

# *SOUTH KOREA*

## SLOUCHING TOWARD SUBMISSION

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Chuck Downs

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**I**n the summer of 2006, two American allies faced clear and present dangers from terrorist forces armed with thousands of highly lethal, state-of-the-art missiles. Their respective enemies denied that these democratic societies had a right to exist, and pursued a long-standing, openly announced intention to wipe them from the face of the earth. Yet the similarities between Israel and South Korea seem to stop there.

Imagine that after its two soldiers were abducted by Hezbollah, Israel had called upon its neighbors to stop criticizing the terrorist group, urged the United Nations not to take action against it, advanced rationales for why Hezbollah might want to pursue more capable weaponry, dismissed its threatening rhetoric, and proposed to arbitrate from a position of neutrality between the United States and the terrorists. Imagine also that it criticized allies which came to its defense.

It is certainly true that each foreign policy issue is *sui generis*—possessing its own unique characteristics based on political, economic, and cultural factors. But what we have seen in the vastly different responses of these two American allies clarifies the depths of South Korea's crisis. In stark contrast to the way Israel has shown respect for, attention to, and dependence upon its partnership with the United States, the government of South Korea appears to be attempting to dissolve its strategic bonds with Washington. Seoul's response during the Korean missile crisis of 2006 will go down in history as a landmark case of an ally tearing down the foundations of an alliance at the very moment it faces significant danger.



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## Going wobbly

Although an armistice officially limits hostilities between North and South Korea, the Korean peninsula has been in a *de jure* state of war since 1950, when Kim Il Sung tried to unify the peninsula under Communist control by invading the South. The United Nations came to the aid of the elected government of South Korea, which was declared to be the only “lawfully-established government” in Korea. Three years of bloody fighting ended in a standoff. After the Korean War, the Communist government in the North was propped up by the Soviet Union until the latter’s demise in 1991, after which it suffered severe economic crisis, famine and institutional duress, but continued to send submarines and commando teams to the South on sabotage missions. South Korea’s security, on the other hand, was guaranteed by the United States, enabling the country—in spite of the threat posed by Communism in North Korea—to make spectacular progress and become the economic powerhouse it is today.

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In recent years, South Korean defense planners have grappled with how best to describe the threat posed by the communist regime in Pyongyang, against which so much of South Korea’s military planning and alliance relations are based. Politically, however, the writing is on the wall.

From the start of the Korean War, the government of the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) understandably labeled North Korea, otherwise known as the Democratic

People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), as its “primary enemy.” But the election of formerly imprisoned leftist opposition leader Kim Dae Jung to the South Korean presidency in 1997 ushered in a new era. In hopes of winning over his country’s hostile northern neighbor, Kim launched a conciliatory approach (known as the “sunshine policy”) built around economic inducements and reassuring strategic overtures. This policy remains very much in vogue today; Kim’s successor and ideological protégé, current President Roh Moo Hyun, has expanded the “sunshine” policy into a “peace and prosperity policy”—one that attempts to engage regional players in developing the North’s economy.

This policy shift has brought with it a substantial strategic reorientation. In recent years, South Korean defense planners have grappled with how best to describe the threat posed by the Communist regime, against which so much of South Korea’s military planning and alliance relations are based. Politically, however, the writing is on the wall. In 2001, a few months after Kim Dae Jung visited Pyongyang for a well-orchestrated summit meeting, his administration announced that it “was examining a plan to use a different expression than ‘primary enemy’ in the official description of South Korea’s relationship with North Korea.”<sup>1</sup> The process proved so controversial that for three years South Korea’s formative defense policy document could not be printed, until finally the term “primary enemy” was dropped entirely.

As stunning as this avoidance of identifying North Korea as its primary enemy may be, it has been accompanied by a series of policy pronouncements that has brought ever deeper confusion and embarrassment to the

alliance between South Korea and the United States. Such statements have included the informal remarks of ruling party security advisors visiting Washington that North Korea's nuclear developments are a long-term advantage for all Koreans. Following a chorus of Congressional condemnation, those remarks were repudiated, but President Roh's oft-repeated statement that South Korea should play a fair, balancing role between the United States and North Korea continues to guide South Korean policy. That this approach is contradictory is self-evident. As AEI economist Nicholas Eberstadt has pointed out, Roh's approach suggests that the government of South Korea can balance the interests of "a proven ally that has repeatedly defended South Korea's sovereignty and independence with those of an enemy that has consistently called for its annihilation."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, while some changes in South Korea's approach to its alliance with the U.S. have occurred gradually, and could be chalked up to generational factors or popular mood swings, South Korea's denigration of the U.S.-ROK alliance has reached a dangerous level that cannot be confused with political maturity. Seoul, simply put, has become North Korea's most persistent apologist.

