

U.S.-Korea Relations:

Military Ties Remain Vital despite North-South Thaw

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Following the historic June summit between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, both Seoul and Pyongyang sought to further advance and solidify international support for gradual integration. The United States offered early and frequent support for ongoing inter-Korean rapprochement, but the rapid progress in talks between the two Koreas left some U.S. strategists seeking to catch up to Seoul's advances. The quarter had bookends of U.S. Defense Secretary Cohen underscoring the importance of a continued U.S. troop presence and calling for added vigilance against North Korean military activity. Both U.S. and ROK strategists called for a renewed and improved alliance that takes into account the thaw on the Korean Peninsula.

U.S.-ROK Defense Relations

Some issues in U.S. and South Korean defense relations remain contentious, with the Nogunri investigations, accusations surrounding testing at the Koonni firing range, and allegations of U.S. military toxic chemical dumping in the Han River reflecting ongoing challenges. On a more positive note, the United States progressed in its discussions with South Korea on the latter's missile capability, with agreement in principle to a range of no greater than 300 km. In addition, an easing of U.S. reluctance on revisions to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in exchange for confinement guarantees reflected forward progress on that issue of recent contention. Nonetheless, the U.S. military command warned in early July of local anti-American "strike squads" targeting U.S. military personnel and urged caution. Summer protests in both in South Korea and Okinawa (which surrounded the G-8 Summit and peaked with some 7,000 residents protesting) reflect the type and tenor of lingering resentment over sustained U.S. troop presence in the region.

In an attempt to counter this sentiment, ROK President Kim Dae-jung spoke repeatedly of the need for a continued U.S. presence on the Peninsula and warned visiting Defense Secretary Cohen of the danger of a power vacuum in the region were forces to withdraw. Several reports indicated that North Korean leader Kim Jong-il publicly has agreed with the South Korean president, calling into question the long-term stumbling block surrounding DPRK objections to a continued U.S. troop presence. Although North Korea indicated as early as the late 1970s and in private sessions since the early 1990s that some semblance of U.S. presence might remain, this quarter's reports go furthest in substantiating a receptiveness at the highest levels in Pyongyang to a continued U.S.

presence. Interestingly, the *Beijing Review* acknowledged the apparent shift in the DPRK's receptivity on the issue, even as China's *People's Liberation Army Daily* decried the U.S. troop presence as the biggest obstacle to unification. Meanwhile, on September 27, the DPRK's *Rodung Shinmun* once again called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea, demonstrating that the DPRK remains as inconsistent and enigmatic as ever in its poorly conveyed foreign policy.

Dealing with the DPRK

U.S. missile talks with North Korea took place in early July amidst a "promising backdrop," according to one observer, but stalled over U.S. refusal to pay North Korea to curtail missile testing. The talks were linked for the first time to nuclear and state terrorism list issues in late September. North Korea badly wants removal from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, in no small part to secure investments necessary for improvement of the North Korean economy. The U.S. has made clear the steps the DPRK must take to be removed from the list, but North Korea has yet to comply. On a more positive note, the DPRK assisted the U.S. in the return of 14 sets of American Korean War remains.

Reports of continued economic challenges and projections of stark food shortages continued, with Pyongyang officially acknowledging in late September a significant grain shortfall given drought and typhoon damage. The UN Food Agriculture Organization and World Food Program (WFP) underscored the projected need, with the WFP head calling for \$100 million in international aid. South Korea's *Chosun Ilbo* reported a doubling of North Korean defectors in the first half of 2000 to 115. The ROK sought to simulate inter-Korean economic investment, with Hyundai's commitment to the West Coast industrial complex an example, and called upon Japan and others to increase needed food assistance. South Korea's ruling Millennium Democratic Party also announced the creation of a 470 billion won Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation Fund.

