

South Korea's Policy Options in a Changing World

Sungjoo Han

In this last decade of the twentieth century, the world is changing at a pace faster and to a degree greater than ever. For nearly 40 years since the end of World War II, nations of various sizes and orientations have conducted their respective foreign relations within the parameters set by a host of factors including the Cold War, U.S.-Soviet bipolarity, and the hegemonial leadership of the United States in military and economic fields. However, the Gorbachevian revolution in the Soviet Union which started in the mid-1980s brought about the collapse of the socialist world. The resulting end of the Cold War, combined with the relative decline of the United States as an economic superpower, has brought about a fundamental change in world structure and international relations. Our rapidly changing world environment presents each nation with the need to reassess basic assumptions and priorities concerning foreign and security policies.

In particular, countries such as the United States and Japan, which have close relations with South Korea and whose policy changes would have a direct bearing on its security assessment, are in the process of reevaluating the basic assumptions, objectives and principles of their external policies. The United States is facing the criticism from within that it no longer has the need

or ability to pursue blindly its internationalist and interventionist policies of the post-World War II era. Hence, much effort is being made to formulate new policies that will be appropriate for a post-Cold War world. In the meantime, Japan is also reevaluating the basic premises of its post-war policy that have led it to conduct a highly U.S.-dependent, passive and low-posture diplomacy. Thus, Japan is now trying to take best advantage of its status as an economic superpower in the post-Cold War era in which the importance of economic power is growing relative to military power.

The transformation of the international order presents South Korea with serious challenge as well as opportunity in the conduct of foreign relations. It is a challenge because, even as the world as a whole is moving towards reconciliation, cooperation and openness, South Korea is still locked with North Korea in mutual suspicion and tension. South Korea faces the dilemma of accommodation and vigilance; North Korea has to choose between continued isolation at the cost of falling hopelessly behind financially, and opening up to the outside world at the risk of losing control internally.

Furthermore, the end of the Cold War could prompt the United States to disengage prematurely from the region and the Korean peninsula, thereby creating a power vacuum that other major powers including China, Japan and Russia might try to fill. Internally, democratization has meant a growing voice and assertiveness on the part of private sectors and groups in foreign affairs, thereby presenting considerable constraints in the government's ability to conduct foreign relations, particularly in trade and other areas involving economic issues.

At the same time, changes in the international environment are providing South Korea with the opportunity to expand and diversify its foreign relations. In particular, they have enabled South Korea to carry out successfully what it has pursued as the "Northern Policy," a diplomatic effort to establish and expand relations with the socialist countries. While the collapse of the

socialist bloc was necessary for successful implementation of the Northern Policy, it also had the ironic effect of making such an effort less urgent for South Korea. In any case, its success in establishing diplomatic relations with the countries of the former socialist bloc, including the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, is both a result and part of the reason for the changing international order.

Until the 1980s, based on the existing international structure and order, South Korea had been pursuing the following policy objectives since the establishment of an independent government in 1948, roughly listed in the following order of priority.¹

1. *Recognition by various countries and international organizations.* This was an important objective in view of the refusal of the Communist bloc and many non-aligned countries to recognize South Korea. United Nations membership was also sought as a part of the recognition campaign.

2. *Competition with North Korea.* Accompanying the "recognition war" between North and South Korea was the competition for support by various countries and in international organizations. Even after President Roh Tae Woo's 7 July 1988, declaration South Korea held a negative view of North Korean official relations with its allies until there came an improvement in the South-North Korean relationship.

3. *Maximizing security.* Having experienced the North Korean invasion of 1950 and facing a continuous military threat, security became the most important objective, especially after 1953. The primary object nation of security diplomacy was the United States, upon which South Korea has depended for its security. The South Korean objective was to retain a U.S. presence in Korea and to muster maximum support for South Korean force improvement and modernization.

1 A more detailed exposition of this subject is given in my article, "Tasks and Options of Korean Diplomacy in an Age of Transition," *Sasang Quarterly* (Summer 1992), pp. 236-63.

