(Preliminary) Political Lessons of the 9-11 War for Korea

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Abstract

Though the 9-11 War is not over, there are lessons that the ROK can draw from the conflict:

• First, there are limits to Chinese power. Though Afghanistan and Central Asia are close to China, it has had to accept the deployment of large US forces in the region, some of whom may remain in place for years. The Sino-Russian axis was destroyed when Moscow forgot about its “special relationship” with Beijing in favor of better ties with the West. China has also had to accept the deployment of Japanese ships to the war zone in support of US forces.

• Second, Russia is weak. It has had to acquiesce to a US and NATO presence in Central Asia. It now seeks US support rather than confront America.

• Third, so far, the conflict has highlighted the enormous military power of the United States. The US quickly established bases halfway around the globe and eliminated the Taliban. Despite the Bush administration’s contempt for its allies, the US successfully organized a world-wide coalition.

• Fourth, the war in Southwest Asia demonstrates that the ROK needs to have experts who are familiar with this region.

• Fifth, “out of area” conflicts provide opportunities for the ROK to expand its international role through peacekeeping and humanitarian aid.

• Sixth, ROK-Japan military cooperation in “out of area” operations is desirable.

• Finally, the 9-11 War does not herald a new paradigm in world affairs. Inter-state relations remain the cornerstone of international affairs.
The Republic of Korea's armed services will draw numerous military lessons from the fighting in Afghanistan. In particular, the experience of the United States and its Afghan allies in attacking bin Laden's caves and bunkers in Afghanistan should provide useful information for South Korea given North Korea's reliance on tunneling and underground facilities. This article, however, will survey the political and diplomatic lessons of the war rather than the military ones.

The conflict which started with the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is not yet over. Its very nature ensures that it is unlikely to end with clarity on a particular date. Even if Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda supporters are all liquidated in Afghanistan there might be violent death spasms from his associates in other nations who could blow up American targets after the demise of their leader. Moreover, links that exist between al-Qaeda and other organizations might prompt them to undertake operations against the United States even after the destruction of bin Laden's group. Nevertheless, more than three months after the quadruple hijackings it is possible to draw some preliminary lessons for Korean national security policy of the events that have unfolded since 9-11.

Lesson No. 1: The Weakness of China

It is an article of faith among many specialists of Asian affairs, both in Korea and overseas, that China is a great power. Discussions of Korea's future frequently conclude that Beijing must sign off on any Korean settlement if it is to be enduring. In particular, many analyses concerning the continued stationing of the of the United States forces in Korea (USFK) after unification focus on the question of "will China allow it?" In the wake of 9-11 it has become apparent that most observers had seriously overestimated the power of the People's Republic. First, for several years China has been cultivating the Central Asian

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republics to establish its influence in the western marches of the Chinese empire. China tried to institutionalize its Central Asian diplomacy with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization whose objective was to strengthen the bonds between Beijing and Central Asia, prevent undue American influence in the region, and enlist the support of the local rulers in the fight against anti-PRC Turkic Muslim movements in Xinjiang.

In the aftermath of 9-11, however, China has had to take a back seat to the United States in Central Asia. The Americans dispatched over a thousand soldiers to Uzbekistan, surveyed air bases in Tajikistan, and their NATO allies deployed additional western forces in Central Asia. Large American delegations, including the secretaries of defense and state and the Commander-in-Chief of the Central Command (General Tommy Franks) have been frequent visitors to Tashkent, as have been the representatives of other NATO nations. It is too early to know if US servicemen and bases will stay in Central Asia indefinitely or if they will be withdrawn once the Taliban and al-Qaeda's Afghan assets have been eliminated. But regardless of what happens, the United States has established the precedent that it can land in force in the middle of Central Asia.

