

## U.S.-Korea Relations: Tensions Escalate as the U.S. Targets Iraq

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Sharp rhetorical attacks and military friction between the U.S. and North Korea mounted this quarter, reaching the highest level since the 1994 nuclear crisis. With South Korea insisting that war was not a feasible option, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), restarted a nuclear reactor, tested two surface-to-surface missiles, sent a fighter into South Korean airspace, and shadowed a U.S. reconnaissance plane. For its part, the Bush administration downplayed the provocative North Korean actions and, while hesitating to negotiate bilaterally with Pyongyang, underlined its commitment to peaceful diplomacy. By deploying new military assets to the region and conducting regular military exercises, the administration elevated its deterrent posture on the Peninsula, even as it concentrated its main foreign policy efforts on bringing about “regime change” in Iraq.

### **Trilateral Diplomatic Coordination**

At the outset of the quarter, amid a high level of tension between the U.S. and North Korea, U.S., South Korean, and Japanese officials met in Washington, D.C. for their regular Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting. Going into the meeting, South Korea announced its intention to “mediate” between Washington and Pyongyang on security issues. South Korea offered a proposal that the U.S. provide North Korea with security guarantees against attack by the United States, in exchange for an end to the North’s nuclear program.

Bush administration officials were reportedly incensed that South Korea, a close U.S. ally, would even rhetorically put the U.S. on the same diplomatic footing as North Korea by offering a compromise proposal. Not surprisingly, the South Korean proposal came to naught. Instead, the trilateral meeting emphasized the common element in the U.S., South Korean, and Japanese positions: all three governments sought a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue with North Korea. The TCOG further endorsed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) adoption of a resolution calling on North Korea to comply with its obligations under the NPT.

At the TCOG, the Bush administration maintained the core principles of its hardline approach toward North Korea that it adopted since October 2002, when North Korea allegedly admitted the existence of a uranium enrichment program to U.S. diplomats. The U.S. stressed that it would not enter into bilateral negotiations with North Korea unless Pyongyang verifiably shut down its nuclear program. Without such a first step by North Korea, the administration argued that even entering into bilateral talks would be a form of appeasement – a sign of weakness in the face of North Korean threats. Nevertheless, the administration coupled its refusal to talk to North Korea with a declaration that it was committed to a peaceful resolution of the nuclear issue.

In the past, the Bush administration appeared divided into at least two factions on how to deal with North Korea – a moderate faction that advocated diplomatic negotiations for the purpose of threat reduction and a more conservative faction that argued for isolating North Korea until it acceded to U.S. demands or collapsed. But in the tense atmosphere that existed throughout this quarter, administration views seemed to coalesce around a hardline approach.

### **North Korea Withdraws from the NPT**

North Korea reacted negatively to the results of the TGOC meeting and to the administration's continued refusal to enter into direct bilateral negotiations. On Jan. 10, Pyongyang announced that it would withdraw from the NPT, effective immediately. North Korea's decision seemed especially destabilizing, since it paralleled the treaty withdrawal announcement in 1993 that led to a crisis over Pyongyang's capability to develop nuclear weapons – and nearly precipitated a preemptive U.S. attack. At that time, only the diplomatic intervention by former President Jimmy Carter, who reached a compromise agreement with North Korean leader Kim Il-sung, broke the chain of events that seemed to be leading ineluctably toward war.

North Korea's decision to withdraw from the NPT – with the implication it would restart its nuclear energy program to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons – was the first of a series of threatening steps Pyongyang took during the quarter to put pressure on the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. North Korea adhered consistently to a coercive game-plan, ratcheting up diplomatic and military pressure on its perceived adversaries if its demands for direct talks with the U.S. were not met.

At no time did Pyongyang apparently attempt to nuance its strident actions toward the U.S. with steps toward a peaceful solution or a willingness to make any concessions of its own. Presumably, there were two strategic intentions behind this approach. On the one hand, North Korea likely expected the U.S. administration to choose to avoid conflict by gradually accommodating some of Pyongyang's demands. On the other hand, Pyongyang likely was attempting to exploit the stark difference in points of view between the U.S. and Seoul on how to best deal with North Korea.

## **South Korea Rejects the Possibility of War**

For its part, the Kim Dae-jung government, in a position later adopted by President-elect Roh Moo-hyun and his advisers, consistently reiterated its commitment to avoid war on the Peninsula while condemning Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT and its nuclear program. In urging the U.S. to enter into direct negotiations with North Korea, Seoul asserted its willingness to play an active role in resolving the nuclear issue. This overall position, which evolved from Seoul's earlier proposal to mediate the nuclear crisis, caused consternation in the Bush administration because it allegedly contained an internal contradiction. By ruling out the use of force against North Korea at the outset, Bush advisors argued, the U.S. and South Korea could not pursue an effective diplomatic strategy with its usual "carrots and sticks."