4. *Achieving economic solvency, development and growth.* In the economic field as well, the United States was the nation of South Korea's primary policy concern. Initially during the 1950s and 60s it was aid, then in the 70s and 80s it was market and other forms of economic cooperation such as investment. Beginning in the second half of the 1980s it was market protection. These became the main issues in South Korean economic diplomacy. Democratization at home has placed many constraints on the government's ability to pursue rational policy objectives effectively.

5. *Enhancing international status.* The ROK had to deal more with immediate and urgent tasks in the security, economic and political areas than to pay much attention to moral or ideological issues. Furthermore, handicapped by its divided nation status, South Korea found it difficult to assume an active role in multi-lateral activities or settings. Only after hosting the Olympics in 1988 and being admitted to the United Nations in 1991 could it begin to pay attention to issues of universal nature and relevance.

6. *Fostering international conditions to promote unification.* As a divided nation, unification had to be an important policy objective. However, the immediate task of having to deal with the North Korean threats of internal subversion as well as military attack made it inevitable to place a priority on peace and coexistence over unification. Only after the two Koreas' admission to the United Nations and progress in major-power cross recognition of North and South Korea could the ROK engage in earnest in a bona fide "unification diplomacy."

The several policy objectives described above were established on the basis of the international and regional environment that prevailed until the 1980s, but now those objectives will have to be reassessed and new priorities set. The following sets of external factors will affect South Korean policy formulation in the years to come: 1) basic structure and characteristics of international relations that are emerging in the post-Cold War era,

2) interests perceived and objectives set by the United States for the changing international environment, 3) regional power relations and configuration in East Asia, and 4) an evolving Korean situation, particularly as a function of changing North-South Korean relations.

Changes in International Relations

Since the late 1980s the world has been experiencing a revolutionary change. The official declaration in June 1990 of the end of the Cold War at a U.S.-USSR summit meeting was in itself an epoch-making event. What has since evolved, with German unification as well as the failed coup d'état in Moscow and disintegration of the Soviet Union, have made the pace and depth of the change no less breathtaking than before the declaration.

1. *The end of bipolarity.* While the world economy was becoming pluralized with the relative decline of the American economy, the United States and the Soviet Union remained martially the most powerful countries, effectively maintaining a military bipolarity. The collapse of the Soviet Union put an end to that, raising the debate over unipolarity, multi-polarity or whatever form of power configuration that will replace it.

2. *Trend toward accommodation and reconciliation among states.* Accompanying the reconciliation and cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union/Russia is the general trend toward accommodation among and between countries that have previously been in conflict. Starting with the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in 1985, various pairs of countries have reconciled or have strengthened their relationships with each other. Nonetheless, local conflicts such as the 1990-91 Gulf War or conflict among different national groups such as in Eastern Europe cannot be ruled out.

3. *Rise of regionalism.* Growing interdependence among the various states, particularly within the same region, has spurred a movement toward regionalization of world economy. Europe

has all but completed its economic integrative process while the three North American countries, the United States, Canada and Mexico, have organized the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA). Asia is debating whether to further institutionalize economic cooperation and integration among the Asian states, led by Japan. In security, multilateralism is receiving increasingly greater attention as an arrangement that could replace the bipolar system.

4. *Changing balance between military and economic capabilities.* Increasingly, economic capabilities are gaining greater importance and relevance in international affairs. Poor economic performance was the major cause of the collapse of the Communist bloc. Relative to military power, economic strength is becoming in contemporary and future international relations an increasingly more effective means of exercising influence over other states.

5. *Democratization and movement toward market economy.* The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union was accompanied by their democratization. They also discovered the merit of market economy. In other parts of the world there is a trend for authoritarian regimes to give way to democratic governments and socialist states adopt market principles and market economy.

6. *A Changing concept of "security."* Increasingly, the term is used to mean something far more comprehensive than defending one country militarily from outside attack. It involves not only the military aspect of a nation's safety, but all other relevant areas such as economy, environment, resources, or way of life that could be threatened by either external or internal circumstances.