Second, for years China has vehemently opposed the evolution of the US-Japan security relationship in ways that facilitate the expansion of Japan's overseas military posture. Beijing probably favors some kind of US-Japanese alliance to prevent the rise of an autonomous Japan (the "cork in the bottle" theory). It clearly, however, does not wish the US-Japan Security Treaty to mature into a joint military organization that expands Japan's international military role and enhances American power projection capabilities. Yet, the 9-11 War prompted Japan to engage in by far its largest overseas military operation since the end of the occupation. The Air Self-Defense Forces flew their C-130 aircraft carrying humanitarian aid to Pakistan. Naval vessels resupplied US surface combatants, demonstrating that Japanese assistance to the US military in "areas surrounding Japan" can expand more than 5,000 kilometers beyond the Japanese shoreline. In addition, the Diet passed—very expeditiously by its standards—laws and amendments that will facilitate future Self-Defense Forces deployments abroad and give more freedom of action to the armed services in the use of force.
Third, the much-vaunted Sino-Russian strategic partnership was supposed to enhance Chinese power vis-a-vis the United States. Beijing and Moscow were to use this relationship to undermine American hegemony by combining their resources. But as soon as 9-11 occurred, Moscow chose to focus on improving relations with Washington and ignored Beijing. President Putin has devoted almost all his diplomatic energy towards the United States and Europe, in particular Germany, and has almost forgotten China in his effort to curry favor in Washington, Brussels, and Berlin. His very subdued reaction to the American abrogation of the ABM treaty undermined Chinese hopes to create a united Sino-Russian front against missile defense.

Fourth, other countries that had close ties with Beijing have also turned their attention towards strengthening ties with the United States. Pakistan, which obtained some of its missile technology from China and was one of its few allies, threw its lot entirely with the United States. India, which had been seeking to improve relations with China, made strengthening its connection with the Americans its top priority.

While the United States has taken the lead in the military and diplomatic offensive in Afghanistan, China has been noticeable by its absence. It has played very little role in the diplomatic maneuvers and conferences aimed at settling the Afghan question. Neither has the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) been engaged in any military activity in the region. The European countries, which are thousands of kilometers away, have been more active diplomatically and militarily in Central Asia and Afghanistan than China.

China’s low profile is surprising. Afghanistan plays an important, though not vital, role in China’s geopolitics. Its border with China is small and mountainous but it has historical ties to some cities of southeast Xinjiang. Moreover, Uighur independentists may have received support from the al-Qaeda activists stationed in Afghanistan. In addition, developments in Afghanistan impact other countries, principally the Central Asian states and Pakistan, that matter to China. The establishment of US military bases in Central Asia should thus not

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leave China indifferent. These US forces, combined with American units in Korea and Japan, sandwich the People's Republic from the west and the east. Along with the American rapprochement with Russia and India, it could seem to Beijing that under the cover of hunting bin Laden a nefarious plan to encircle China is in the works.

Beijing may have eschewed involvement in Afghanistan because it thought it would be better off keeping out of this conflict. The Afghan situation is fluid and complex, thus the Chinese might prefer to let the Americans and their allies deal with this hornets' nest on their own. In particular, Chinese leaders may have underestimated American capabilities, thinking—and hoping as well—that the Americans would get bogged down like the Soviets (a situation that would have achieved the twin goals of weakening Moslem extremists in the region and humiliating the Americans). But it is difficult to believe that if it had the ability to participate in events that are shaping not only Afghanistan but also Central Asia and Pakistan, China would not want to play a role, if only to protect its own interests. There are several reasons that account for this remarkable Chinese passivity.

First, China has very few allies. It has close relations with a handful of outcast autocratic states, such as Burma, who carry little weight in the international systems. Its ties with Pakistan and Russia, two players in the Afghan war, were shown to be very shallow since both Islamabad and Moscow have done very little for China since 9-11.

China's position is further weakened by its obsession with its "sovereignty," which makes it difficult for Beijing to participate actively in diplomatic intercourse and multinational institutions that are based on give-and-take among nations (the United States often suffers from the same defect but its sole superpower position renders its situation entirely different from that of China). In several cases, such as the South China Sea islands and Taiwan, it prefers the use of force or the threat thereof to diplomacy. The Chinese tendency of hurling verbal abuse at foreign governments with which it disagrees further limits the effectiveness of its diplomacy. Its handling of the US Navy EP-3 incident earlier in 2001 exemplified its tendency to overreact and, in the process, to strengthen anti-PRC sentiment overseas.

Second, part of the solution to the Afghan question is to throw a lot of money at it for humanitarian purposes and to buy off the various
factions. In the long run these aid programs might do little to help the Afghan people but they lubricate the compromises and alliances that could bring some peace to the country or at least insure that Afghanistan will stop harboring international terrorists. Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and possibly other neighboring states will have claims on receiving aid in exchange for their support to the coalition. Russia too will probably be eligible for some handout to reward it for its cooperative stance. Japan and the EU nations compensate for their relative lack of military might with yen and euro diplomacy which allows them to get a seat at the table. The United States uses its financial wherewithal to add another dimension, besides the military one, to its global power. China, however, is poor. It is richer than twenty years ago but still a Third World country, thus its capacity to play in this league, where billions of dollars may have to be spent, is limited (China with 1.3 billion people has a GDP about the size of Italy, which has 58 million inhabitants). Moreover, it does not have the administrative infrastructure to administer large foreign aid programs nor the necessary ties to NGOs and international aid organizations. This economic factor therefore restricts its role in the non-military aspect of the 9-11 War and diminishes its influence in countries, such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia, that prefer to be on the side of those with deep pockets.

