

## **The Future of Korea-U.S. Relations: Moving towards a “Twilight Divorce?”\***

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There can never be any solid friendship between individuals, or union between communities that is worth the name, unless their parties be persuaded of each other's honesty, and generally congenial the one to the other; since from difference in feeling springs also difference in conduct.  
- Thucydides –

### **I. Introduction**

The alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States came into existence when the North Korean military forces supported by China and the Soviet Union threatened the survival of the Republic of Korea in the Korean War. Thereafter, the essence of Korea-U.S. relations was stipulated in the Korea-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954:

The primary purpose of this treaty is to deter further aggression in the Pacific area by a clear warning to potential aggressors that the United States and the Republic of Korea will regard an armed attack on the territory of either party as dangerous to their peace and security and that they will act to meet this danger in accordance with their constitutional processes.<sup>1</sup>

It can be said that the aim of the treaty has been achieved over the last half century. For fifty years since the 1953 Armistice Agreement, the existence of U.S. Forces in South Korea has played a critical role in deterring a second invasion by North Korea. Furthermore, South Korea has been able to achieve the fastest continuous economic growth in contemporary economic history due to the security guarantee provided by the stationing of U.S. Forces in South Korea. In the three-year Korean War, South Korea was reduced to dire poverty and tragic desolation, and was regarded by

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<sup>1</sup> Jesse A. Helms. 1983. “U.S.-R.O.K. Mutual Defense Treaty in Perspective,” in Han Sung-Joo, ed., *U.S.-Korea Security Cooperation: Retrospects and Prospects*. 14. Seoul: Asiatic Research Center, Korea University

many Americans as a “mendicant nation”<sup>2</sup> Since then, South Korea has come along way - it not only successfully hosted the 1988 Olympic Games, but also joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on December 12, 1996. This implies that the international community recognized South Korea's national economic power and its people's affluent life. As a most notable achievement, South Korea successfully hosted the 17<sup>th</sup> Soccer World Cup together with Japan and surprised the whole world by reaching the semi-finals of the tournament.

South Korea was able to host the Olympic Games and the Soccer World Cup and enjoy the same with numerous foreigners because it had the necessary economic capability and trust of foreign visitors. In other words, all of these were closely linked with the national security of South Korea and the assurance of peace on the Korean peninsula. It can, therefore, be said that the fundamental mission of U.S. Forces in South Korea since 1953 has been successfully accomplished.<sup>3</sup>

However, as Thomas Aquinas has said, existence precedes essence. It is paradoxical that people in both America and Korea recently began to raise questions about the “existence” rather than the essential “mission to accomplish” of U.S. Forces in South Korea. While an initial success can bring about further successes in human affairs, it can also become a source of failure. Success tends to breed over-confidence and this over-confidence might lead one to forget the essence and negate the existence thereby causing failure. In a similar vein, the recent raising of questions on the existence of U.S. Forces in South Korea might be a result of the successful accomplishment of the essential mission of the American forces on Korean soil.

## **II. The Changed Attitude of the American People: the Achilles Heel of Democracy**

The arguments for the stationing of U.S. Forces in South Korea during the Cold War were based, above all, on the fear and the military-strategic calculation that North Korea, which maintained a stronger military power than South Korea, might launch a surprise attack on the latter in the absence of U.S. forces, especially the U.S. Air Force. Yet, after the Cold War system collapsed and the large-scale economic aid from Russia and China was suspended, “independent self-reliance” of North Korea has been proved futile. Furthermore, as North Korea becomes an “economic orphan,” a new kind of fear arises. North Korean leaders might provoke a war to break through the difficult situation of poverty. Such a fear has been intensified by the stubborn insistence of North Korean leaders to ignore the persuasion and pressure of both the international community and the U.S and drive on with the development of nuclear weapons and missiles.

As North Korea attempted to threaten not only South Korea but also Japan and

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<sup>2</sup> Byong Choon Hahm. 1964. “Korea's Mendicant Mentality: A Critique of US Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 1, October: 165-174.

