater regional and international cooperation to create a “better peace.” This paper describes the evolution of these factors in

¹ Republic of Korea (ROK) also known as South Korea

the strategic and regional environment and suggests changes to US strategic policy which forward both the interests of the United States and the region, “adding substance to sunshine.”

Evolution of the Strategic and Regional Environment

The Korean people proudly relate a history of over 3000 years. It is one marked by violent conflict, both for internal control of the peninsula and fighting off invasion and conquest from China and Japan. Throughout this history, the Koreans maintained their cultural identity and continuously fought for their independence. With the end of World War II and 40 years of Japanese occupation, the Korean people anticipated their freedom and independence.²

The Korean War³

It was not to be. Following Japanese occupation, Korea found itself divided by the war’s emergent “superpowers,” the United States and Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, now squaring off against each other after jointly defeating the Axis. The superpower rivalry supported an internal struggle between two Korean leaders, Kim Il Sung in the north and Syngman Ree in the south. The division was tested in the summer of 1950 when North Korean forces pushed south, captured Seoul and advanced to the Pusan perimeter. Routed South Korean and United States forces, joined by contingents from more than a dozen members of the United Nations, reversed the North’s progress and drove them back to the

² As promised by the leaders of the Grand Alliance in the 1943 Cairo Declaration—that Korea should become free and independent “in due course.” Hastings, p26

³ For two views of the Korean War, see Hastings’ *The Korean War* and Paik’s *From Pusan to Panmunjom*

Chinese border, only to be reversed again when China joined the battle. After six months of fighting up and down the peninsula, the armies ground to a halt roughly at the original borders north of Seoul. The carnage continued, with little change in position, until negotiations ended in 1953 with the signing of an Armistice--neither the beginning of peace nor the end of the war--dividing the nation on either side of a demilitarized zone (DMZ), locked in stalemate. UN forces withdrew, except for a small monitoring force in the DMZ; however, US military units remained, bolstering South Korean forces, determined to prevent further aggression and contain the communist threat. Fifty years later, 37,000 American servicemen⁴ continue “fighting” the Korean war, manning the same fighting positions as their grandfathers. But this is not the Korea of fifty years ago...

Korea Today

Two generations later, the two Korean entities, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), have evolved along divergent paths.

Republic of Korea (ROK)

Today, the Republic of Korea is one of the West’s greatest success stories, defined by an evolved democracy, strong economy, and modern military. Korea’s political history has been turbulent, marked by military intrigues, corruption, and civil unrest; however, the first popular election of Roh Tae Woo in 1987 marked the beginning of ascendancy of political institutions over the military in South Korea. This democratic movement culminated in the 1997

⁴Larry Nicksch, , *Korea: U.S--Korean Relations—Issues for Congress*, CRS Issue Brief p. CRS-1

election of a second party candidate and former political dissident, Kim Dae Jung, verifying the establishment of Korea's democratic institutions.⁵

Kim's term of office has been marked by two significant efforts—first, leadership through the recent economic crisis, widely hailed as a great success; and second, an attempt to reduce tensions and normalize relations with the North--“Sunshine Policy”—an effort which has generated a considerably more mixed reaction, both domestically and abroad.⁶ Both efforts reflect the ROK's primary goals—continued economic growth and national security. In attempting to achieve these objectives, Kim's government is attempting to normalize relations with the North while maintaining its long relationship with the United States. Both Pyongyang and Washington, D.C. have given him challenges and limited his success. While Kim's diplomatic efforts may have been limited, the fact remains that South Korea has developed into a leader in the region.

A country of 40 million people, Korea's economy ranks among the world's strongest. Its rapid recovery from the Asian economic crisis and repayment of loans arranged through the International Monetary Fund further demonstrate its resilience.

Humiliated during the war, the ROK military is now a modern, capable force. Modeled on the US military, it includes four functional Service components (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines), compulsory military service for all

⁵ Carol Clark, “Kim Dae-jung: From prison to president.” *CNN Interactive*.; Nicksch, p. CRS -15-16

⁶ Nicksch, p. CRS-11; Victor D. Cha, “Korea's Place in the Axis” *Foreign Affairs* New York May/June 2002

qualified male citizens, a professional military education system, and a Joint Staff. Technologically, the ROK Armed Forces are among the most modern in the world, not only operating but also producing high quality ships, armor, and aircraft.

The South's political, economic and military success stands in stark contrast to conditions in the North.