Third, China is weak militarily. If it had military resources even remotely comparable to America’s it could possibly have decided to join the fighting in the Afghan War (though that is most unlikely given that China has never undertaken multinational combat operations). But lacking anything that resembles what the United States can deploy it could not risk participating in the conflict as it would have exposed the giant gap between American and Chinese military capabilities.

Some may argue that China is weak now but that it will grow stronger in the future. This view is mistaken. China lacks solid property rights and the rule of law that are the foundations of all developed states, be they Western or Asian. Economic theory and empirical evidence teaches us that it is extremely difficult and time consuming to develop the institutions that are the backbone of economically developed polities.

South Korea and Taiwan were poor in the 1950s but they already had these institutions, albeit in imperfect form. Moreover, the decaying of the Communist Party, which has not been accompanied by the development of alternative political organizations, points to a period of instability rather than continued growth.

Consequently, policymakers and analysts should not overestimate the weight of China in Asian affairs. There is no need for Korea, or for that matter for the United States, to provoke Chinese anger. But when thinking about Korean security we should realize the limits to China’s power. In particular, it would be irrational to give Beijing a veto over the shape of the settlement that will follow the demise of the DPRK. China may well be displeased about a post-unification arrangement if it entails a strong American military presence and a continued ROK-US alliance but Beijing’s displeasure will not translate in the ability to stop Seoul and Washington from implementing their policies. Similarly, a decision by Korea to protect itself and its American allies from DPRK missiles by joining a ballistic missile defense program would displease China but it would have no means to stop it. Faced with the united front of the ROK, the United States and Japan, Beijing will have no choice but to acquiesce the decisions taken by South Korea.

This is an important lesson not only for Koreans but also for Americans. Too much American thinking sees China as a rising superpower whose wishes about Korea must be accommodated. At the other extreme, some Americans, also mistakenly, believe that China is a looming threat that is about to become the 21st century’s version of the Soviet menace; in addition, making China America’s No. 1 enemy and threat worsens US-ROK relations by putting Seoul in an uncomfortable position. In fact, China is a medium-sized power, heavily dependent on the goodwill of the United States and its allies for its economic well-being and its security, whose views can be ignored if need be.

Lesson No. 2: The Weakness of Russia

Though it may be an error, it is normal that numerous Koreans believe that China is a great power. It has 27 times the population of South Korea, a growing economy, and is the source of much of Korea’s
traditional high culture. That Russia should be perceived as a major actor on the world stage by South Koreans is, however, rather surprising, though perhaps understandable since many Americans and Europeans still treat it as one.

Russia’s economy, according to The Economist Intelligence Unit, is smaller than that of the ROK, equals about half of Canada’s, and is not much greater than Argentina’s. The per capita income of one South Korean represents that of four Russians.\(^3\) Russia, like China, is bereft of functioning liberal institutions. Its vital statistics, such as male life expectancy and HIV infection rates, point towards a Third World future for the country (Indian men have a higher life expectancy than Russian ones). Whereas Korea is a leading manufacturer of technology products, Russia relies on raw materials to earn foreign exchange. Yet many Koreans still think of Russia as one of the three “great powers” surrounding the peninsula (the United States is the fourth one but it is geographically distant).

This idea harks back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when Russia, England, the United States, and Japan were the main characters in the imperialist chess game played in Northeast Asia. Though their military and economic resources were unequal, they each had a legitimate claim to great-power status in what was then known as the Far East. But a hundred years later the world pecking order has changed. Korea, once a passive victim, is now a stronger and healthier nation than Russia.