A key question being asked in connection with the changes described above is how the relative power positions of the major countries will be altered and what kind of international system, if any, will replace the bipolar world that does not exist anymore. One view, which may be characterized as that of "pluralism

school" and which is widely shared in Japan, holds that the days of superpowers are gone and several countries or regions with various power bases will construct a complex network of influence relationships characterized by collective decision making, mutual checks and balances and cooperative efforts to deal with conflicts and crises.²

At the other end of the spectrum is the argument that with the eclipse of Soviet power and in the absence of any other power to match either the former Soviet Union or the present United States, the latter has emerged as the preeminent military power, thus forming in effect a world of "unipolarity."³ According to this view, the United States remains the only superpower capable of projecting its military power and exercising its influence over any part of the world. Although the United States needed military cooperation and financial contribution from other countries in the successful 1990–91 Gulf War, the American role as policeman of the world has become even more essential than before, and its ability to impose U.S. values and pursue policies has increased.

Both arguments introduced above may exaggerate the actual situation, at least for the time being. It is true that the United States will remain the most powerful military power in the world. That power, however, will be most effective in neutralizing the power of an adversary or imposing its will on small countries in its own neighborhood such as Grenada and Panama. Although the United States led the multinational force that defeated Iraq in the Gulf War, it required an extraordinary set of circumstances—circumstances that produced resolutions in the United Nations and the U.S. Congress and enabled the United States to wage the war. But those circumstances are highly un-

2 Hisashi Owada, "The Japanese Role in the Regional Security of East Asia," in Eric Grove, ed., *Global Security—North American, European and Japanese Interdependence in the 1990's* (London, 1990), pp. 12–14.

3 See, for example, Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* (January 1991), pp. 23–33.

likely to be duplicated in any future conflict. Indeed, the present era can be seen more as one of transition from what might be called bipolarity to "pluralism" rather than to unipolarity.

Another basic question to be asked in connection with future international relations is: how fundamental is the change taking place now? Will history somehow repeat itself, or is the very nature of international relations undergoing the type of fundamental change that will make unlikely a repetition of history with its wars, imperialism and conquests? Those who believe this change is rather fundamental observe that with the end of the Cold War the days of old "geopolitics," in which nations play the power game of dominating and being dominated, are over.

Hence, according to this view, military power is becoming less important and less relevant relative to other elements such as economic and technological capabilities. Big powers cannot dominate small powers as they both become increasingly more interdependent. There are no "hegemons," only more or less co-equal partners. Peace is sought through collective security rather than alliances. Multilateralism rather than unilateralism or bilateralism will be the order of the day. One can be assured that a repeat of the power politics that was prevalent at the turn of the previous century, during the two world wars or in the post-war period, is unlikely. In the words of Joseph Nye, "power is becoming less fungible, less coercive, and less tangible."⁴

On the other hand, there are many who believe that it is much too early to dismiss the old geopolitics.⁵ Particularly in Asia, although one can witness the emergence of a new kind of relations among nations, the transformation lags much behind that in Europe both in speed and depth. The reasons are many. In comparison with Asia, the countries of Europe, particularly

4 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Challenging Nature of American Power* (New York, 1990), p. 188.

5 See, for example, Samuel P. Huntington, "America's Changing Strategic Interest," *Survival* (January/February, 1991), pp. 3-17.

Western Europe, which for the most part are geographically contiguous and culturally compatible among themselves, have had the experience for several decades of cooperation and integrative efforts; internally their politics are more democratic and their civil society has deeper roots; their economies are more evenly developed and their economic systems more homogeneous; they have several nations with comparable strengths that can balance off one another. Even then, Europe has not completely rid itself of geopolitics, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Considering these contrasts, it is only natural that Asia has a long way to go before it can eulogize the passing of the old power politics.

U.S. Response

Korean security interests and policy will be affected most directly by the future directions U.S. policy takes. The end of the Cold War and the American success in the Gulf War have made the United States the preeminent power in the world. However, those events in turn have triggered a serious internal debate concerning its future security role in the world.⁶

The military sanction of Iraq was possible only because many critical factors—oil, the survival of Israel, a power struggle among the Gulf countries, Saddam Hussein's audacity, and the availability of time (several months before the invasion) and launching space (Saudi Arabia)—converged to enable an international (UN) and national (U.S. Congress) consensus to form. A similar action is unlikely to be able to be taken elsewhere later.