The core issue causing conflict between the two allies was, of course, whether to treat military conflict as a possible response or solution to North Korea's menacing moves toward developing a nuclear weapons capability. Two and a half years after the June 2000 summit between President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, large elements of the South Korean public and bureaucracy had accepted the notion of normalization with North Korea. A cornerstone of President Kim's North Korea policy has been taking measures to foster greater commercial relations between the two countries as the basis for eventual Korean reunification. Even as tensions between the U.S. and North Korea mounted during the quarter, North and South representatives actively discussed development of a new industrial zone in Kaesong, just north of the DMZ, and the completion of rail and highway links.

The Bush administration apparently decided to ignore and effectively override the internal contradiction in Seoul's approach toward North Korea by announcing it would push for a tough new measure – UN Security Council condemnation of Pyongyang's nuclear program. U.S. Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton stressed during a visit to Seoul in late January that the Security Council should address this issue although he did not see the need to impose economic sanctions on North Korea at this time, despite an expected IAEA resolution denouncing Pyongyang's withdrawal from the NPT. His comments drew a sharp response from North Korea, which threatened, as it had during the 1994 nuclear crisis, that it would consider UN sanctions the equivalent of a declaration of war. An aide to President-elect Roh made it known at this time that South Korea opposed consideration of the nuclear issue in the Security Council.

In the context of rising tensions with North Korea and the apparent policy conflict between Washington and Seoul's approach, U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Thomas Hubbard attempted to maintain a balance in U.S. policy. He pointed out that incentives and aid for North Korea would be available if Pyongyang abandoned its nuclear program: "If they satisfy our concerns about the nuclear programs, we are prepared to consider a broad approach that would entail, in the final analysis, some economic cooperation, perhaps in the power field."

In mid-February, shortly after the IAEA referred the nuclear issue with North Korea to the Security Council, President-elect Roh made his strongest statement reflecting differences with the Bush administration's hardline approach. He said he would strive to prevent a war on the Korean Peninsula even if it meant conflict between Seoul and Washington: "It is better to struggle than suffer deaths in a war. Koreans should stand together, although things will get difficult when the United States bosses us around. Even if we have to pour out more to the North, we have to invest there."

South Korean opposition to immediate UN Security Council action on the nuclear issue seemed to pay off shortly thereafter, as the Council decided to refer the matter to an experts' group for an indefinite period. This move averted a political confrontation with North Korea that could have led to a near-term military conflict.

### **North Korea Ratchets Up the Threat**

Presumably reflecting the hardline views of the North Korean military faction, Pyongyang took a series of bellicose actions in late February and early March that raised tensions on the Peninsula to the highest level since the 1994 nuclear crisis. On Feb. 20, a North Korean MIG-19 fighter penetrated South Korean airspace beyond the so-called Northern Line Limit over the West Sea, but turned back to avoid confrontation with the South Korean fighters sent to intercept it. One day before President Roh's Feb. 25 inauguration, North Korea tested a surface-to-surface missile in the Eastern Sea, aimed in the direction of Japan. In late February, North Korea restarted its 5-megawatt Yongbyon reactor, rekindling fears it would again acquire the capability to produce nuclear weapons.

And after threatening in early March to withdraw from the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War, four North Korean fighter jets intercepted an unarmed U.S. reconnaissance plane reportedly located 150 miles off the North Korean coast. The plane broke off its surveillance mission and returned to base, though U.S. military sources characterized the North Korean action as highly provocative. Again, on March 10, North Korea conducted a second test launch of a surface-to-surface missile.

Arguably, North Korea's threatening actions over this period may be viewed as its own crude form of "deterrence" against the United States. The U.S. was fully engaged in a large-scale buildup of military forces near Iraq, where President George W. Bush had pledged to replace the regime of President Saddam Hussein. North Korea feared, based on leaks from Washington, that the U.S. might soon challenge Pyongyang militarily if it did not close down its nuclear facilities. Thus, Pyongyang's military actions may have been designed both to signal Washington that it was prepared for military conflict and to push the Bush administration toward resuming a direct bilateral dialogue.