The events after 9-11 highlighted Russia’s weakness. After years of claiming it had special rights in the former Soviet republics, it could do nothing to prevent Uzbekistan from lending its bases to the US military and seeking a close security relationship with the United States. Not having money to offer (on the contrary, Russia is a recipient of foreign aid), its ability to influence the course of events has been further limited. It supplied weapons to the Northern Alliance, but if it had wanted to participate in the fighting such a decision would only have exposed to the world the parlous state of its army. That the United States decided unilaterally to withdraw from the ABM Treaty at a time when it wants

Russian support over Afghanistan speaks volumes about Russia's weakness. President Putin acts like the leader of a strong country, but only because American and European governments overestimate Russian power and also have decided that there was no need to embarrass him while he cooperates with them.

Northeast Asia is even farther from the Russian heartland than Afghanistan. In addition, the Russian Far East is in dire economic straits, further undermining Russian power in the region. Russia's ability to affect events in East Asia is therefore very limited. It may play a role as a supplier of weaponry to North Korea or China. But, even more than in the case of China, it would be mistaken for South Koreans and Americans to assume that Russia is a "great" or "major" power in the region. Though there is no need to humiliate Moscow publicly, it is important for policymakers in Seoul and Washington to realize how much Russian power has declined since the days of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire.

Lesson No. 3: American Power and its Alliance System.

The 9-11 War is still going on, but so far the conflict has highlighted the resources of the United States. America successfully staged military operations that ranged from conventional bombing raids to special operations in a country that is not only distant from its territory but also from its established overseas bases. Moreover, it is important to realize that if it had wanted to, the United States could have deployed to Afghanistan and Central Asia a far greater number of personnel and materiel than it did. If it had judged it necessary, Central Command could have poured thousands of additional soldiers, including heavy armor, into Afghanistan using its strategic airlift capabilities. The military campaign illustrates the proposition that not only is the United States the planet's No. 1 military power but that the next ten or twenty positions are empty. 4

The diplomatic successes of the United States have been even

equally impressive. President Bush took office with little experience or interest in foreign affairs except for his commitment to improving relations with Mexico. Until 9-11, the administration had been doing its best to ignore the allies, eschewing compromises in favor of unilateralism, even if the face of allied opposition. In several cases, such as the Kyoto Protocol, Washington appeared bent on maximizing opposition to the United States and showing contempt for its partners. Yet, despite this inauspicious beginning, the United States managed, in a few weeks, to assemble a broad alliance in the pursuit of its goals in Afghanistan. Some of the coalition partners may defect at one point, but the fact remains that the United States has brought together practically all of the world’s developed nations in Europe and Northeast Asia, most of the key players in Southwest Asia, and to some extent Russia and China, behind its cause. The United Nations, despite its shabby treatment by American administrations and the Congress, has been very supportive.

Why has the United States succeeded to organize such a global coalition? There are reasons specific to the particulars of the 9-11 War, especially the fact that many governments view al-Qaeda as a threat and that, with the possible exceptions of a handful of nations, no countries support its aims. The destruction of the World Trade Center and a wing of the Pentagon also left few doubts about the righteousness of the American claim to self-defense. But beside these circumstances that are unique to this event, the diplomatic success of the United States reflects the existence of an informal “American empire.” Since 1945, the United States has developed a consensual alliance network that encompasses the NATO European states, its Northeast Asian allies, Canada, and Australia. This system is different from traditional empires on two major counts: the United States does not exercise direct rule over foreign territory and any member is free to leave. These alliances give the United States an enormous edge in international affairs because, as long as it respects its allies’ interests and takes their views into account, it has at its disposal the resources of practically the entire developed world, which account for a majority of the world’s wealth and most of its military power.

This US empire is a partnership of countries that provides its

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5 New Zealand is in limbo due to its disagreement over visits by US Navy vessels.
members with several advantages, ranging from military protection to mechanisms that make possible international agreements that foster trade and investment across borders. As analysts think about the direction of Korea's future diplomatic alignment, the 9-11 War should lead them to measure the benefits of a continued military alliance between Korea and the United States. It is not unimaginable that in the future South Korea could be a victim of North Korean aggression. Unified Korea too could be targeted by die-hard North Korean fanatics (given the indoctrination to which North Koreans are subjected it is not unreasonable to think that followers of the Kim dynasty could engage in suicide hijackings or other acts of violence even after the demise of the DPRK). Border troubles could erupt with China after unification. With a strong American alliance, Korea can expect to be supported by the full might of the United States and its other allies. Without a US connection, however, Korea would be left to its own devices or dependent upon the support of far weaker nations.