### **Stockholm syndrome in Seoul**

The summer 2006 Asian missile crisis has brought this state of affairs into sharp perspective. While even North Korean ally China urged Pyongyang not to proceed with what American intelligence concluded were likely preparations for missile launches, South Korean President Roh took pains to explain that North Korea might have a legitimate

need for such tests—for example, for peaceful space exploration. That notion was not an original idea; it had been the official North Korean line when the DPRK shocked the world in 1998 by launching a three-stage *Taepo-Dong* intercontinental ballistic missile over Japan into the Pacific Ocean. That demonstration proved that North Korea's missile capabilities far exceeded western intelligence estimates. It naturally also raised concerns about North Korea's recklessness; the missile could have sent debris into Japanese cities, but it was launched without even a routine notice to mariners fishing near the point of splashdown.

North Korea's objectives in the missile launches of July 4, 2006,<sup>3</sup> were similar to those of 1998. The *Taepo-Dong II* test in July, however, was a technical failure, with the missile exploding less than a minute after launch. To some degree, however, the failure was mitigated by an impressive series of mobile launches of *Scud* and *No-Dong* missiles (some with new characteristics).

The successful *Scud* and *No-Dong* tests could be described as posing a threat to Russia, China, and Japan, because parts of each country's territory lay within the missiles' range. Without a doubt, however, the greatest threat posed by these weapons is to South Korea, whose entire territory sits within range, and whose historical enmity can be presumed to matter. Back in June 2006, South Korea had joined diplomatic efforts to persuade North Korea not to carry out the missile tests. But, when push came to shove, the Blue House, the South Korean president's executive mansion, was hesitant to respond to the launches. In explaining why two hours had lapsed before President Roh was even informed of the

launches, Unification Minister Lee Jong-seok said, "Because these missiles were shot toward the East Sea, it was not thought they posed a direct threat to national security."<sup>4</sup>

In press briefings, South Korean officials also chose not to emphasize President Bush's statement that North Korea had taken "a provocative action," instead voicing muted concern that the missile launches might produce a "grave and negative impact on inter-Korean ties."<sup>5</sup> South Korean officials did make a show of declaring that meetings previously scheduled with North Korea might not be held and food aid to the North would be temporarily suspended. But simultaneously, they also pointed out reassuringly that South Korean-sponsored economic activities at North Korea's Kaesong industrial complex would be unaffected by the missile tests, because they were a matter for the private sector (even though South Korean taxpayers provide the official financial guarantees without which these activities would not be undertaken).

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President Roh himself chose to make no statement on the North Korean action for a week, a silence

that drew rebuke from South Korea's opposition party. Instead, a statement from officials at the Blue House declared that the situation was "not a national security emergency." The silence might have been justified if it were a tactic designed to allow the rest of the world to voice its alarm more effectively. But that was not the case. In a telling statement, the President's staff explained, "There is a reason for the president's silence. It would be foolish to take action that could throw national security into jeopardy by raising tension levels on the peninsula."<sup>6</sup> The message was clear: North Korea had succeeded in bullying the South Korean government into silence, even though stating a fear of self-defense is seldom an effective means of guaranteeing one's security.

Sensitive to South Korea's proximity and distaste for confrontation with the North, American officials welcomed the leading role Japan was willing to play in drafting and sponsoring a UN resolution reprimanding North Korea for the missile tests. The Japanese draft called upon member states not to provide materials to North Korea that could be used in manufacturing missiles and raised the possibility that stronger measures under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, including military enforcement and economic sanctions, could be authorized against the rogue regime. Japan backed up this proposal by taking immediate action to impose economic sanctions prohibiting Japanese companies from providing funds or military equipment to North Korea.