<sup>3</sup> In order to look into a comprehensive research on the historical and strategic characteristics of the US forces in South Korea, see Kang, Sung-Hack. 1997. *Iago and Cassandra: The United States and Korea in the Age of Air Power*. Seoul: Oreum, Chapter 3 “The US Forces in Korea and Korean Peninsula: Historical Development and Its Meaning.” (in Korean)

the U.S. with weapons of mass destruction, an ironic cognitive change began to emerge towards North Korea within the U.S. Selig S. Harrison, for example, says that even though North Korea has not given up its goal of communizing South Korea, it, so to speak, is now in a defensive position and is fearful of South Korea's possible absorption-unification of it. It is argued that North Korea, experiencing a severe economic and military hardship due to the loss of large-scale aid from China and the Soviet Union once provided during the Cold War period, may as well know that South Korea is able to sustain a long-time war without the U.S. combatant troops, considering its economic capability, military power and technology, and dynamic defense industry.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Selig S. Harrison argues that North Korea cannot help but take the measure of deploying its troops forward because the U.S. Air Force is providing definitive advantage and superior capability to South Korea beyond its defense vis-à-vis North Korea, and North Korea can offset South Korea's such advantages only with forward deployment.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, many existing suggestions such as arms control<sup>6</sup> and the easing of tension are ignoring North Korea's concern about its safety and, in particular, its fear of the U.S. Air Force.

From this standpoint, Harrison contends that the U.S. should shift its role to that of an honest broker, encouraging a federal system on the Korean peninsula and gradually withdrawing its forces from South Korea over the next ten years or so.<sup>7</sup> He continues to argue that South Korea will not be a power vacuum even without the U.S. forces stationed in its territory, and there is no reason for South Korea to become an ignition point for hegemonic competition among the neighboring powers.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the current living standard of Korean people could be said to be dependent, in part, on U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. In 1998, when South Korea was facing a financial crisis, the U.S. extended a relief loan amounting to 17 billion dollars. At that time, the U.S. Congress agreed to the loan, despite the dubious prospect for future contribution to the U.S. economy, mainly in view of U.S. security interests. Mr. Harrison says that the U.S. is too deeply tied to South Korea by the anachronistic Cold War bondage and is not able to actively pursue its own economic interests. Furthermore, the U.S. might be drawn into another round of relief loan if another economic crisis takes place in the future.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the U.S. should guard against

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<sup>4</sup> Selig S. Harrison. 2002. *Korean Endgame*. 161. Princeton: Princeton University Press p. xi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For the author's analyses of the arms control on the Korean peninsula, see Sung-Hack Kang. 1995. *Cameleon and Sisyphus: Changing International Order and Korean Security*. Seoul: Nanam. Chapter 10 "Confidence-Building Measures for the Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula," (in Korean); Sung-Hack Kang, "Arms Control of North and South Korea and the Roles and Prospects of the US Forces in South Korea and the United Nations Command after the Coming into Effect of the Agreed Framework." 『Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula』, Arms Control Material 9, pp. 66-81.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. Harrison's argument cannot be underestimated as a personal view because it has been drawn as a result of a wide range of interviews with major figures of the US as well as South Korea. For the author's view that provides a similar view to Harrison's with regard to the possibility of the US policy change in the aftermath of the Cold War, see Sung-Hack Kang. 1997. "Changing Strategic Milieu for East Asian Security and Korean Unification," *IRI Review*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter), in particular, pp. 151-152.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion on this, see *ibid.*, part 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

the possibility of falling into the position of a “hostage state.”

To sum up, South Korea has double the size of population and is a much bigger economic power than North Korea, and hence is able to take up the defense responsibility for itself. Seen in this manner, it is high time that the U.S. started playing the role of a more neutral honest broker between the two Koreas rather than maintaining one-sided alliance with South Korea.<sup>10</sup> Only then can the U.S. pursue its economic policy wherein priority will be given to the American interest over and above other factors. To be more explicit, the U.S. policy towards the Korean peninsula should be revised in such a direction. I think that Mr. Harrison’s argument represents a cognitive change, increasingly happening, in the thinking of American people including many American officials. In other words, American people’s attitude towards South Korea began to change with the shift in the mood of the Tocquevillian Democracy in America.