Lesson No. 4: Understanding the World beyond East Asia

The 9-11 conflict has had repercussions throughout the planet; al-Qaeda's network spans the globe while the coalition that has been assembled by the United States comprises nations from all continents. Nevertheless, Korea has been remote from the center of the action. Bin Laden's original goal was to expel the American military from Saudi Arabia and to overthrow the monarchy. His wrath has been expanded to include all “Crusaders” (i.e. Christians) and Jews but the Christians who are the targets of his hate are Westerners rather than Korean ones. Moslem fighters in Mindanao in the Philippines may be associated with bin Laden, who is also rumored to support Uighurs fighting for East Turkestan in Xinjiang, but he has no known interest or links to the Korean peninsula. His followers could target American objectives in Korea but their reliance on Arab operatives makes it hard for the group to undertake attacks in Korea. In North America or western Europe bin Laden's men, many of whom are familiar with the West and its languages, find it easy to blend in these multiracial societies, something that would be impossible for them in Korea where they would stand out.
in this monoethnic nation. Moreover, as a result of having to face the possibility of North Korean commando raids, US facilities in Korea are probably better defended than American diplomatic and military outposts in other countries.

Not only is Korea far from the epicenter of the war but most Koreans find the issues that fueled al Qaeda's terrorist acts rather obscure. The West has a long history of interaction with Arabs and Moslems. There are large Arab and South Asian communities in Europe and America. For decades, the United States and Europe have been closely involved with the events unfolding in the Arab world. North of the Philippines and east of Xinjiang, East Asians have very little experience of interaction with Islam (there are Hui, Han Chinese Moslems, in China proper and on Taiwan but their numbers are fairly small compared to the non-Moslem population and they have few ties to the Arab or Turkic world, unlike the Uighurs of Xinjiang). The ideological and political roots of Islamist movements are also alien to most Koreans. North Korea, of course, has often resorted to terrorist methods but the issues surrounding the DPRK are totally unconnected to the problems in the Middle East and South Asia.

Though Korea is distant from the eye of the storm, the 9-11 War is an event that it cannot brush aside, demonstrated by Seoul's decision to dispatch an army medical unit to the region. The United States plays a critical role in East Asian security. Any conflict that entails a major commitment of American military power and diplomatic resources automatically affects Korea. The 9-11 War could also reverberate in the Persian Gulf, either because of American military action or domestic upheavals resulting from the conflict. This would have important implications for oil prices and Korean business interests in the region. Consequently, Seoul cannot afford to ignore Southwest Asia. Moreover, as happened after 9-11, it may be in Seoul's national interest to participate, albeit modestly, in military operations in this region. But in order to weigh the pros and cons of any military involvement it needs to be able to understand the political dynamics of the regions.

6 Terrorism is almost impossible to define; in this case I refer to political assassinations, kidnappings of civilians, sabotage of civilian airliners, and other similar actions undertaken by the DPRK.
Unfortunately, there is a paucity of expertise in the ROK about the Arab world and South Asia. Many South Koreans are familiar with North America, East Asia, and Europe, but few can be called specialists in Southwest Asian affairs. One of the lessons of this war is that South Korea needs to enhance its understanding of the area from the Suez Canal to Pakistan by ensuring that it has enough specialists, in government and academia, who understand this part of the world. In particular, the Ministry of National Defense will need the services of Southwest Asia experts since any Korean participation in wars in that region is likely to involve the military.

Lesson No. 5: South Korea’s International Role

When the western imperialists first reached the shores of Northeast Asia, Korea was known as the Hermit Kingdom. In the past decades, however, South Korea has become anything but a hermit nation. It is home to tens of thousands of foreign soldiers and businessmen. Economically, it is one of the world’s largest exporters. In the cultural sphere as well Korea has opened itself, with tens of thousands of Koreans studying overseas. It was the site of the Olympics in 1988 and it will co-host the World Cup this year.

Since the early 1990s, South Korea has also expanded its international role in the security area. Starting with the Gulf War, where it dispatched a small contingent of troops and contributed financially as well, Seoul has become active in political-military affairs outside Northeast Asia. The Korean Army has participated in several United Nations peacekeeping missions: South Korean troops were deployed in Somalia, a Korean general assumed command in 2001 of the Cyprus peacekeeping operation, and ROK servicemen have been deployed in East Timor. In the 9-11 War, South Korea has made a medical unit and support services available to the coalition effort. (South Korean army and marine divisions fought alongside Americans during the Vietnam War, but the context was entirely different and the operation was financed by the United States.)