It might have been expected that South Korea would express quiet gratitude to Japan for carrying its water on this issue. Yet quite the opposite occurred. During the hiatus in presidential statements about the

missile crisis, President Roh's staff took the opportunity to declare that South Korea had "no reason to make a fuss about it like Japan did."<sup>7</sup> In fact, when President Roh broke his silence on the missile crisis, he did so to criticize Japan, whose attitude, he said, "may lead to a critical situation in the peace over Northeast Asia."<sup>8</sup>

In South Korea's topsy-turvy analysis, its own diplomatic efforts were focused on proceeding with North-South talks that had been scheduled before the missile crisis. Recognizing when they had a compliant hostage, the North Korean delegation attended these talks and pulled out all the stops. North Korean negotiator Kwon Ho-ung exclaimed that South Korea ought to provide assistance to North Korea in gratitude for Kim Jong-il's policy of putting the military first. Kim's notorious "military first" policy justifies starving North Koreans in order to develop nuclear weapons. Yet Kwon argued that it not only defends North Korea from imperialism but actually protects South Korea's real interests as well. The South Korean delegate demurred, saying such protection had not been requested.

### Parting ways

Although it seemed not to notice, South Korea's approach was alienating it from neighbors while also making it vulnerable to abuse from its enemies. China and Russia, as expected, initially opposed the Japanese draft and proposed something similar to what had been done after the 1998 *Taepo-Dong* test—a letter from the President of the Security Council expressing concern over the North Korean action. That *de minimis* approach had South Korea's tacit approval, but fell far short of what Washington sought in New York. Even Russia had reason to take a harder

stance than it had in 1998; some of the missiles from the July test now littered their Pacific fishing zone. But, in the week after the missile launches, a Chinese effort to reason with North Korea ran aground, and South Korea watched as China stiffened its resolve on North Korea's defiance of regional concerns. After the PRC's Vice Premier Hui Liangyu and its top nuclear negotiator, Wu Dawei, returned from Pyongyang without North Korean consent even to attend a new round of the Six-Party Talks, the official PRC statement told the story: "China is gravely concerned about the current situation and we have expressed our position to the North Korean side."<sup>9</sup> And China did not abstain on July 15th, when the UN Security Council unanimously approved Resolution 1695 condemning the North Korean test launches and demanding "that the DPRK suspend all activities related to its ballistic missile program."

Washington took action to put back in place economic sanctions against North Korea that had been lifted during the Clinton administration. Two days later, President Roh criticized American efforts to impose these additional financial sanctions on North Korea, and called Japan's role in the crisis "rash and thoughtless."<sup>10</sup> An aide called Japan "truly evil," in case there was any doubt how the Roh administration felt. President Roh then explained that in dealing with the United States, "since they are an ally, we cannot scold them, but we have to go at it with Japan."<sup>11</sup>

On July 19th, Roh summarized his government's distance from American objectives: "The missile launches were a wrong behavior and are feared not only to harm peace and stability on the Korean peninsula but also trigger a regional arms race ... but the moves by some forces,



which create unnecessary tension, will not be helpful either for settling the problems.”<sup>12</sup> The message was clear: South Korea had decided that the UN resolution would not hamper its sunshine policy toward North Korea. Economic projects with the regime would, it announced, continue unabated. Minister of Unification Lee Jong-seok explained that because the resolution was aimed at missiles and weapons of mass destruction, it does not require “sanctions on general economic exchanges.”<sup>13</sup>

Luckily, the government of the People’s Republic of China, North Korea’s erstwhile friend, saw the situation more clearly. In late July, it froze North Korean bank accounts at the Bank of China—a move that won praise from the White House because it recognized the need to rein in North Korea’s international illicit operations (including counterfeiting, drug smuggling, and proliferation) funded through external banking institutions.<sup>14</sup>

### Off the reservation

As a month closed, it had become clear that whatever had been gained or lost by North Korea and its adversaries, the relationship between Washington and Seoul had suffered severe stress. Sometimes the murky, nuanced world of diplomacy becomes painfully blunt. In one such moment of clarity, when asked who he thought had pursued the most unsuccessful policy during this crisis, South Korea’s point man, Unification Minister Lee, said that Washington’s policy had failed the most. Lee’s was by no means an isolated sentiment. When questioned by reporters, President Roh responded: “Do you think the United States is a country without fault?”<sup>15</sup> These veiled attacks on U.S. policy were met with

widespread public outrage and calls for Lee’s resignation from the opposition party, which has recently gained clout in local elections. The South Korean public seems to know who its friends are, even if its government does not. The U.S. State Department deftly answered the minister’s comments by pointing out North Korea’s policy has actually demonstrated the greatest failure.