### **III. A Great Power Syndrome of South Koreans and Erupting Nationalistic Feeling**

Nowadays, the primacy of domestic politics is evident in almost all countries. Since the end of the Cold War, what keeps governments in power is politics at home, not foreign relations. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent developments have made this clear. The Cold War was a struggle between two systems: democracy and market economy on the one-hand, and state control of economy plus party control of everything else on the other hand. The defeat of one system has been followed not by imperial takeover, but by domestic change. We can witness several sudden and radical changes in South Korean domestic politics.

Since South Korea became a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and was recognized as an economically developed country, South Koreans became interested in the problem of inequality in the South Korea-U.S. alliance. However, when the economic crisis, starting with the foreign exchange crisis, befell South Korea, it could not but ask for the help of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the U.S. Thanks to American help, South Korea demonstrated its national capability by finishing the so-called IMF system within three years.

Even so, problems between South Korea and the U.S. did not end. Newly emerging issues between the two countries included the Nogun-ri Massacre committed by the U.S. military during the Korean War, reported by the Associated Press on September 29, 1999. In addition, there were the issues of inequality between the two on the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the building of apartments for the U.S. Forces personnel in Seoul, the Maehyang-ri residents and the firing range of the U.S. Air Force, the environmental pollution by the U.S. Forces Units, and the death of two middle school girls after being run over by a U.S. Army armored vehicle. Even though there have been large and small anti-American gatherings, there has been no nation-wide anti-

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<sup>10</sup> For this point made by the author years ago, see Sung-Hack Kang. 1996. “The Strategic Environment Surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the Role of the US: Is the US Caesar or Iago?,” 『Hankook Jeongchihakhoebo (The Korean Journal of Political Science)』 Vol.30, No. 3. (in Korean)

American sentiment or the demand for complete withdrawal of U.S. forces - something that could create a serious crisis in the South Korea-U.S. alliance. However, the American request for South Korean military assistance in the process of pacification of Iraq and the revelation of American soldiers' maltreatment of Iraqi prisoners of war did aggravate the existent anti-American feeling.

The self-esteem and national pride of the Korean people in regard to their achievement of two miracles - the economic development and the establishment of democratic government - is not willing to accept unequal and unfair treatment anymore.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the 2002 Korea-Japan Soccer World Cup was an occasion through which South Koreans could heighten their self-esteem and national pride. They bypassed China, Japan, Russia and the United States (the four surrounding great powers) and reached the semi-finals in the midst of nation-wide support and passionate cheering by the Red Devils.

As a result, the self-intoxicated South Koreans began to suffer from the "Great Power Syndrome"<sup>12</sup> in the midst of changing international conditions such as the end of the Cold War. This indulgence and self-intoxication encouraged the neglect of the fundamental security structure of South Korea, and allowed a destructive anti-American movement and the demand for the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from South Korea to dominate public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

#### **IV. America's Changing Role from the Godfather of South Korea to an Iago in East Asia?**

Despite Henry Kissinger's contention that there was no explicit tradition of geopolitics in American foreign policy until the start of the Nixon Administration,<sup>14</sup> the geopolitical perspective undoubtedly formed a steady and important element of American policy-makers' understanding of international relations and their foreign policy decision-making. The main reason for the implicit, rather than explicit, character of the geopolitical perspective was that the American policy-makers established and justified their policies, relying on, not Spykman-style, but Tocqueville-style approach, i.e. not geopolitical but moral and ideological. After all, the American national interest became the absolute value in the U.S. foreign policy in which abstract or ideological values were combined with geopolitical realism. As is well known, the American containment policy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War was the sophisticated

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<sup>11</sup> David I. Steinberg, "The Dichotomy of Pride and Vulnerability: South Korean Tension in the U.S. Relationship," in Wonmo Dong, ed. 2000, *The Two Koreas and the United States*, Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 94-115

<sup>12</sup> This expression was borrowed from Robert L. Rothstein. 1968. *Alliances and Small Powers*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 296.

<sup>13</sup> Richard H. Solomon. 2000. "Korea's Security and the Future of the U.S.-R.O.K. Alliance: Moving forward to the Past?" in Dong-Sung Kim, Ki-Jung Kim and Hahnkyu Park, eds. *Fifty Years After the Korean War: From Cold War Confrontation to Peaceful Coexistence*. 260. Seoul: Korean Association of International Studies.

<sup>14</sup> Henry A. Kissinger. 1994. *Diplomacy*, New York: Simon & Schuster, pp. 703-732.

combination of the Spykman-like geopolitical concept and the Tocquevillian world view. Against this background, it was natural to expect a change in the goal of American foreign policy when the bipolar ideological conflict of the Cold War came to an end.

The U.S. seems to be transforming itself from the position of a hegemonic arbiter to a clever balancer in East Asia. The traditional balancing behavior cannot help but flummox friends and foes alike. When it comes to balancing, a traditional British-like balancer does not typically deal with long-term threats.<sup>15</sup> And a strict British-like balancing role would be almost impossible for the U.S. to play at the present time unless the U.S. completely disengages itself from its many alliance systems. Therefore, the U.S. might attempt to play a balancing role similar to that played by Bismarck after the German unification in 1871. Bismarck identified himself as an honest broker, but one with strong alliance systems.<sup>16</sup> Bismarck's foreign policy had the clear goal of isolating France. In contrast, the U.S. prefers to be engaged with all the major powers, including China, and chooses to maintain better relations with all the possible contenders. But the role of an honest broker is attractive to everyone in that it does not involve the payment of any price. The position of an honest broker is too seductive a position for the U.S. to not take in the unipolar world.<sup>17</sup>

By playing the role of an honest broker, the U.S. will reduce the possibility of over-extending itself in the dynamic region of East Asia. East Asia's dynamism is fed by the familiar forces of economic growth and increasing military power. Russia is weak, but its potential is enormous. Though slowly, Russia is recovering from the shock of the collapse of its totalitarian regime. China is cautiously converting its new economic strength into military capability. Japan is already well-equipped to make the military leap.

By threatening to use the weapons of mass destruction(WMDs), North Korea has been challenging not only the United States' policy of nuclear non-proliferation, but also the UN's purpose of maintaining international peace and security. Kim's regime of North Korea continues to be a "hedgehog" which knows only "one big thing" in the wild world of "foxes" which knows many things.<sup>18</sup> One big thing that the hedgehog of North Korea is concerned about is how to maintain Kim's regime and create politico-military conditions favorable for the unification of the Korean peninsula on its own terms. And Kim Jong Il continues to play the dangerous game of nuclear and cruel mendicant brinkmanship with the U.S. and the international community. Thus the prospect of igniting a "sea of fire" on the Korean peninsula through an American attack on North Korea, another axis of evil, after two successful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq creates a strong fear of catastrophe in all Koreans. But another war on Korean soil would not come about in spite of America's commitment against the axis of evil and the successful

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph Joffe, "'Bismarck' or 'Britain'?: Toward an American Grand Strategy after Bipolarity," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Spring 1995), pp. 102-105.

<sup>16</sup> Sung-Hack Kang, 1995. *Chameleon and Sisyphus : Changing International Order and Korean Security*, Seoul: Nanam, (in Koreans), pp. 92-93.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Van Ness, "Hegemony, not Anarchy: Why China and Japan are not balancing US unipolar power," *International Relation of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 2, NO. 1 (2002) pp. 131-150; Robert Kegan, 2003. *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*, New York: Alfred A Knopf.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 1953. *The Hedgehog and Fox*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, p. 1.

conduct of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The U.S. will not become "an arsonist" on the Korean peninsula for the following reasons:

First of all, an American war on North Korea cannot be localized geopolitically. The so-called collateral damage to South Koreans will be too great to be accepted and China will not accept the simple destruction of North Korea as it already proved fifty years ago by participating in the Korean War.

Secondly, while Iraq is located in the petroleum-producing heartland of present day geopolitics, North Korea is a small poor country without any valuable natural resources such as petroleum.

Thirdly, the strategic value of Korean peninsula has sharply declined in this age of Revolution in Military Affairs.

Fourth, the U.S. will recoil for some time from another expensive and politically risky war while it reassesses the results of the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.

Cumulatively, the U.S., if anything, will be more than willing to shift the very expensive burden of neutralizing North Korea's WMD threat to the neighboring powers.

## **V. Conclusion**

Long time ago, Aristotle said, "an unequal person wants equality and an equal person inequality, and that fact becomes the source for revolution". While Koreans now claim the recognition of equality with the United States; the United States continues to claim the traditional recognition of inequality with or superiority to Koreans. In a sense, the relation between Korea and the United States has entered a new phase which is filled with the so-called Hegelian-Nietzschean struggle for rational recognition.

It is true that the South Korea-U.S. alliance system contains an element of inequality, but a complete equality between the benefactor and the beneficiary does not exist anywhere in this world. Who are the benefactor and beneficiary (who benefits more?) in the South Korea-U.S. alliance system is very clear. Therefore, while South Korea cannot help but endure some degree of inequality, it can and should continue to try and secure equality. Any attempt to achieve complete equality overnight would mean a virtual demand for complete withdrawal of the U.S. forces from South Korea. U.S. forces will pull out of South Korea whenever South Koreans want them to. It is natural that the stationing of foreign troops within another sovereign state incurs some tension, and the U.S. forces have become a target of Korean nationalistic sentiment as the tragic memory of the Korean War has gradually faded from Korean minds.

President George W. Bush characterized North Korea as "an axis of evil" after the September 11 terror attack. Ever since this remark, people who seek unification simply for the sake of the same denounce, like Don Quixote, the U.S. as a hegemonic state obstructing the unification of the Korean peninsula through the Sunshine policy. They continue to widely foment the anti-American sentiment in the nation. If this goes on, it is possible that a situation will arise in which the U.S. forces will not be able to continue to stay in South Korea. The U.S. might then prefer to abandon its role as the Godfather-like protector of South Korea for a more Bismarck-like role in which it will act as an "honest broker" between the two Koreas. The issue of completely withdrawing

U.S. forces from South Korea will then be actively raised and the possibility cannot be ruled out of the issue being decided almost unilaterally in Washington D.C.

If the U.S. policy should be revised based on the belief that North Korea no longer posed a security threat under today's changed circumstances and for the purpose of facilitating North-South reconciliation, the United States would have to put an end to its role of a traditional "forest fire-fighter" on the Korean peninsula. Instead, it will have to assume a role akin to Iago, the Shakespearean character, and act as an "honest broker" between South and North Korea and in East Asia.

And the recent American government decision to redeploy 4,000 troops stationed in Korea to Iraq and the subsequent American hints at cutting more troops signify the apparent beginning of the end of the traditional alliance system between Korea and the United States. In other words, the two nations seem to be moving ultimately towards a "twilight divorce."<sup>19</sup>

My crystal ball is not quite clear at the moment, but it can be said in short that the U.S. is not likely to act like a Godfather (or a forest fire-fighter) or a preventive first striker (or an arsonist) on the Korean peninsula in the coming years. Neither will it act like a grand inquisitor as in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rather it will act, in the name of an honest broker, like Iago who spoke aside:

"Everyway makes my gain"<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Twilight divorce refers to the phenomenon of Korean or Japanese couples, who had put up with the dissatisfactions with their marriage and married partners all their lives, from fear of the social stigma against divorce and the disadvantages of the children of broken homes in the marriage market, file for divorce in their old age, taking advantage of the relaxation of the prejudice against divorce and the general improvement in alimony settlements for women.

<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello*, the Moor of Venice, Act 5, Scene 1.

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