Due to the DPRK menace, the ROK’s engagement in overseas missions can only remain a marginal aspect of its defense policy as long
as the country is divided. Unlike European countries who enjoy the luxury of friendly neighbors, South Korea cannot make out-of-area operations the primary mission of its soldiers. Nevertheless, South Korea is sufficiently strong and rich to contribute some forces to international operations, as it has done since the Gulf War. The 9-11 War is unlikely to be the last time that the ROK will take part in such operations. It will therefore be in Seoul’s advantage to maximize the advantage it derives from its participation. Very few Americans are aware of South Korea’s numerous contributions to international peace since the end of the Cold War. A more vigorous public diplomacy effort on the part of South Korea would seem to be in order.

Out-of-area operations also offer the ROK armed forces other advantages besides boosting the country’s international image. They give the military the ability to experience a real theater of war, providing officers and men with insights that they can use to improve the effectiveness of their training back home. Even missions that do not involve combat are useful. They offer experience in long-range deployment and give junior officers the opportunity to take initiatives. Moreover, during multinational operations Koreans get the chance to interact with foreign militaries other than the American one. These missions thus provide an opportunity for the Korean military to expand its horizons. South Korean diplomats also benefit from the opportunities to involve themselves in these international issues that broaden their experience.

Lesson No. 6: The Importance of Good ROK-Japan Relations

In the wake of Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United States asked its allies to take part in the campaign to expel the Iraqi army from the emirate. Unable for constitutional and political reasons to join the fight, the Japanese government ended up writing the United States an enormous $13 billion check and deployed a few minesweepers after the armistice had been signed. Despite the large amount of financial resources Tokyo made available to the coalition, it received very little gratitude in return. Many Americans derided this
checkbook diplomacy, taking Japan to task for its unwillingness to shed blood. The final humiliation occurred when the advertisement the Kuwaiti government bought in the press to thank its liberators omitted to list Japan among the countries who had freed Kuwait.

Cognizant of the failure of Japan's Gulf War response diplomacy and benefiting from the results of a decade of Japanese-American collaboration aimed at reinforcing their military relationship, the Koizumi administration reacted to the 9-11 Incident in a dramatically different manner. It dispatched Air Self-Defense Forces transport aircraft to deliver humanitarian supplies to Pakistan within weeks of 9-11. This was the first time since the end of World War II that armed Japanese servicemen were dispatched to what was in effect a war zone (Japanese crews performed minesweeping operations during the Korean War but they did so as civilian contractors under the command of the United States rather than as sailors in the service of the Japanese government). In addition, Tokyo tasked Maritime Self-Defense Forces vessels to provide logistical support to the US Navy in the Indian Ocean. The government enacted new legislation to facilitate overseas deployments that granted the Self-Defense Forces more leeway in the use of their weapons. Though modest in absolute terms, these steps are very significant in light of Japan's previous reluctance to deploy its military for missions other than peacekeeping operations where there was almost no risk of fighting (Mozambique, Cambodia, Golan Heights).

While President Bush praised Japan's contribution to the war effort during his Pearl Harbor 60th anniversary speech on 7 December 2001 the reaction of the ROK government to Japan's actions were muted, but it was clear that Seoul was not particularly enthusiastic about these measures. Moreover, the government, according to some observers, was under pressure from public opinion to be more critical of the Japanese decisions.

It is not surprising that many South Koreans did not enjoy the sight of Japanese aircraft and warships participating in combat operations, even though they were helping Korea's major ally. Besides the long historical baggage of Korea-Japan interaction dating back to the invasions of Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late 16th century, relations between Seoul and Tokyo have deteriorated since the heyday of the Kim-Obuchi summit. In particular, the controversy over textbooks
followed by the visit by Prime Minister Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine in August 2001 enflamed Korean sensitivities. Other irritants, including the comfort women question and the dispute over Korean fishing in the Northern Territories (Southern Kuriles) have made the relationship more tense.

Since the 9-11 War is being waged thousands of kilometers from Korea, the lack of Korean enthusiasm for Japan's actions has not had much of an impact. Neither Japan nor Korea are leading participants in the military activities which the Americans dominate, thus there is no need for them to coordinate their operations nor to play a significant role in the conduct of the war. But Koreans' reactions reveal their hypersensitivity to anything having to do with Japan's military. This is understandable in light what is known as the "history question," but it could have crippling effects on Korea under different circumstances.