North Korea

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is one of the last bastions of Stalinist communism. While assuming the trappings of democracy—a constitution, periodic elections and “representative” legislative and judicial assemblies, leadership in the North has never been an issue of choice. Kim Il Sung molded his revolution into a dictatorship and ultimately a cult of personality centered on himself as “Great Leader.” He killed off or coopted his competition and sealed off the country from virtually all external influence.

Economically, he imposed land reforms, heavy industry and defense development mirroring Soviet economic policy, with much the same result—economic stagnation and agricultural disaster. As the USSR crumbled, the DPRK's chief benefactor provided less and less support, moving the aging “Great Leader” to declare a policy of “juche”—self-dependence—but his government never developed a successful strategy to implement. When he died in 1994, he left to his son, Kim Jong Il, a country with a huge military, a starving population,

and not much else.⁷ Many expected the country to implode shortly after the senior Kim's death; however, the younger Kim is proving himself adept at maintaining his dynasty's position, primarily through adept use of a powerful military-industrial complex.

The DPRK is a nation-at-arms, spending 25% of its GNP on the military, the highest ratio in the world.⁸ The Korean People's Army numbers over a million in a country with a population of only 20 million. Much of this massive force is deployed near the Demilitarized Zone, along with a huge array of artillery capable of ranging Seoul's southern suburbs.⁹ Responding to the South's military parity, Pyongyang developed asymmetric approaches to augment its conventional army. It developed a large special forces capability, designed to infiltrate the South and create a second front early in the war. Additionally, North Korea developed a large theater missile program, combining short-range SCUD missiles with longer range No Dong missiles, capable of covering any target on the peninsula. Later variants of the No Dong also threaten potential targets in Japan. In 1998 the North surprised the world, launching a multi-stage "Taepo Dong" missile over Japan, which may have been capable of reaching as far as Hawaii.¹⁰ Pyongyang's latest announcement of an in-place nuclear development program further enhances the DPRK's military potential.

⁷ Kim Il Sung Biographical Notes

⁸ C.S. Elliot Kang, "North Korea and the U.S. Grand Security Strategy," *Comparative Strategy*, Jan-Mar2001, Vol. 20 Issue 1, p25, 19p. ProQuest. NDU Library. 11 Oct 2002.

⁹ Niksch, CRS-7

¹⁰ Kang

North Korea's diplomacy has been marked by periodic "brinksmanship"—military demonstrations designed to gain attention and threaten in order to compel reaction from the U.S., South Korea, and the surrounding region.¹¹ This pattern, established by the senior Kim, appears to be the latest Kim's strategy as well. To date, it's been successful, given the Kims' objectives of maintaining power and military strength.

United States Presence

Since 1952, the United States has maintained a strong military presence in South Korea, designed to ensure against a repeat of the 1950 invasion and to demonstrate US commitment to the region. Approximately 37,000 soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines make up this force. Most are stationed in Seoul or further north along the DMZ. The Commander, US Forces Korea, is also the Commander in Chief, Combined Forces Korea, overall commander for both US and Korean forces should hostilities commence. Additionally, a second U.S. contingent of nearly equivalent size is based in Japan, poised to join the fight at the outbreak of war.

US involvement with the ROK has evolved to much more than a military relationship. Both economies are entwined, trading in everything from textiles to automobiles and computers. Korean and American businessmen are heavily invested in each other's countries. And, since 9/11, our common interests in fighting global terrorism further galvanize this 50-year relationship. However, it should also be noted that anti-American sentiment is periodically seen in both

¹¹ Kang

Japan and Korea, particularly during the recent economic crisis and following crimes involving U.S. service members.¹²

International

Korea's neighbors have always maintained an interest in and influenced events on the peninsula. Russia, China and Japan all have long histories with the Koreans and continue to recognize its importance to the region. Additionally, the Korean War was a defining event for the United Nations and the organization continues to maintain a presence in the DMZ. Finally, in a globalized world, non-governmental and private volunteer organizations have an increasingly powerful effect in the region.

Russia

A "sponsor" to the North in the Soviet era, the end of the Cold War curtailed that relationship. Yet, Russia's shared border, potential for economic gain should the two Koreas unite, and desire to maintain prestige as a regional power still motivate her to maintain diplomatic engagement with both the North and South.¹³ Indeed, Russia's relationship with the ROK in recent years has been considerably stronger than with the DPRK.

