

VISIONS OF NORTHEAST ASIAN REGIONALISM: THE UNITED STATES AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

by

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For more than four years the Bush and Roh administrations have been grappling with two divisive issues—the best approach to the North Korean nuclear threat and the future of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula—that have obscured differences over a third issue with less apparent urgency but, perhaps, no less importance. This is the issue of a new regional architecture for Northeast Asia, institutionalizing the rapid integration of the area's economies and reestablishing stability through new security mechanisms and a shared identity focused more on the future than the past. While ties to North Korea as well as Russia are involved, the divergence over regionalism centers on how to respond to China's assertiveness as an aspiring “superpower” and Japan's assertiveness as an ascendant “normal” state. If the two key issues for Bush and Roh may be tempered by more moderation from new presidents elected in December 2007 and November 2008 and, in any case, depend heavily on decisions taken in Pyongyang, new leaders will have to search for consensus on regionalism with little guidance from what has preceded.

Historical Background in the Quest for Regionalism

Twenty years ago, Roh Tae-woo's *nordpolitik* served the interests of the U.S. in ending the cold war and defusing tensions in the region, although by 1992 it had revealed differences with Japan and China in regional strategy. Tensions with Japan mounted over its uncoordinated overtures to North Korea and its perceived pursuit of leadership in the region without addressing the South's concerns. In contrast, ties with China advanced at a rapid clip after normalization in September 1992, but on condition that the South strive not to isolate the North and with awareness that China objected to the U.S. strategy in the region. The first nuclear crisis and its aftermath further exposed differences at a time of rising discord between China and Japan. In 1995-96, lack of coordination by Japan as it rushed humanitarian assistance to North Korea came as Kim Young-sam cooled in his approach to Japan, while China's aggressive moves toward Taiwan undermined stability in the region before Sino-U.S. ties were repaired. In the glow of the Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae-jung, all of this seemed to be left behind as both Japan and China praised his reconciliation efforts, but behind the scenes Japan's nervous concern about being isolated and China's growing centrality in inter-Korean relations with the summit of 2000 set the tone for divisions that would intensify. As the gulf between Tokyo and Beijing widened, that between Seoul and Washington over regionalism would become harder to manage.

Kim Dae-jung's active role in regionalism through ASEAN + 3 in 1999-2001 did not arouse concern in the U.S. because it was welcomed by China and Japan while going forward with ASEAN at the center. Roh Moo-hyun's inauguration call for South Korea to become the hub of Northeast Asian regionalism drew scant attention too because ongoing deterioration in Sino-Japanese relations as well as the nuclear crisis on the peninsula left little prospect that it would succeed. In turn, increased U.S. concern over regionalism in ASEAN + 3 or even the East Asian Summit as it was taking shape in 2005 may have led Roh to suspect further that the goal was to turn Japan away from Asia and to sharpen the divide

between maritime and continental zones, but in the midst of the nuclear crisis this issue was not a priority. If Bush and Roh did not seriously clash over divergent attitudes toward regionalism, their underlying strategies were diametrically opposed. Neither was in favor of the status quo; each was meant to counter perceived threats to stability.

The Bush and Roh Strategies toward Regionalism

Neither strategy was working. The initial Bush strategy toward Northeast Asia did not endure. Unexpectedly, by January 2003, reliance on China was growing, due not only to the war against terror but also to the nuclear crisis. By late 2003, the weight given to Taiwan also had to be reconsidered; an understanding was reached on suppressing moves toward independence. By March 2005, hopes for a triangular alliance with South Korea as well as Japan were crushed by the tension in bilateral ties between these two in the face of U.S. one-sided reliance on Japan and neglect of South Korean interests as well as by Roh's unreliability in dealing with the North and emotional outbursts against Japan. Finally, on February 13, 2007, the past strategies of pressure, unilateralism, and malign neglect toward North Korea were eclipsed by a Joint Agreement in the Six-Party Talks. It did not take long, however, to observe that even after Seoul and Washington had joined in this new approach and then agreed on an FTA, they were not in accord in keeping pressure on Pyongyang to fulfill the agreement nor in managing Abe Shinzo's nationalist tendencies. Preoccupied with Iraq and secondarily with Iran, Bush seemed in no hurry to address the complexities of Northeast Asia; while anxious about his legacy, Roh seemed in a rush to advance North-South relations as the basis for the South's regional ascent.

Roh's strategy had not worked, but his supporters placed much of the blame on the U.S. and Japan. Over six years in office, Bush had with the exception of the summer of 2005 and the winter of 2006-07 undercut efforts to engage the North. In 2004 Koizumi had veered from working to bridge U.S.-South Korean differences and supporting more steps toward regionalism, and Japan had not reverted to its earlier roles even after Abe took office in the fall of 2006 with new ambiguity about visiting the Yasukuni Shrine. In trouble at home after the North tested a barrage of missiles and then a nuclear bomb, Roh would not accept the status of a lame duck as he desperately appealed to the North for a summit and other signs of inter-Korean progress that might rescue his legacy as president.

Divergent Outlooks on Regional Triangles

Regardless of the party in power, the U.S. is intent on making Japan the gateway to Northeast Asia and on preventing a regional framework where China is in the forefront and North Korea and Russia are emboldened. In contrast, South Koreans, with exceptions among a minority of conservatives, seek limits on Japan's assertiveness and are amenable to a balance of power that gives China a special role while engaging North Korea and not showing concern about Russia's reassertion of influence. Viewed through the prism of several triangles, these divergent outlooks on regional cooperation pose varied challenges.

First in the alliance triangle, Washington is fortifying the U.S.-Japan dyad, while Seoul is torn between a more equilateral arrangement and a new quadrangular shape in which the alliance would be tempered if not replaced by multilateral power balancing. Those who expected to build a full-fledged triangular alliance by strengthening the Japan-South Korean dyad at the same time as they concentrated on making the U.S.-Japan dyad as strong as

possible had to realize that this could not be reconciled with Seoul's reasoning. As triangular reasoning shifts to bilateral logic on one side and quadrangular logic on the other, the gap is widening between suspicions about regionalism and eagerness for it.

Second, in the U.S.-two Korea triangle, putting overwhelming priority on nuclear weapons without a strategy to address reunification in stages (initially by rewarding the North as it lowers its threat posture) and regional security is not acceptable to South Koreans. Rejecting the Sunshine Policy or insisting on complete, verifiable, irreversible, denuclearization (CVID) before addressing the concerns of the North and even those of South Korea could only leave this triangle in shambles with a frustrated South and defiant North determined to find a different course but not working in tandem. After Roh leaves office, the new president may well demand more reciprocity from the North, but the U.S. will have to take the South's views more seriously if there is to be a U.S.-South Korean dyad capable of effectively managing the North's uncertain maneuvers. Washington gives little thought to how engaging Pyongyang could boost regional cooperation, while Seoul is keen on repositioning this triangle within an evolving regional framework.

Third, in the critical East Asian great power triangle, the way Washington deals with Tokyo and Beijing will reverberate in Seoul's responses to all three. Since October's nuclear test at the time of Abe's visits to Beijing and Seoul, this great power triangle has seen more cooperation. Wen Jiabao's visit to Tokyo in April 2007 made clear that China remains eager for this mood to intensify. In order to achieve the February 13 agreement, Sino-U.S. coordination in the Six-Party Talks drew closer. If North Korea abides by the agreement, then Japan may be isolated as a result of its refusal to provide fuel oil due to insistence that the abductions issue must come first. If, on the other hand, North Korea defies the agreement, then South Korea may be alone in giving it the benefit of the doubt and generously pursuing engagement in defiance of the other parties. As long as the U.S. and China are in agreement, the Japanese response is not likely to be decisive, but the South Korean one could determine if the North will be subject to a joint strategy of five vs. one. The Six-Party Talks, in turn, will set a precedent for regional security cooperation, in which U.S.-South Korean relations will be most vulnerable. Many observers recognize that Japan may have trouble adjusting to closer Sino-U.S. cooperation, but few have yet to consider whether South Korea may have trouble too with the Korean peninsula in the forefront of its concerns. In any case, interest in Seoul in bridging Beijing and Tokyo is not in line with the preoccupation in Washington with making ties with Tokyo stronger. Regionalism that starts with the core East Asian Sino-Japanese-South Korean triangle does not fit into U.S. strategic thinking that concentrates on the three triangles above.

Toward a New Joint Regional Strategy

With Beijing refusing to play a strong leadership role on behalf of the February 13 agreement and Tokyo confused about how to boost nationalism and continue to engage China, Washington and Seoul bear the burden of developing far-reaching strategies that can link resolution of the crisis to regional stability. If Bush and Roh have been inclined to act at cross-purposes, others planning for the transitions ahead should recognize the wisdom of searching for common ground without the illusion that leadership change will suffice. Most likely, in 2009 new leaders in Washington and Seoul will be searching for more common ground on North Korea, force realignment, and even regionalism. The state of the Six-Party

Talks will no doubt set the tone for what is possible. Either Beijing or Tokyo could complicate the process. If the U.S. were as suspicious of regionalism as in 2005-06, then the prospects of consensus would be grim even with a conservative regime in Seoul. Likewise, if South Korea were as much in a hurry to become a “balancer” and boost multilateralism as in 2005-06, even Clinton-era thinking would be unlikely to reach agreement. Circumstances in Northeast Asia are changing, and it will not be easy for the next leaders to find a joint strategy.

A new strategy, if it is to endure, should highlight:

- 1) linking regionalism to globalization with the U.S. fully involved in all security matters and assured of the open, gradual nature of moves toward regionalism;
- 2) recognizing equal leadership for China and Japan with a critical role for South Korea as the party that is best positioned to work well with both of them; and
- 3) making resolution of the nuclear crisis through the Six-Party Talks—coordinating carrots if North Korea meets its obligations and sticks if it does not—the foundation for a regional security framework and a boost to multi-sided regional cooperation.