American Apples, Korean Oranges

By John Feffer | August 17, 2006

The United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have enjoyed a close alliance for more than a half century. When South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun met with George W. Bush in November 2005, an official White House statement summed up the relationship between the two countries: "The two leaders agreed that the alliance not only stands against threats but also for the promotion of the common values of democracy, market economy, freedom, and human rights in Asia and around the world." In other words, South Korea and the United States contend that they stand together not only for strategic military reasons but also because of a strong overlap in economic and political philosophies.

So if the United States and South Korea have so much in common, why does it appear that the two countries have begun divorce proceedings? The two presidents barely communicate with each other, their foreign policies are worlds apart, the U.S. troop presence in Korea is rapidly dwindling, and squabbling continues over a bilateral free trade agreement. In 2005, the conservative American Enterprise Institute published an article in its magazine urging the two allies to call it quits. Some on the political left in South Korea concur.

An optimist might compare the differences between the two allies—regarding North Korea, "strategic flexibility," Japan's new foreign and military policy, and so on—to the rivalry between siblings, with the United States as the older brother and South Korea as the younger. Such a sibling rivalry reflects the power disparity between the two nations. It explains the mixture of respect and resentment from Seoul as well as the arrogance and obliviousness of Washington. Recent moves by Seoul toward a more independent military and foreign policy also suggest the perspective of a younger brother emerging from the shadow of the elder.

The sibling comparison, however, can only go so far to explain the U.S.-ROK dynamic and why the two countries have now reached one of the lowest points of cooperation in the 50-year history of their alliance. Two siblings, after all, still come from the same family. But what if the ROK and the United States do not share this essential commonality? From a reading of recent events, a pessimist might conclude that the divergent political, economic, military, and geostrategic policies of the two countries mean that we are now comparing apples with oranges.

Different Beds, Different Dreams

It is often said that George W. Bush responds to world leaders at a very personal level. He likes Tony Blair. He likes Junichiro Koizumi. At least initially, he even liked Vladimir Putin, having somehow grasped "a sense of his soul."

But Bush doesn't seem to have gotten along with recent Korean leaders. The White House virtually snubbed Kim Dae Jung during his March 2001 trip to Washington. And despite several pending issues in U.S.-ROK relations—North Korean missile launches, free trade negotiations—Bush hasn't spoken to Roh Moo-Hyun since their November meeting in Washington.

This emphasis on personal likes and dislikes obscures a more fundamental difference that has emerged in the political culture of the two countries. South Korea has evolved toward increasing democratization.

It has gone from authoritarian to representative democracy and now toward greater participatory democracy. Due to new technologies, political power has been disbursed throughout Korea's population. The election of Roh Moo-Hyun was, at one level, a smooth democratic transition. At another level, though, it challenged the highly centralized power base that rests on certain family lineages, educational backgrounds, and political and economic institutions. Officially, authoritarianism has been laid to rest in South Korea. Unofficially, however, authoritarian patterns persist in day-to-day business conducted in the corridors of power. An outsider in many ways—he earned a law degree through self-study rather than law school—Roh Moo-Hyun has harnessed the new participatory democracy to challenge authoritarian structures that were designed to prevent someone like him from ever occupying Seoul's Blue House.

But while the Blue House rides this wave of participatory democracy, the White House is surfing in the opposite direction. With the help of politically motivated legal scholars, the current U.S. administration has attempted to construct a more powerful executive branch. In particular, President Bush has usurped power from Congress in the exercise of foreign policy (by prosecuting wars) and domestic policy (by suspending civil liberties). Instead of vetoing legislation, Bush has instead issued "signing statements" that often contradict the intent of new laws and allow the executive branch to ignore the will of the people. In other words, while South Korea moves from representative to participatory democracy, the United States is backtracking on even representative democracy.

In the economic sphere, too, the two countries are diverging. Yes, they are sitting down at the table to negotiate a free trade agreement, but South Korea remains committed to strategic investments in key sectors of the economy such as telecommunications. Except for the military sector and certain agricultural subsidies, the Bush administration is ideologically opposed to targeted government investment. Although both administrations speak the language of "free trade," South Korea adheres to a corporatist development model in which the state and businesses cooperate closely while the United States relies on the "unfettered market" to stimulate economic growth.

These political and economic differences certainly contribute to the two leaders' starkly different worldviews. But the more profound and ultimately determining differences are in the military and geopolitical sphere.

Guns and Strategy

Following a long-term Pentagon review and the much-heralded "revolution in military affairs," the Bush administration has continued to induce the U.S. military toward rapid-response power projection. In its fight against terrorism and other threats, the Pentagon has deemphasized fixed bases and slow-moving tanks in favor of "strategic flexibility:" the ability of allied troops and hardware to react quickly to a rapidly developing crisis. Maintenance of America's unilateral strength is now predicated on such flexibility in the exercise of military power. This change in military philosophy—coupled with an uptick in protests against U.S. bases and troops—led to the decision to reduce the U.S. military presence in South Korea to 25,000. And the Pentagon may be planning to withdraw even that number after 2008.

South Korea's military, meanwhile, is still arrayed to defend against an attack from North Korea. Although tensions with Japan have risen, the focus of the South Korean army remains relatively fixed. For Seoul, strategic flexibility is a nonissue. South Korea is primarily concerned with assuming control of its own defense within the context of an equal alliance with the United States ("cooperative self-reliant national defense"). Toward that end and because of its own military-industrial complex, South Korea is increasing defense spending to over 3% of GNP even as economic engagement moves forward with North Korea.