¹² Sharif M. Shuja, "North-east Asia and US policy," *Contemporary Review*, Cheam, Aug 2002; see "The US and the Two Koreas"

¹³ Patrick E. Tyler, "South Korea's New Best Friend?" *New York Times*, 1 Mar 2001

China

At face value, the commitment of over 2,000,000 troops to North Korea's defense during the Korean war suggests a common bond between the DPRK and China; however, such a relationship is not reality. There is little love lost between the two, a byproduct of centuries of conflict. North Korea serves as a buffer to the influence of democratic South Korea, but China views the growing number of North Korean refugees and requests for energy as an irritant. Despite this, the Chinese are the closest to a North Korean "ally" in the region. Like Russia, potential economic gain spurs increasing involvement with the South along with the prestige of regional influence.

Japan

Japan's relationship with Korea is even more hostile than China's, owing to the recency of World War II. Japanese and South Korean economic relationships are a mixture of competition and cooperation. North Korean military development and actions, specifically infiltrations of spies, naval activity, kidnappings, WMD programs, and missile launches, have spurred unprecedented cooperation between Japan and South Korea, involving cabinet-level bilateral meetings, search-and-rescue exercises, port calls, noncombatant evacuation operations, and academic military exchanges.¹⁴ Paradoxically, North Korea recently initiated diplomatic efforts with Japan, shocking the world by not only admitting to kidnapping Japanese citizens, but also allowing some of the victims to return home.

¹⁴ Cha, see "Beyond the Peninsula"

The United Nations, NGOs and PVOs

At the conclusion of hostilities, the UN implemented a four-country observer team (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Sweden, and Switzerland) to monitor Armistice provisions in the DMZ. With the demise of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Hungary elected to withdraw. The European Union, as well as multiple nongovernmental and private volunteer organizations (NGO/PVOs), from Doctors Without Borders to religious missionary groups, contribute to humanitarian efforts in the North.

Assumptions

Before developing a strategy, assumptions must be made concerning unknown facts which would otherwise invalidate the strategy. The following assumptions are made here:

- Kim Jong Il's regime is not going to voluntarily relinquish power; however, he would like to move his country forward economically, and improve his status as a national leader in international eyes.
- Korean reunification is at least a generation (25 years) away.
- Russia, China, and Japan are motivated to improve regional stability.

Proposed Changes to US Strategy

The contextual elements outlined above support a re-examination of US National Security Strategy and implementation of changes to enhance US national objectives.

Ends—Objectives

The first step in developing this proposal is to review the desired “ends”—the country’s national objectives--in the region. The primary source document outlining U.S. objectives is the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS).

US National Security Strategy

The latest version of the NSS reiterates the theme of previous documents—the United States’ success is based on its commitment to freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. The U.S. will promote these values throughout the world to encourage success in other nations. Defense of the nation is the government’s first responsibility. In today’s environment, the primary threat to the nation comes less from national entities than from failed states and terrorists, armed with fanaticism and weapons of mass destruction. To defeat this threat, the United States will “use every tool in our arsenal...”¹⁵

With respect to Korea, the NSS specifically states, “To enhance our Asian alliances and friendships, we will...work with South Korea to maintain vigilance towards the North while preparing our alliance to make contributions to the broader stability of the region over the longer term;...”¹⁶ Proposed changes described below are designed within this broad guidance.

Means and Ways —“Substance to Sunshine”

The “means and ways” to implement strategy are typically defined in terms of instruments of power—Diplomatic, Economic, Military, and Informational—the “tools in our arsenal.” Arguably, U.S. and South Korean strategy have been

¹⁵ NSS, Preface by President Bush

¹⁶ NSS, p. 26

disjointed during the last decade, between US-North Korean talks aimed at missile and nuclear technology control and North-South talks on normalization of relations.¹⁷ President Kim's "Sunshine Strategy" received considerable scorn from critics in his own country as well as the United States primarily because it appeared to be based on "all give and no take." U.S. bilateral talks with the North were criticized for leaving out the South. The changes proposed below are in line with our current National Security Strategy; however, they do not fundamentally negate a "sunshine" policy. Instead, the measures suggest a reorientation of US strategy to conduct a more regional diplomatic and economic approach, provide a less intrusive military presence aimed at a more multilateral balance of power, and improve on regional and international cooperation, thus adding "substance" to "sunshine."