In need of expanded economic assistance, North Korea, buoyed by its formal acceptance and positive reception in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), announced an interest in the World Trade Organization, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), ASEAN Plus Three, and Asia-Europe Meetings (ASEM). World Bank President James Wolfensohn announced that institution's willingness to "stand ready to support inter-Korean economic cooperation" where possible. North Korea demurred, however, on invitations to attend the general meetings of the International Monetary Fund and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The July ARF meeting in Bangkok afforded historic meetings between U.S. Secretary of State Albright and DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun, as well as between Paek and South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Jong-binn. Albright declared the highest meeting to date between U.S. and DPRK officials "substantially modest, but a symbolically historic step." U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Talbott applauded the forward progress in bilateral ties between North Korea and many of the nations present at the meeting.

Elsewhere, the G-8 refrained from placing the North Korea missile issue on the agenda and similarly lauded the thaw in inter-Korean relations. Russian President Putin captured headlines at the event with suggestions that the DPRK might be willing to trade-off its satellite launch program (i.e. its testing of long-range missiles) in exchange for assistance with space launches--a point later contested but not dismissed outright.

The U.S. seemed to accept and perhaps even welcome positive Russian involvement in Korean Peninsula affairs. Reflecting renewed Russian interest in the region, Putin visited Pyongyang July 19-21. In August, Russia and the DPRK signed a cooperative treaty, and reports surfaced of a possible autumn visit by North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to Vladivostock. Reflecting an evolution of U.S. dialogue with its allies in the region and a willingness to include Russia more closely in discussions, U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Stephen Bosworth expressed a willingness to expand the four-party talks process to a six-nation arrangement, to include Russia and Japan. However, he did underscore the primacy of inter-Korean dialogue. Similarly, the September 1 meeting of the Trilateral Oversight and Coordination Group (TCOG) was predated with a visit by U.S. Ambassador Wendy Sherman to Russia for consultation with senior leaders on DPRK issues.

Assessing the North Korea Threat

In September, Defense Secretary Cohen and Japanese Defense Agency Director General Torashima agreed to a consultative body to improve joint defense capabilities, particularly relative to North Korea. To that end, the U.S. military command in South Korea released a report titled "North Korean Threat," describing an "unusually active year" for DPRK forces. Ambassador Bosworth cautioned that the North Korean military threat has not diminished despite the thaw.

The Foreign and Defense Ministers of the United States and Japan similarly stated in September that they must solidify defenses to guard against DPRK aggression. Cohen described North Korea's warming as "encouraging signs but just steps." U.S. and ROK defense chiefs called for "substantial measures" on the part of the DPRK toward reducing tensions. To that end, the historic late-September meeting of the ROK and DPRK defense ministers led to reports of a common commitment to reconciliation and a basic understanding of military roles. The two agreed to the clearing of landmines and the need to reconnect a rail link through the DMZ, and South Korea repeated its desire for a military hotline and committee on military cooperation.

Nonetheless, both sides continued military build-ups despite the thaw. The U.S. Department of Defense released a report September 22 to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees on DPRK military improvements. Meanwhile, *Aviation Week and Space Technology* noted on September 18 that the ROK is sustaining a large military procurement program despite the easing of inter-Korean tensions.

The more cautious tone of U.S. and Japanese strategists toward the end of the quarter may reflect emphasis on continued deterrence, the continued strength of the military-industrial complex on the Peninsula, and/or more conservative readings than South Korea's. Reports surfaced that U.S. State and Defense intelligence analysts were at odds on the reading of the North Korean threat, with the State Department cautioning that Defense Intelligence Agency estimates were far too pessimistic. The emotive dynamism of the August family reunions, senior official and unofficial inter-Korean contacts, the proposed relinking of the railway, and North and South Koreans marching under a single flag at the Sydney 2000 Olympics constitute a most dramatic story of positive change in the region. The United States must avoid appearing to lag behind or in any way be obstructionist toward the broader process of reconciliation and gradual integration.

Chronology of U.S.-Korea Relations July-September 2000

July 1, 2000: DPRK renews threat to restart nuclear reactors without U.S. compensation for energy losses.