## **U.S.-South Korea Dialogue**

The U.S. responded to shrill North Korean rhetoric and the new military threats with several deterrence measures of its own, including moving 24 heavy bombers to Guam, within range of North Korea, and extending the training time of several F-117 stealth and F-15E fighters sent for the “Foal Eagle” joint military exercises in Korea. Furthermore, as planned joint military exercises got underway in March, the U.S. moved the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *USS Vinson* to Pusan port in South Korea, to participate in the exercises.

The highest level U.S.-South Korean dialogue of the quarter occurred at President Roh’s inauguration Feb. 25, when Roh met with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to iron out differences in the two allies’ policy toward North Korea. Roh stressed South Korea’s critical role in peacefully resolving the nuclear issue with Pyongyang and he reportedly opposed any prospective U.S. use of force in compelling North Korea to give up its nuclear program.

Powell reiterated the U.S. view that it has no intention of invading North Korea and said, unlike in Iraq, “regime change” has never been a political objective of the U.S. in dealing with Pyongyang. But he also reportedly stressed that the U.S. could not remove the available military option for addressing the North Korean threat. Powell used the occasion to announce a new conciliatory measure toward the North: resuming food aid, beginning with a shipment of 40,000 tons to which another 60,000 tons or more would be added later in the year.

## **Moving Toward a Common U.S.-South Korean Diplomatic Strategy**

During January and February of this quarter, leading commentators in both South Korea and the U.S. criticized the failure of the two governments to agree on major tenets of their North Korea policy. A common theme was that the only country that benefited from the existing difference in views was North Korea, and that neither the U.S. nor South Korea could achieve its policy goals without the support of the other. Seemingly in response to this criticism, two new elements entered into U.S.-South Korea diplomatic relations toward the end of the quarter.

Following President Roh’s inauguration, the South Korean Foreign Ministry, led by new Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan, stressed the importance of resolving the nuclear issue with North Korea through a multilateral framework. This approach melded with the recent U.S. proposal to convene a multilateral conference on the nuclear problem.

South Korea’s support for a multilateral approach tended to reinforce a common U.S.-South Korea strategy that might break the log jam between Washington and Pyongyang over direct negotiations. North Korea formally rejected a multilateral framework while insisting on direct talks with the U.S. But Ambassador Hubbard gave further momentum to the multilateral proposal in mid-March by adding a nuanced U.S. position on bilateral talks in a multilateral context: “We are ready to meet with representatives of North

Korea in a multilateral setting to discuss the steps the North can take to meet the obligations it has undertaken, and has regrettably abandoned,” Hubbard said. Whether the South Korean-U.S. emphasis on multilateral diplomacy and the new U.S. willingness to hold direct talks at a multilateral conference would satisfy North Korean pre-conditions for entering into negotiations was not clear at the end of this quarter.

A second development that helped to smooth over recent differences in U.S.-South Korean relations was Seoul’s decision to join the coalition supporting the U.S.-led war on Iraq. President Roh indicated that adopting this position was “not easy,” presumably because of strong antiwar feeling in the South Korean public and because of South Korea’s close commercial and political ties to the Arab world. Roh’s decision came in direct response to a U.S. request and led to expressions of appreciation from both President Bush and Vice President Richard Cheney. Seoul proposed to send approximately 700 noncombat troops, including a construction battalion and medical assistance personnel to help the U.S. at a cost to South Korea of approximately \$270 million.

Drawing on these two changes in South Korean policy, Foreign Minister Yoon visited Washington in late March and offered a “roadmap” to “induce North Korea to participate in the U.S.-initiated multilateral format.” From published reports, it appeared that Yoon’s proposal called for South Korea, the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia to provide a comprehensive aid package to Pyongyang, including economic and energy assistance to address the country’s dire domestic problems, *if* North Korea freezes its nuclear program, enters into multilateral negotiations, and takes no further actions to exacerbate the security situation on the Peninsula.

The South Korean proposal reflected differences with current U.S. policy in at least two respects. Rather than seeking a freeze of the status quo, the Bush administration has previously called for Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear program and meet its international commitments under the NPT *before* negotiations can begin. Only after North Korea takes decisive action to end the nuclear program has the Bush administration been willing to offer significant economic aid under its so-called “bold initiative.” Finally, the administration has shied away from any measures to “induce” Pyongyang to end its nuclear brinkmanship.