Diplomatic

United States strategy should, as always, lead with diplomacy; however, it is time to reorient the focus of that diplomacy. President Bush's now famous State of the Union speech, in which he included North Korea as part of the "Axis of Evil," stated in frank terms an adversarial relationship which has existed since the U.S. allied with South Korea in 1950.¹⁸ Recent revelations of DPRK nuclear program development reveal U.S.-North Korean direct talks in the last decade

¹⁷ "Reviving Korean Diplomacy" Editorial, *New York Times* Feb 18, 2002

¹⁸ Neil King Jr. and David S. Cloud, "Bush Tough Talk Shakes Up Diplomatic Stance --- Warning to 'Axis of Evil' Doesn't Reflect Comprehensive Strategy," *Wall Street Journal*, New York, N.Y. Jan 31, 2002

were defaulted on by the North practically from the moment the ink dried on the documents. These bilateral talks only served to undermine both U.S. and South Korean prestige, while overstating the DPRK's negotiating strength. Instead, the U.S. should describe North Korea in terms of the regional challenge of a failed state, and work primarily through South Korea to influence DPRK actions.¹⁹ Additionally, U.S. diplomacy should be channeled through other regional allies and institutions such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), to influence affairs on the peninsula.

The U. S. approach should emphasize South Korea's success as a democracy and free enterprise system, working with and through them in attempting to shape North Korean actions. ROK-DPRK negotiations and exchanges should be encouraged, while making clear U.S. support for South Korea and refusing North Korean efforts to compel the U.S. to unilateral action. The U.S. should emphasize through the ROK its concern over DPRK WMD/missile technology efforts, and desire for inspections—restating expectations from North Korea as a Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) member, as well as suggesting options for returning to the tenets of the '94 Framework. Additionally, the U.S. should work with the region to push for United Nations resolutions calling for an end to North Korea's declared nuclear program. Finally, U.S. diplomats should work with South Korea, Russia, China and Japan to clarify intentions and coordinate actions if a war should occur or the determination is made to act preemptively to prevent

¹⁹ Henry Kissinger, "A Road Through Seoul" *The Washington Post*, 6 Mar 2001.

North Korean employment or proliferation of WMD. Again, U.S. overall diplomatic guidance should be toward treating the ROK as the strong regional actor she has become.

Economic

U.S. economic power is potentially useful in dealing with North Korea. Humanitarian aid not only helps relieve suffering, it also makes a positive statement about America; however, any “giveaways” must be assured of getting to needy civilians. Economic aid should be tied to DPRK reductions in either military power or mobilization status and a corresponding interest by the DPRK government to care for its people.²⁰ Once again, US economic aid should be in tandem with South Korean diplomatic and economic efforts and also coordinated with the other regional powers.

Military

NSS guidance for the military element of power is more direct, calling for a “transformation” to “meet the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.”²¹ Additionally, the requirement for American forces overseas still exists, as “one of the most profound symbols of the U.S. commitments to our allies and friends.”²² Our military’s transformation must be made in a way that emphasizes our strengths and focuses on improving weaknesses.

²⁰ Cha, see “Helping Hands” discussion

²¹ NSS, p 29

²² Ibid

It is time to move south—get the majority of US military forces off the border and south of Seoul. This move recognizes the capability of the modern ROK armed forces to defend its country as well as serving U.S. force protection interests by moving our military and dependents away from the North Korean artillery. To further recognize ROK modernization and capability, the CFC CINC should either transfer permanently or alternate between Korean and US leadership. As US forces move to southern bases, ground forces should “transform” to exploitation/reinforcement combat elements designed to rapidly exploit ROK gains or reinforce against a DPRK breakthrough. Transformation should also continue to improve logistics, not only as reinforcement in a Korean engagement, but also as possible deploying forces to other areas in the region. In light of recent DPRK admissions in nuclear program development, U.S. forces should develop and maintain WMD pre-emptive options. Additionally, to further counter North Korean asymmetric strategy, continue to develop and maintain theater missile defense structure²³ and contribute to civil defense by coordinating missile defense warning.

Finally, if war breaks out on the Korean peninsula, the result will be tremendous loss of life and catastrophic loss to South Korean infrastructure, despite the near certainty of North Korea’s defeat. The longer the war, the worse the damage; therefore, it is incumbent upon all interested parties to end the war quickly. The fastest way to end this war, short of nuclear weapons, is to request Chinese military intervention from the north. North Korean forces, aligned

²³ Cha, see “Peace Through Strength” section

towards the south, cannot defend both fronts. In 1950 Chinese forces advanced to Pyongyang in ten days.²⁴ Should war again erupt, it is unlikely the Chinese will stand by and watch. Prudence demands U.S. engagement with the Chinese to ensure a coordinated strategy with agreed-upon goals and safeguards.

Overall, this strategy reduces the intrusive nature of U.S. forces, while still maintaining a forward fighting element on the peninsula. It provides for improved force protection and, should war break out, maximizes U.S. strengths to ensure South Korea's defense. Finally, by encouraging Chinese intervention in a peacemaking role, it brings any North Korean initiated conflict to a rapid conclusion, minimizing losses on all sides.