Since the end of the Second World War, in the course of the competition and Cold War with the Soviet Union, the United States overcame its long-held isolationist instincts and pursued

6 See the debate in the Summer 1992 issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Norman J. Ornstein, "Foreign Policy and the 1992 Election," pp. 1–16; James A. Leach, "A Republican Looks at Foreign Policy," pp. 17–31; and Lee H. Hamilton, "A Democrat Looks at Foreign Policy," pp. 32–51.

an internationalist foreign policy for which a basic consensus had been formed. Now with the end of the Cold War, America's relative economic decline, and pluralization of the world, divergent views on U.S. foreign policy contend among themselves concerning the way in which the United States should proceed in the years ahead. At the risk of oversimplification, two of those views may be considered isolationist in nature, and three of them basically internationalist.

One form of isolationism in existence since long before the end of the Cold War is expressed by progressive critics who have opposed U.S. arms buildup, military interventionism, and what they consider to be economic imperialism abroad. They opposed the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, support of the rightist regimes in the Third World countries, and the arms race with the Soviet Union which has only enriched the military-industrial complex at home. They have been particularly critical of the military establishment's exaggeration of the Soviet threat.⁷ For them, the collapse of socialism and the Soviet Union not only vindicates their previous assertions but also strengthens the argument that the United States has no need for military alliances and presence abroad.

Another, more recent, expression of isolationism comes from the opposite end of the spectrum. Having their ideological roots in the pre-World War II America, these conservatively oriented critics accept that what they considered to be the greatest threat to the United States and humanity, that of the Soviet bloc, has now dissipated. But they disagree with the progressives saying that the Soviet Union collapsed only because the U.S. took a strong stand, militarily as well as in economics, against socialism and the Soviet power. Now that the United States has "won" that contest, it can safely mind its own business and interest as "a normal country in a normal time."⁸

7 For example, Richard Barnet, *Global Reach* (New York, 1974).

8 Jean J. Kirkpatrick, "A Normal Country in a Normal Time," *National Interest*

Despite these isolationist trends, it is not likely that the United States would abandon overnight the internationalist-interventionist policies it has maintained for over 45 years since the end of World War II. Those who, despite the end of the Cold War and economic obstacles, argue that the United States must maintain internationalist policies and role do so on the following three grounds.

One school argues that, since hegemonic leadership is inevitable in any international system, some other country or power will try to fill the gap should the United States vacate that role by following its isolationist instinct. Hence, Samuel Huntington, who sees the post-Cold War world as a "uni-multipolar system" contends that the United States should check the militarization of Japan, maintain military balance in Europe and Asia, and protect U.S. interests in the Third World lest some other power try to assert its own hegemonic leadership in either the economic or military field.⁹ Unlike the Cold War warriors, however, even those who believe the United States should not cede its leadership role take a lukewarm attitude toward alliance relationships the United States has with "Third World" countries such as South Korea.¹⁰

Another school advocates an American leadership role on moral or idealistic grounds. Consistent with the pre-War idealism that was an important part of U.S. foreign policy considerations, those in this school argue that the United States has a golden opportunity to work effectively towards some of the ideals for which the nation and its people stand. They lament that the United States is not taking full advantage of its preeminent position in this "unipolar" world to pursue the "new world order," which should include such ideals as the inviolability of

(Fall 1990), pp. 40-44.