The alliance between the United States and South Korea has withstood five decades against a persistent totalitarian threat. It is one of the closest and strongest military alliances the world has ever witnessed between people who speak unrelated languages. It is based on an extensive architecture of mutual defense activities, unique command structures that facilitate warfighting when necessary, and the deployment of tens of thousands of American troops in Korea, at a cost of about ten billion dollars annually. The alliance has shown tremendous resiliency, delivering success in war and prosperity in peace. And there is no question that in an alliance between sovereign states there will occasionally arise disputes and differences of opinion, and those may be centered on key questions of how the alliance addresses threats. In this instance, no one doubts that the government of South Korea has the right not just to hold a different view but also to state it. But when a nation faces an enemy that seeks its destruction, it is unwise for that nation to pander to the enemy and abuse its friends. Part of North Korea’s objective in creating crises like the missile crisis of July 2006 is to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington. For the moment, Seoul seems intent on helping it succeed.



1. Nicholas Eberstadt, "Korea," in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg, eds. *Strategic Asia 2001-02: Power and Purpose* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2001), 154. See also Jonathan D. Pollack, "The Strategic Futures and Military Capabilities of the Two Koreas," in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills, eds. *Strategic Asia 2005-06: Military Modernization in an Era of Uncertainty* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2005), 148.
2. Nicholas Eberstadt, remarks at the American Enterprise Institute, June 5, 2003, reiterated in an email exchange and conversation with the author thereafter.
3. The date in Korea was actually July 5th, but analysts are in general agreement that the timing was selected to occur in the afternoon of America's Independence Day, and perhaps intended to draw a comparison to the American shuttle launch of the same date.
4. "Seoul's Late Response to Missile Launch Draws Flak," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 6, 2006. <http://English.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200607/200607060024.html>.
5. "Inter-Korean Ties to Suffer from Missile Launch," *Korea Herald* (Seoul), July 6, 2006, [http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/SITE/data/html\\_dir/2006/07/06/200607060034.asp](http://www.koreaherald.co.kr/SITE/data/html_dir/2006/07/06/200607060034.asp): See also "Government Statements on North Korean Missiles," *Korea Policy Review* (Seoul), August 2006, [http://www.kois.go.kr/multimedia/attach/kpr/2006080101\\_en.pdf](http://www.kois.go.kr/multimedia/attach/kpr/2006080101_en.pdf).
6. Kim Ji-hyun, "Criticism Builds Over Seoul's Handling of Missile Crisis," *Korea Herald* (Seoul), July 12, 2006, <http://news.nate.com/Service/natenews/ShellView.asp?LinkID=1&ArticleID=2006071201205990188>.
7. Ser Myo-ja, "Fussy" Japan Rejects Seoul's Barbs," *Joong Ang Ilbo* (Seoul), July 10, 2006, <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/200607/10/200607102235209509900090409041.html>.
8. Chun Su-jin, "On the Seventh Day, Roh Finally Speaks About Missile Crisis," *Joong Ang Ilbo* (Seoul), July 13, 2006, <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/200607/12/200607122217414609900090309031.html>; see also "Roh Against U.S.-Japanese Sanctions on North Korea," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 19, 2006. <http://English.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200607/200607190019.html>.
9. "China's President Appeals to North Korea," Associated Press, July 11, 2006.
10. Ryu Jin, "Roh Critical of U.S. Financial Sanctions," *Korea Times* (Seoul), July 16, 2006, <http://times.hankooki.com/1page/200607/kt2006071616564210440.html>.
11. "[Exclusive] President Lobs Informal Criticism at U.S.," *Hankyoreh Shinmun* (Seoul), July 15, 2006, [http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english\\_edition/e\\_international/141578.html](http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/141578.html).
12. Ryu Jin, "Korea-U.S. Alliance Cracking," *Korea Times* (Seoul), July 20, 2006, [http://search.hankooki.com/times/times\\_view.php?term=levey++&path=hankooki3/times/1page/nation/200607/kt2006072017215411950.htm&media=kt](http://search.hankooki.com/times/times_view.php?term=levey++&path=hankooki3/times/1page/nation/200607/kt2006072017215411950.htm&media=kt).
13. "Unification Minister Calls for Strict Implementation of UN Resolution," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 18, 2006. <http://English.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200607/200607180029.html>.
14. "North Korea: U.S. Praises Accounts Freeze by China," Associated Press, July 27, 2006, <http://select.nytimes.com/mem/tnt.html?emc=tnt&tntget=2006/07/27/world/asia/27briefs001.html>.
15. "Roh Defends Minister's Right to Slam U.S.," *Chosun Ilbo* (Seoul), July 25, 2006, <http://English.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200607/200607250013.html>.