Information

The NSS reference to the use of information is framed in terms of the war on terror. First, it is implied in a statement calling for the use of "all the elements of national and international power" in the effort to disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations.²⁵ References to improving "integrated intelligence capabilities" refer more directly to the use of information.²⁶ Finally, the most direct guidance comes in the form of stating the need for "a different and more comprehensive approach to public information efforts that can help people around the world learn about and understand America."²⁷

²⁴ Hastings, pp. 140-146

²⁵ NSS, p 6

²⁶ Ibid, p 16

²⁷ Ibid, p 31

“Information is power”—is an overstated cliché exactly because it is so true. Despite frequent criticisms, the United States has an extremely effective intelligence gathering apparatus. This capability should be used to keep regional allies informed on North Korean WMD activity to help galvanize support in ensuring treaty and agreement compliance as well as securing against WMD proliferation.

A significant aspect of taking the above actions is promoting the good news story of South Korean success and the U.S. role in supporting that success. The “Information” campaign’s message should be that South Korea is and should be the primary regional actor dealing with its countrymen in the North. U.S. diplomatic and economic efforts must be in conjunction with South Korean and regional actors. The U.S. recognizes the humanitarian disaster in North Korea, and wants to help, but can only do so if Pyongyang shows an equal concern for its citizens. US forces are moving off the DMZ in recognition of the Republic of Korea’s military strength on the peninsula. Correspondingly, the U.S. is rearranging command structures in recognition of the ROK military’s primary role in its country’s defense. A strong public relations effort explaining U.S. strategy on the peninsula, will maximize the effect of changes which could be misinterpreted or overlooked.

Analysis—Why Change?

Any strategy should be weighed in terms of costs incurred, risks taken and opportunity for gain.

Costs

Costs are either tangible or non-tangible and expected to be paid as a result of strategic choices. In this proposed strategy there are several. The most tangible cost will be the expense of moving our ground forces south. This cost will ideally be offset by South Korea through the transfer of valuable land and facilities in Seoul. It is also very likely that US military officials will perceive difficulties in CFC operations owing to the transfer of leadership to the ROK military. Similar difficulties can be anticipated as well in attempting to coordinate multilaterally among the regional powers. It is a complicated world. Finally, in playing the Chinese “card” the U.S. will likely be accused of turning a blind eye to ongoing human rights issues in the PRC.

Risks

Risks are the cost one hopes not to have to pay. First, and possibly the most significant, is the possibility that the movement of U.S. forces south will be seen as either appeasing or fearing North Korea and abandoning our South Korean allies on the front lines, encouraging further North Korean aggression. The proposed strategy attempts primarily to avert the risk of war; it is believed this risk is low, given Kim Jong Il’s desire to remain in power. Additionally, it is believed this strategy minimizes U.S. losses should war occur as well as bringing about a rapid and favorable conclusion. A second risk is that of the DPRK once again attempting to exercise “brinkmanship diplomacy” by somehow inflicting American casualties on the peninsula through a limited military action. In such a scenario, the Kim government would claim its forces somehow acted

independently, in an excessive display of martial or national spirit, pull back and perhaps discipline the offending unit, and then request/demand assistance to keep such an unfortunate incident from reoccurring. Once again, the suggested strategy improves U.S. force protection and should reduce the possibility of the described “bloody nose” scenario. A third risk may be that in our dismissal of North Korean military capabilities and ending direct diplomatic negotiations, we push the north to take even more dramatic action, perhaps in terms of a nuclear weapons test or another missile launch. Yet another risk is that anti-American sentiment in either the ROK or Japan builds to the point that either or both countries evict their military tenants. The proposed strategy, aimed at making U.S. forces less intrusive, should mitigate this risk. Finally, there is the risk that the Chinese either decide to “solve” the Korean problem on their own or, after a request to intervene with South Korea and the United States, decide to remain in the territory they “liberate.” Such an end state is still, arguably, a “better peace.”

Conclusion—An Opportunity

For fifty years, U.S. strategy and posture on the Korean peninsula have remained virtually static, aimed at maintaining the status quo; however, the environment no longer supports the status quo. To remain mired in the past negates the opportunities for positive change today. The success of modern South Korea is reflected in our own policy statements: “When we see democratic processes take hold among our friends in Taiwan or in the Republic of Korea...we see examples of how authoritarian systems can evolve, marrying local

history and traditions with the principles we cherish.”²⁸ We can and should build on that success to modify U.S. diplomacy and transform U.S. presence on the peninsula, enhancing both its acceptability and capability in the 21st Century.

²⁸ NSS, p 3

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