Washington and Seoul view North Korea very differently. An optimist might conclude that the United

States looks at North Korea and thinks in terms of nonproliferation while South Korea looks at North Korea and thinks in terms of preventing a war. A pessimist would see an even wider split, with Washington contemplating regime change in the North, and Seoul desperate to keep Pyongyang afloat in the interests of both peninsular and regional stability. So wide has the split become that the U.S. government recently cancelled the sale of unmanned surveillance and intelligence aircraft to Seoul, reportedly fearing a technology leak from South to North.

The United States looks regionally at containing not only North Korea but also China and perceived Islamic fundamentalist threats in Indonesia, the Philippines, and elsewhere, whereas South Korea's military policy is focused on the peninsula. It is not so much that U.S.-ROK military relations are divergent. On some issues, such as the pending shift in operational control, alliance perceptions are converging. Rather, the two military approaches are *structurally* different. The military alliance began on an asymmetrical basis—this asymmetry was built into the force structure—and geopolitical realities only underscore the differences.

The greatest divergence between the two countries, ultimately, is geostrategic. As several key U.S. documents have demonstrated—the Defense Planning Guidance, the Quadrennial Defense Review, the National Security Strategy—the United States is concerned more with the rise of a competing hegemon like China than with the relatively minor threat of North Korea. China can potentially challenge U.S. interests not only locally but in the South China Sea, in Central Asia, and South Asia. Through economic diplomacy in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, Beijing is already gaining influence at Washington's expense. China is also pushing for multilateral solutions to problems—a break from its past policy of emphasizing bilateralism—which offers a distinct alternative to the current U.S. administration's unilateral tendencies. The Bush team has not yet learned how to combine the economic engagement of Beijing with the military containment of the Asian giant. In short-term diplomacy, China is an important interlocutor and occasional ally; in long-range planning, China is perceived as a threat.

South Korea's geostrategy flows from its pivotal position between Japan and China. The ROK is dependent on energy resources flowing through the South China Sea and is concerned to a certain extent about Islamic fundamentalism. But these concerns pale in comparison to relations with the North. Taking advantage of geography, South Korea wants to establish a new economic hub in East Asia that will rival South China, and the cheap labor of North Korea is a key element of this strategy. South Korea's fondness for China has waxed and waned, but fundamentally Seoul needs Beijing's finesse in solving the "North Korea problem," supporting Korean reunification, and embedding the reunification process in a regional integration system. As long as Seoul's relationship with Tokyo is complicated by controversial questions (the Tokdo island dispute, the Yasukuni Shrine visits), South Korea will continue to rely on China as a critical partner.

For geostrategic reasons, the United States intensified relations with Japan. Both the Clinton and Bush administrations encouraged Tokyo to break out of its "peace constitution." Japan sees North Korea with U.S. eyes, cooperates with Washington on missile defense and the Proliferation Security Initiative, and has backed U.S. ventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Spurning Clinton's trilateral coordination approach in the 1990s, the Bush administration plays a zero-sum game with its key East Asian allies—what Japan gains, South Korea loses.

Divergence or Convergence?

On a variety of issues, the United States and South Korea perceive genuine common interests such as better trade relations and the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. But fundamentally different political and economic philosophies, military objectives, and geostrategic aims have made it difficult for the two countries to act in concert on these common interests.

What ultimately determines the trajectory of U.S.-ROK relations: the personal relationship of the leaders, the respective economic and political philosophies of the administrations, the overlap in military planning and goal-setting, or the overall geostrategic visions of the two countries?

Personal relationships are important, but ultimately they are transitory, subject to whim and elections. Economic and political philosophies also morph with electoral cycles. In the 1990s, the Clinton and Kim Dae Jung administrations had greater overlap in economic and political philosophy. There were still conflicts, but at least it seemed as though an apple were negotiating with an apple. The Bush and Roh Moo-Hyun administrations, however, look at economics and politics very differently. It might seem, then, that U.S.-ROK relations have become hostage to the out-of-sync choices of the two electorates. If the conservative Grand National Party wins the next election in South Korea, it may usher in a period of temporary convergence. But if Bush's popularity ratings continue to decline up to the 2008 elections, the U.S. public will elect a far less conservative president, and U.S.-ROK relations will again fall prey to uncompromising differences.

Ultimately, though, neither the force of personality nor the political cycles of the two countries are as important as their underlying military and geostrategic perspectives. The three key issues are: the approach toward North Korea, the engagement of China, and the potential for multilateral structures in East Asia. Agreement between Clinton and Kim Dae Jung on these fundamental issues transcended their other differences of opinion, and U.S.-ROK relations prospered as a result. Deep disagreements between Bush and Roh Moo-Hyun on these topics have accentuated their other differences of opinion and propelled the conflicts into the media spotlight.

In order for the two countries to escape this apple-orange dilemma and once again relate to each other on the same terms, one side or the other must change its position. Roh Moo-Hyun has shown flexibility on "strategic flexibility" and troop commitments to the war in Iraq, but the Bush administration has been relatively intractable on most issues. Since South Korea is constrained by geography from altering its fundamental postures toward China and North Korea, it is up to the United States to rethink its East Asia strategy.

John Feffer is the co-director of Foreign Policy In Focus.

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