Despite these policy differences, Secretary Powell called the South Korean proposal “interesting” and said the administration would review it closely. Since Seoul’s proposal was cleverly designed to realize the Bush administration’s multilateral approach to the North Korean nuclear problem, Washington had reason to be pleased with the “roadmap” as well as Yoon’s overall emphasis on strengthening the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

One further aspect of Yoon’s meetings with Powell and other White House officials was their mutual reiteration of a commitment to address issues with North Korea through “peaceful diplomacy.” In South Korea, the Roh administration and various news media viewed this statement as a significant assurance in light of widespread fear that the U.S. might attack North Korea after the completion of the war in Iraq. For the U.S.

administration, however, the statement was no different than other statements it had made previously and did not seemingly represent a change in policy.

### **Reviewing the Status of U.S. Forces in Korea**

In the week prior to President Roh's inauguration, the "realignment" of U.S. forces in South Korea emerged as a public issue. Gen. Leon LaPorte, the senior U.S. general in South Korea and head of the Combined Forces Command, said the two countries would review the fundamental elements of their alliance based on the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said that the U.S. and South Korea would soon begin their re-examination of the status of U.S. forces, at Seoul's request.

In part, the new emphasis on reviewing the status of U.S. forces was a response to President Roh's campaign statements that he sought to "rebalance" the alliance relationship in order to establish real "equality" between the two countries. At the same time, the new U.S. push on this issue was likely meant to remind the South Korean government and public of their dependence on U.S. forces for defense against North Korea. Both policy motivations arose in the wake of recent demonstrations against the U.S. troop presence following the accidental deaths of two junior high school girls during a U.S. military exercise.

Among the specific issues that U.S and South Korean defense officials intend to discuss in the near future are: 1) changing the operational wartime control of the South Korean military which currently is given to the U.S. combined forces commander; 2) relocating Yongsan army base away from the center of Seoul to a place south of the city; and 3) removing U.S. troops from the region near the demilitarized zone where they have long served as a "trip-wire" for U.S. involvement in any new Korean conflict.

During his visit to Washington at the end of March, Foreign Minister Yoon and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld agreed that the purpose of any realignment of U.S. forces would be to strengthen deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. Reflecting fears in Seoul that the U.S. might somehow weaken its military commitment to South Korea during this critical period, Yoon "stressed the need to deal with the issue in a low-profile manner" and to postpone any relocation of U.S. forces until after progress is made on the nuclear issue with North Korea.

### **Prospects**

At no time since the spring of 1994 have events brought the United States and North Korea closer to armed confrontation than they did this quarter. In reaction to the Bush administration's refusal to enter into bilateral talks, Pyongyang responded with escalating rhetoric, diplomatic brinkmanship, and ultimately military threats, culminating in the attempt to force down a U.S. reconnaissance plane in early March. North Korea seemed never to deviate from its view that the best way to achieve its diplomatic goals was to threaten the U.S. administration. Arguably, Pyongyang's fear of U.S. military power, on

display in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula through joint military exercises, motivated this policy position.

For its part, the Bush administration tried hard to downplay the potential for conflict on the Peninsula, insisting that it was committed to a peaceful diplomatic solution. But general U.S. unwillingness to engage in direct negotiations with North Korea, in the face of Pyongyang's threats, inevitably undercut its alleged support for diplomatic conflict resolution. Some voices in Washington promised full retribution against North Korea following an Iraq war, even as others argued that allowing Pyongyang to become a declared nuclear weapons state would not harm U.S. interests.

Toward the end of the quarter, diplomats in Seoul and Washington sought breathing room in a formula for a multilateral solution to the nuclear issue, which Pyongyang has thus far rejected. Through its creative "roadmap" proposal, Seoul, in particular, looked for ways to make a multilateral approach attractive to the North Korean regime. The proposed bilateral U.S.-North Korea talks that would accompany a multilateral conference may ultimately give North Korea a sufficient measure of the direct negotiations with the U.S. it is seeking (comparable to the bilateral U.S.-North Korean contacts during the now defunct Four Party talks). If so, this strategy may become a fruitful avenue for shutting down Pyongyang's nuclear program and providing North Korea with security guarantees, while avoiding military conflict on the Peninsula.

### **Chronology of U.S.-Korea Relations\*** **January-March 2003**

**Jan. 6, 2003:** International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) adopts resolution on North Korean cooperation and compliance.

**Jan. 7, 2003:** U.S, South Korea, and Japan hold Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) meeting.

**Jan. 10, 2003:** North Korea announces it is withdrawing from Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), South Korean Foreign Ministry calls on North Korea to cancel its decision.

**Jan. 11, 2003:** South Korea and Russia jointly urge North Korea not to withdraw from NPT.

**Jan. 12-14, 2003:** U.S. Asst. Secretary of State James Kelly meets President-elect Roh Moo-hyun and begins consultations with ROK officials on North Korean nuclear issue.