July 1, 2000: Defense Secretary Cohen states U.S. troops need to remain on the Peninsula.

July 10-12, 2000: U.S.-DPRK engage in missile negotiations, which end in stalemate.

July 12, 2000: *South China Morning Post* reports DPRK Leader Kim Jong-il wants normalized relations with U.S.

July 14, 2000: U.S. Representative Gilman introduces legislation to reintroduce economic sanctions on DPRK if it tests or proliferates missiles or missile technology.

July 14, 2000: Assistant Secretary of State Robert Einhorn meets informally with South Korean foreign ministry officials to discuss the ROK's entry to the Missile Technology Control Regime.

July 17, 2000: U.S. agrees "in principle" to ROK 300 km range missile.

July 18, 2000: On-site forensic work begins at Nogunri, site of alleged U.S. Korean War massacres.

July 27, 2000: DPRK formally joins the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

July 27-29, 2000: Senior inter-Korean talks occur in Seoul.

July 28, 2000: U.S. Secretary of State Albright meets DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun in Bangkok, the highest diplomatic contact in the history of both nations.

Aug. 2-3, 2000: U.S. and ROK engage in Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) talks.

Aug. 9-10, 2000: U.S. and DPRK engage in talks on DPRK removal from U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Aug. 14, 2000: DPRK leader Kim Jong-il acknowledges missile sales to Iran and Syria.

Aug. 15-18, 2000: Historic family reunions occur between selected North and South Koreans divided families.

Aug. 18, 2000: ROK releases initial report, indicating at least 175 Nogunri victims.

Aug. 19, 2000: DPRK returns 14 sets of possible U.S. Korean War remains.

Aug. 21, 2000: ROK scales back 12-day exercise with U.S. troops.

Aug. 28-29, 2000: U.S. Ambassador Wendy Sherman leads consultations with senior Russian officials on DPRK issues.

Sept. 1, 2000: U.S.-ROK-Japan Trilateral Commission and Oversight Group meets in Seoul and is led by Ambassador Sherman, Japan Deputy Foreign Minister Yukio, and ROK Deputy Foreign Minister Jang.

Sept. 5, 2000: American Airlines Frankfurt security checks lead DPRK UN Millennium Summit delegation to return to Pyongyang in protest.

Sept. 6-8, 2000: United Nations Millennium Summit supports inter-Korean summit; ROK President Kim Dae-jung hails “miracle” of rapprochement and meets with U.S., PRC, and Russian leaders.

Sept. 11, 2000: DPRK Asia-Pacific Peace Committee leader Kim Young-sun leads delegation to Seoul.

Sept. 15, 2000: ROK and DPRK athletes march in Sydney 2000 Olympic opening ceremonies under unification flag.

Sept. 18, 2000: U.S. announces late September talks with DPRK to discuss nuclear, missile, and state terrorism list issues in tandem.

Sept. 18, 2000: Assistant Secretary Einhorn holds missile talks with Song Min-soon, director general of the ROK Foreign Ministry’s North American affairs.

Sept. 18, 2000: *Aviation Week and Space Technology* reports that the ROK is sustaining a large military procurement despite inter-Korean advances.

Sept. 20, 2000: ROK and U.S. reaffirm security alliance at Security Consultative Meeting.

Sept. 20, 2000: Inter-Korean Red Cross talks begin.

Sept. 21, 2000: U.S. Defense Secretary Cohen and ROK Defense Minister Cho Sung-tae meet and call on DPRK for “substantial measures” to reduce tensions.

Sept. 22, 2000: U.S. Department of Defense releases a report on DPRK military improvements.

Sept. 25, 2000: Historic meeting of ROK Defense Minister Cho Sung-tae and DPRK Defense Minister Kim Il-chul takes place in Cheju, South Korea.

Sept. 25, 2000: Pyongyang announces 1.4 ton grain loss due to drought and typhoons.

Sept. 27, 2000: DRPK’s *Rodung Shinmun* calls for withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea.