

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 976

15 September 2020

James Jungbok Lee. "Treating Allies with Respect: U.S.-ROK Alliance and the Second Korean Nuclear Crisis, 2002-2006." *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 26:2 (2019): 165-205. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/18765610-02602004>.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR976>

Article Review Editors: Thomas Maddux and Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY TERENCE ROEHRIG, U.S. NAVAL WAR COLLEGE¹

On September 15, 2006, Presidents No Moo-hyun and George W. Bush met at the White House for their 5th summit meeting. Most of the discussions centered on the plan to transfer wartime operational control to the Republic of Korea (ROK) but the meeting also addressed the stalled effort to denuclearize North Korea, one of the most serious points of friction in the ROK-U.S. alliance at the time. After the meeting, No sought to put a positive spin on the two countries' relations, maintaining that they were friendly and that Seoul and Washington were working to closely coordinate common issues of concern. However, press reports characterized relations in a more realistic manner. The *New York Times* noted that their positions on North Korea were as wide as the East Sea while the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* lamented in an editorial: "The Korea-U.S. summit showed if anything what an alliance on the brink of divorce looks like."²

The No-Bush years were difficult times for the alliance for several reasons, but in large part due to differing assessments of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the best route to seek its denuclearization. President No was determined to continue the Sunshine Policy begun under his predecessor, Kim Dae-jung to improve inter-Korean relations, but with improvements and a different name, the Peace and Prosperity Policy. The Bush administration was highly critical of North Korea and skeptical of efforts to engage the regime. Bush had inherited the Agreed Framework that Republicans disparaged from the outset. With the October 2002 revelation of North Korea's covert uranium enrichment program, the Agreed Framework collapsed and tensions continued to climb. In his first State of the Union address, Bush included North Korea as part of the "axis of evil" and later declared in a press interview, "I loathe Kim Jong-il."³ At the outset, the likelihood of the No and Bush administrations bridging their positions was slim.

James Jungbok Lee has written an interesting and detailed examination of the clash over North Korea policy between Seoul and Washington, placing it in the broader context of alliance dynamics and how changes within the alliance contributed to that friction. Lee argues that there is a puzzle here in how these dynamics played out in relation to alliance theory. A fundamental aspect of alliance formation and maintaining the alliance over time is having a shared assessment of the nature

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author, expressed in an unofficial capacity, and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Navy or the U.S. government.

² "Getting Ready for Divorce," *Chosun Ilbo*, September 15, 2006, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2006/09/15/2006091561031.html.

³ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 340.

and severity of a common threat. If the threat dissipates, the alliance will typically break up as well.⁴ Yet given the shared threat, why were South Korea and the United States not able to agree on their North Korean policies? Moreover, in an asymmetric alliance where the distribution of power is skewed, as the weaker alliance partner South Korea should have acceded to U.S. wishes and avoided the friction that disagreement over North Korea caused along with any danger of Washington abandoning its alliance commitment. Given these two factors, according to Lee, why were the two allies not more unified in their approach to dealing with North Korea?

Contrary to the predictions of alliance theory, Lee maintains that “the South Koreans came to believe strongly in their country’s status as a solid middle power in the international community. Such a sense of entitlement instilled in them a desire for a more horizontal and egalitarian U.S.-ROK alliance, a bilateral relationship in which both sides fully ‘respected each other’s positions and accommodated each other’s interests’” (170). When Washington did not adjust its policy preferences to more closely align with those of South Korea, the No administration viewed U.S. policy and alliance interactions generally as “boss diplomacy.” As a result, South Korea was forced to defy Washington and “take a more proactive and assertive approach to the [DPRK] nuclear issue” that led to the overall deterioration of the alliance (170). Consequently, “the U.S. failure to show respect for South Korean status aspirations and engagement in what the latter perceived as hegemonic behavior made cooperation and harmonious relations less attractive and legitimate from the ROK’s point of view” (171).

Lee’s assessment focuses on an important element of a long-term alliance, namely the possible shift over time in common threat assessments and power relations among alliance members. The alliance began in 1953 as a patron-client relationship with the United States providing the bulk of security while a devastated South Korea focused on economic recovery after the Korean War. Over the years, South Korea built itself into an economic powerhouse that became a thriving middle power. ROK power and influence has grown significantly in the region and globally while also taking on a greater share of its own defense.⁵ Moreover, ROK pride in its accomplishments has rightfully grown along with its ambitions to be an important player in regional and international affairs. Consequently, Lee argues that South Koreans believed their rise gave them “a sense of entitlement to their country’s status as a strong middle power in the international community” (199-200). Within the alliance, Lee maintains that South Koreans expected that “the two sides fully respected and understood each other’s views and suggestions and honored the spirit of reciprocity” (200). Instead, and much to Seoul’s disappointment, the United States resorted to ‘boss diplomacy,’ exerting its power to pressure South Korea into following its lead.

Despite South Korea’s economic, political, and military rise over these years, the alliance was still asymmetric. The alliance had transitioned into more of a partnership, but the 2000s were the early years of that process and the frictions between Seoul and Washington as this relationship evolved were unmistakable. There were clear and deep fissures between the two governments regarding the best way to deal with North Korea and denuclearization efforts. Yet, the key word in Lee’s argument is “respect”—the United States failed “to show respect for South Korean status aspirations and engagement” (171).

Lee is on the mark in his overall description and assessment of the serious clash between the No and Bush administrations; the alliance was in serious trouble and it was unclear what the future had in store for ROK-U.S. relations. But was this a matter of respect or the clash of competing, deeply held views on North Korean threat assessment and denuclearization policy? Indeed, even within South Korea there were strong disagreements over No’s North Korea policy. Lee acknowledges that Seoul and Washington achieved some level of accommodation but were never fully aligned in their approach to the DPRK. Were these clashes signs of disrespect or the typical behavior one would expect from the dominant power in an

⁴ Stephen M. Walt, “Why Alliances Endure or Collapse,” *Survival* 39:1 (Spring 1997): 156-179; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

⁵ Uk Heo and Terence Roehrig, *The Evolution of the South Korea-United States Alliance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

asymmetric alliance over preferred policies? Moreover, how does one distinguish between disrespect and policy differences? Lee is likely correct in this judgment but the evidence to show the difference between disrespect and policy differences is thin. Thus, there is a gap in Lee's evidence to show more fully that the attitudes and responses of the Bush administration demonstrate a lack of respect.

An important example of the policy misalignment that Lee describes during these years was the U.S. decision to impose sanctions on Banco Delta Asia (BDA). At the conclusion of the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks on September 19, 2005, negotiators announced an agreement whereby "the DPRK committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency] safeguards."⁶ Yet, four days before this announcement was made, the U.S. Treasury Department designated BDA a "primary money laundering concern" under Section 311 of the USA Patriot Act.⁷ Located in Macao, the bank had been under investigation for several years for its ties with North Korea and as a conduit for DPRK money laundering and counterfeit currency. The BDA designation froze \$25 million in North Korean accounts, infuriating Pyongyang and disrupting any further efforts to implement the September 19th agreement.

Lee notes that "the South Koreans were greatly distressed" by the BDA decision and believed that "U.S. evidence was weak and rather circumstantial," demonstrating that Washington was more concerned for counterfeiting than the denuclearization of North Korea (197-198). Indeed, this chain of events was bewildering. The BDA investigation had begun well before the Six-Party Talks commenced, meaning that it did not run on a parallel track. Yet the decision to impose the sanctions so close to the announcement of the Joint Statement was disconcerting and clearly undercut any progress that had been made at the Six-Party Talks. Some have suggested the timing was intentional, either to completely derail the deal or as a measure to maintain pressure on North Korea to ensure that it followed through on its commitments in the September 19th agreement. Another possibility was poor coordination among different parts of the U.S. government, but that seems to be a weak explanation. In any case, as Lee convincingly argues, it was a perplexing chain of events that further showed the misalignment of Seoul and Washington on North Korea policy.