**Jan. 16, 2003:** South Korean President-elect Roh Moo-hyun urges U.S. to open talks with North Korea on peaceful resolution of nuclear issue.

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\* Chronology compiled by Vasey Fellow Kim Ah-Young.



**Jan. 17, 2003:** Charles Kartman says construction of Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) project still going forward; Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage says U.S. has no hostile intent toward North Korea.

**Jan. 18, 2003:** Ambassador Thomas Hubbard says U.S. will aid North Korea if it abandons nuclear program.

**Jan. 22, 2003:** Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security Affairs John Bolton says U.S. expects North Korea nuclear issue will be referred to UN Security Council.

**Jan. 24, 2003:** In statement concluding inter-Korean talks, South and North Korea agree nuclear issue should be resolved peacefully.

**Jan. 25, 2003:** At World Economic Forum, U.S. and South Korean officials exchange proposals on multilateral framework for addressing nuclear issue with North Korea.

**Feb. 3, 2003:** North Korea says it is prepared to counter “U.S. plans to invade amid a nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.”

**Feb. 5, 2003:** Joint U.S.-ROK panel gives Korean prosecutors greater rights to question U.S. soldiers for off-duty alleged crimes.

**Feb. 11, 2003:** North and South Korean officials discuss inter-Korean economic issues in Seoul.

**Feb. 12, 2003:** The IAEA declares the DPRK in breach of its nuclear nonproliferation commitments and refers the matter to the Security Council.

**Feb. 13, 2003:** North Korea says it has the ability to strike U.S. military targets anywhere in the world. President-elect Roh says he will strive to prevent new Korean war even if it means disagreement with the U.S.

**Feb. 17, 2003:** North Korea announces it will build four more nuclear power plants, each bigger than Yongbyon.

**Feb. 18, 2003:** Ambassador Hubbard foresees possibility for new “division of roles” between U.S. and ROK military forces in future realignment; North Korea threatens to abandon 1953 Armistice that ended Korean War.

**Feb. 20, 2003:** North Korean MiG-19 fighter penetrates South Korean airspace, turning back before being intercepted. Incoming National Security Advisor Ra Jong-il meets with North Korean official in Beijing, urging inter-Korean summit meeting.

**Feb. 21, 2003:** Ambassador Hubbard says U.S. is reviewing consolidation of military bases in Korea, including relocation of Yongsan army base in downtown Seoul.

**Feb. 24, 2003:** North Korea tests antiship missile, one day prior to President Roh's inauguration.

**Feb. 25, 2003:** Roh Moo-hyun is inaugurated as president of the Republic of Korea. Secretary of State Colin Powell leads U.S. delegation, says U.S. will resume food aid to North Korea.

**Feb. 27, 2003:** U.S. reports that North Korea has restarted its 5-megawatt Yongbyon reactor.

**March 2, 2003:** DPRK fighter intercept and shadow a U.S. Air Force reconnaissance plane over the Sea of Japan about 150 miles off the DPRK coast.

**March 4, 2003:** Operation "Foal Eagle" begins for Combined Forces Command, testing force deployment, protection, command and control between U.S. and ROK forces; Defense Secretary Rumsfeld deploys 24 long-range bombers to Guam, within range of North Korea.

**March 6, 2003:** ROK Prime Minister Goh Kun calls for U.S. forces to remain in Korea for deterrent purposes.

**March 7, 2003:** ROK Defense Ministry formally protests North's interception of U.S. reconnaissance plane.

**March 8, 2003:** North Korea rejects U.S. proposal of multilateral talks, insisting on direct negotiations.

**March 10, 2003:** North Korea conducts second test launch of antiship missile.

**March 11, 2003:** The U.S. announces it will send up to six radar-avoiding F-117A "stealth" warplanes to South Korea for "Foal Eagle" exercise.

**March 13, 2003:** President Bush thanks President Roh for South Korean support on Iraq. Nuclear carrier *USS Vinson* arrives in Pusan to participate in military exercises.

**March 18, 2003:** KPA turns down UN Command offer of general officer-level talks to explain current joint military exercises in South Korea; U.S. Secretary Powell rejects North Korean demand for direct talks in lieu of multilateral framework; Pentagon announces U.S. and South Korea will develop a realignment blueprint by Sept. 2003.

**March 20, 2003:** Ambassador Hubbard says U.S. will meet directly with North Korea in a multilateral setting.

**March 26, 2003:** South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Yang-kwan meets with Secretary Powell in Washington.