9 Samuel P. Huntington, "America's Changing Strategic Interest," *Survival* (January/February, 1991), pp. 3-17.

10 Ibid.

sovereignty, rule by law, peaceful settlement of disputes, and protection of human rights.¹¹

A third "internationalist" school argues that the primary role of the United States in the future world should be to maintain stability in key regions such as Europe and Asia, and to give reassurance of security to key countries such as Germany and Japan.¹² In fact, the United States has emerged as the protector of the world order in the wake of the end of the World War. In their view, a continued presence of the United States in Asia will help reassure those countries concerned about both intraregional and global sources of conflict.¹³ For this, they argue, the United States should recognize that it has lost the absolute superiority it once enjoyed in economic and political areas but continues to assume its military role with the support of and in cooperation with other countries.¹⁴

It should be noted that, from among the "five" schools of thought introduced above concerning the future policy directions, it is unlikely that the United States will adopt one policy exclusive of all the others. What seems certain is that, regardless of the relative weight each of these views will carry in the formulation of future U.S. policies, the United States will reduce its military presence globally and particularly in Asia, and it will have a direct bearing on policy toward Korea.

11 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment, *Foreign Affairs* (New York, 1991), pp. 23-33; also, "Bush: Such Timidity, and Such a Bully Pulpit," *The Washington Post*, 23 September 1991.

12 William Pfaff, "Redefining World Power," *Foreign Affairs: America and the World* (1990/91), pp. 34-48.

13 Ibid.

14 Several government reports such as "National Security Strategy of the United States," The White House, August, 1991, and "National Military Strategy of the United States," Washington, G.P.O. (for the Joint Chiefs of Staff), 1992, reflect views of this school. For reports on the defense planning guidelines of the *Department of Defense*, 1994-99, see *The New York Times*, 18 February and 24 May 1994.

Regional Politics

Asia lags behind Europe in regional integration and in the degree and depth to which former socialist states have been revolutionized. In Asia, for geographic as well as psychological reasons, the discontinuity between the former Soviet Union and Russia after its disintegration (and for that matter previously between Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union) is felt much less than it is in Europe. Nevertheless, changes do take place in the region in a way that is more relevant to South Korean choices than to global changes.¹⁵

To begin, the end of the Cold War, the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, and emergence of a cooperative relationship between Russia and United States have all removed from the United States one of the most important incentives to maintain a strong military presence in Korea—that of countering the Soviet threat and expansionism. In light of the new international and regional situation of the 1990s, the level of U.S. troop presence in the future as well as the overall American role in Korea has become an object of reappraisal. As a result of these pressures the United States conducted an official review of its policy and position in Asia including Korea. Thus, a Department of Defense strategy statement, “A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century,” called for a transformation in the role of U.S. troops from one of leadership to one of support.¹⁶

The changes in the Soviet Union/Russia led to an official recognition of South Korea and the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1990, straining its relations with North Korea. The security implication for South Korea of this development is significant and far-reaching. For economic as well as political

15 See *The New York Times*, 18 February and 24 May 1994.

16 U.S. Department of Defense, *A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C., 1990).

reasons, Russia is limiting its supply of strategic goods including oil to North Korea. Although it has refused to abrogate its 1961 alliance (Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation) with North Korea and tries to maintain ties with Pyongyang, Moscow has been putting pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program, which is posing a threat to regional stability and hampering North-South Korean dialogue.

Most important, the Soviet/Russian rapprochement with South Korea triggered a cross-recognition cycle between the two Koreas and the major powers, arousing strong incentive in Japan, China and the United States to follow suit. Contrary to the widely-held expectation that Japan would be the second major power to establish diplomatic relations with both Koreas, China moved first to normalize its relations with South Korea while the Japanese normalization effort with North Korea stalled due to Pyongyang's refusal to allow mutual inspection of nuclear facilities between North and South Korea.

Although the diplomatic normalization of August 24, 1992, between China and South Korea was achieved for reasons and logic of its own, there was an important element relating to Japan that lurks behind their move apart from economic and other bilateral interests. It is the perception in both China and South Korea that Japan is preparing to expand its political role and influence in Asia, requiring a countervailing move on the part of its neighbors who are weary of the implications of Japan's passage of the PKO bill, importation of quantities of plutonium, and apparent resurgence of "nationalism."