Lee makes a crucial concluding point—"It was against this backdrop that the ROK, in defiance of the United States, started to adopt a more proactive and assertive approach to the nuclear issues..." (200). Yet, South Korea's response was more than a rebellion on a single issue but was an important signal of the broader evolving nature of the ROK-U.S. alliance. As South Korea's power and confidence grew, its ability and willingness to push back against Washington when its interests did not align increased.⁸ This raises an important aspect of Lee's study, the overall state of ROK-U.S. relations at the time, that would have benefited from further development.

After South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987, the restrictions of previous military regimes on political dissent were loosened, allowing citizens to more openly express their frustrations concerning a host of issues, including the United States and the alliance.⁹ In the 2002 ROK presidential race, candidate No stoked some of the anti-U.S. sentiment and declared that he would be the first ROK president who "won't kowtow to the Americans," while opposing the Bush administration's

⁶ "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks," September 19, 2005, available at the National Committee on North Korea, https://www.ncnk.org/sites/default/files/September_19_2005_Joint_Statement.pdf.

⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Designates Banco Delta Asia as Primary Money Laundering Concern under USA PATRIOT Act," September 15, 2005, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/js2720.aspx>.

⁸ Uk Heo and Terence Roehrig, *South Korea's Rise: Economic Development, Power, and Foreign Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁹ David Straub, *Anti-Americanism in Democratizing South Korea* (Stanford: Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2015).

hard-line policy on North Korea and calling for a more equal relationship with Washington.¹⁰ Moreover, there had already been a spate of controversies that further fueled anti-Americanism and set the stage for worsening relations. One example was the 1999 revelation that U.S. forces had fired on fleeing Korean refugees at No Gun Ri during the Korean War, believing they were spies from the North. Another example was the 2002 military training accident when a U.S. armored vehicle ran over two South Korea middle school girls followed by the subsequent acquittal of the U.S. personnel involved in the incident. Thus, there were numerous other points of friction besides disagreements over North Korea that also contributed to anti-American sentiment at the time.

All of these were signs that the alliance was changing, but not in a formal, structural way. As Lee argues for DPRK policy, these were indications of a more confident South Korea that was willing to push back in disagreements with the United States while still recognizing the importance of the alliance for its interests. In the context of these events and further concerns over South Korea leaning toward China, Sunhyuk Kim and Wonhyuk Lim put it this way in 2007: “Instead, a combination of South Korean economic development over time, the rise of a new generation in South Korean politics, and changing inter-Korean relations help explain a Seoul that has become more fundamentally independent than anti-U.S. or pro-Chinese.”¹¹

Lee’s impressive study is an important reminder to remember our history. Any alliance relationship that lasts over 60 years will evolve as the interests, threat assessments, and power of the alliance members change. If these elements of the relationship are no longer conducive to maintain the alliance, theory suggests that the alliance will end, but this has not been the case. Yet, while the ROK-U.S. alliance endures, it has gone through many trials and tribulations that have required dialogue and accommodation. Alliance management for all members is tough work that requires attention, communication, and understanding. The United States must also acknowledge South Korean interests and not expect they be subservient to its own concerns. Moreover, exorbitant burden sharing demands are not helpful. The current state of ROK-U.S. relations is worrisome and one hopes that these are not signals of what may be coming in the future. While most of the fundamentals of the alliance remain strong, there have been important changes over the years and others are likely to follow. Lee’s assessment helps us to remember that we have been here before, and his article is crucial reading if one wants to understand the dynamics of a relationship that has never been fixed or easy. The importance of these ties and the uncertain security environment of the future makes maintaining the ROK-U.S. alliance essential.

Terence Roehrig is Professor of National Security Affairs and Director of the Asia-Pacific Studies Group at the Naval War College. He has written on Korean and East Asian Politics and Security including *Japan, South Korea, and the United States Nuclear Umbrella* with Columbia University Press.

¹⁰ Choe Sang-Hun, “U.S. Ties with Seoul Fray over North-Asia-Pacific - International Herald Tribune,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/12/world/asia/12iht-allies.2781826.html>.

¹¹ Sunhyuk Kim and Wonhyuk Lim, “How to Deal with South Korea,” *Washington Quarterly* 30:2 (Spring 2007), 72.