From the point of view of many Asians and Americans, Japan is gradually replacing the Soviet Union as a reason for the continuing U.S. military presence in the region, especially in Japan and Korea. It is not so much that Japan is seen as a present threat as it is the concern that, in case of a U.S. withdrawal, Japan either from a sense of insecurity or from plain opportunism might try to fill the vacuum. More immediately, it will take the form of larger Japanese military budget allocation and the creation of

legal and institutional openings for overseas involvement. Presumably, a continued U.S. military presence will provide the needed reassurance for Japan's security as well as serving as a constraint on its arms buildup. South Koreans are now beginning to recognize the value of security ties with the United States not only to meet the North Korean threat but also as an irreplaceable balance to the other three major powers including Japan.

Multilateral security arrangements in the region (however "region" be defined) constitute another proposed response to an expected reduction of U.S. presence as well as to an anticipated increase in the role and influence of other powers, particularly Japan and China. It is too late, however, to think about an arrangement such as NATO and premature to attempt an Asian equivalent of CSCE. The ASEAN PMC formula proposed by ASEAN and supported by Japan is worthy of pursuit and support, but it will have only a limited relevance to Northeast Asia. In fact, the "geopolitical" elements still have too strong a presence in the area surrounding the Korean peninsula for a collective security system to be effective and sufficient. Furthermore, Seoul is still burdened with the complex predicament of the Korean division, with the accompanying and still existing threat from Pyongyang.

South Korean Policy Options

Given the radical changes in international relations taking place on both global and regional levels, South Korea needs to make a comprehensive and long-term assessment of the situation and make choices in several issue areas:

1) *Relationship with the United States.* Since its independence, South Korea has depended exclusively upon the U.S. for its security. In recent years, South Korea has made an effort to move away from this exclusive dependence, mainly in the non-military areas, in the name of "Northern Policy." But now, diplomatic normalization with the Soviet Union/Russia and with China

seems to have accelerated the diversification process. South Korea will have to devise a way to balance the need to retain a U.S. military presence in Korea on the one hand and the pressures to reduce or withdraw it on the other.

2. *Weight of military security.* Ever since the Korean War, South Korea has been preoccupied with the immediate threat of North Korea. Thus security has been given the highest priority in attention as well as budget allocation. With the changing environment, the security situation is becoming more complex in terms of the source and type of threat. It requires paying attention to the broader regional context and to non-conventional security issues such as nuclear safety, environment, sea lines of communication, resources, and economic security.

3. *Attention to universal and ethical issues.* For reasons understandable, South Korea has been preoccupied with short-term and highly secular interests, mainly in areas of the economy and security. Due to urgent and immediate problems of its own, it could not pay attention to more universal issues of global peace, morality, values and ideals. Very often, however, "moral" issues have practical implications. With its membership in the United Nations and universal diplomatic relations, South Korea is now in a position to pay closer attention to and involve itself in global issues and areas of ethics.

4. *"Non-zero sum game" with North Korea.* As a divided nation, South Korea has for the most part been competing with North Korea, in effect playing a "zero sum game." This was inevitable in the face of the North Korean threat of external attack and internal subversion. In economics and internationally, however, North Korea is no longer in a position to be South Korea's serious rival. The July 7, 1988, declaration was meant to enunciate South Korean willingness to accept North Korea as a partner, not a competitor, in the international arena. This intention, however, has not been able to be tested substantially largely because North Korea never gave South Korea the opportunity to implement its announced intentions. Now that it has diplomatic relations with

all four of the major powers including China, perhaps South Korea can start playing a “non-zero sum game” in earnest. South Korea can now seriously pursue its “unification diplomacy” and should make plans with the interest of a unified Korea, and with the divided South Korea, in mind.

5. *Multilateralism.* Finally, South Korea can play a more active role in and for multilateral arrangements, both regional and global. Already, Seoul played a key role in the organization and development of the Asia-Pacific Economic Council (APEC). It should pay more attention to and involve itself in non-economic organizations and arrangements, too. For the moment, South Korea is a member of neither a subregional organization such as the ASEAN nor a global grouping such as OECD, which is another reason why South Korea must become involved with new as well as old multilateral organizations and arrangements, both economic and non-economic.

In summary, the external circumstances require and internal developments enable South Korea to make choices in foreign relations that emphasize multilateralism, far-sightedness, and purposefulness.