The fact is that Japan plays a major role in Korean security. It is by far the largest economy in the region (about three times China's), is the most technologically and industrially advanced nation in Asia, and is home to a large proportion of the US military infrastructure in the Western Pacific. Its own Self-Defense Forces are the most modern military force in Asia. Moreover, due to the development of North Korea's medium-range ballistic missile arsenal, Japan is now a front-line state that is more concerned with developments on the peninsula than it was in the past. If and when Korea is unified, Japan will have to play a major role as a provider of emergency economic and humanitarian assistance. Therefore, any effective ROK national security policy requires close cooperation and coordination with Japan.

Consequently, Seoul needs good relations with Tokyo (and vice versa). The unease of the Korean public in the face of the very limited Japanese actions in the aftermath of 9-11 illustrates the problematic state of ROK-Japan relations. If they were what they should be, Koreans should have welcomed Japanese participation and Koreans and Japanese might have arranged for their forces to operate jointly.

The "lesson" to be drawn from the Korean reaction is that Seoul and Tokyo need to improve their bilateral ties. In this particular circumstance (9-11), the quality of ROK-Japan cooperation matters very little to Korea, but in other scenarios it will be critical. Thus both sides should work towards solving the Yasukuni Shrine issue, resolving the textbook
controversy, settling the comfort women question, and reaching some lasting agreement on fishing and maritime sovereignty issues. Unfortunately for Korea, most of the steps necessary to improve Korea-Japan relations will have to be taken by Tokyo. Except for the last questions involving fishing and maritime claims, the solution to the problems between the two countries lies almost entirely with the government of Japan. What Korea can do is to redouble efforts to convince the Japanese to take Korean sensitivities into account. Domestically, the ROK government can also continue to work to convince the Korean public to accept that an increase in Japan’s role in international affairs is not a threat to Koreans.

Lesson No. 7: 9-11 Does Not Herald a New Paradigm in World Affairs

The attacks on September 11, 2001, do not mark the a new era in international relations. There has been much talk about “asymmetric war” but the reality is that al-Qaeda inflicted only very minor damage on the United States. For a country of 281 million inhabitants and over $10.7 trillion dollars of GDP the loss of the World Trade Center and the damage to the Pentagon represent only superficial wounds. Even loses in the hundreds of thousands of civilians, or more, would not have significantly diminished US power, though they would probably have led to an even more forceful military response. In contrast, in a few months the United States overthrew the regime of a country (Afghanistan) and inflicted severe loses on al-Qaeda at very little cost in American lives. The financial costs of operation Enduring Freedom and possible follow-on attacks on other countries are not a major burden for the United States and its allies. The fight against al-Qaeda may take many more years, and there might be many more twists and turns to this conflict. But the 9-11 War does not alter the fact that the international system remains based on the interaction of sovereign states and that “traditional” military might is essential for victory. Even a so called “non-state actor” like Osama bin Laden required the assistance of a country, Afghanistan, to perpetrate his deeds.

In the case of South Korea, its international environment will
continue to be defined by the state of relations between the two Korean states and by the policies of the neighboring countries and the United States. Therefore the basic parameters that affect Korean security remain unchanged after 9-11.

Conclusion

What conclusions can we draw from these preliminary lessons of the 9-11 War for Korea? The most important is that they have highlighted facts that were true before September 11 but have become even more salient in the wake of the conflict which Osama bin Laden initiated. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon did not make China and Russia weaker or America stronger but they helped reveal the true state of the balance of power in the world today.

But how does the 9-11 War relate to South Korea’s more pressing problem, namely, relations with North Korea? For decades North Korea has been wont to use military provocations to advance its diplomatic goals. In some cases the North’s actions have involved violence, such as infiltrating commandos into the ROK, in others they have only consisted of displaying real (missiles) or potential (nuclear programs) weapons for the purpose of extracting economic gains or diplomatic concessions from its adversaries.

In the wake of 9-11, North Korea may find it more difficult to practice brinksmanship. The post-9-11 atmosphere in the United States and many other nations is such that it is unlikely that North Korean blackmail with weapons of mass destruction would result in any gain for Pyongyang. Any move by Kim Jong-il to engage in threats, and even more any North Korean use of force, will not induce Americans to compromise with it, as has often been the case in the past, but rather will lead Washington to harden its position. In addition, the success of the bombing operations against al Qaeda’s caves may increase the confidence of the US military in its capacity to eviscerate the DPRK’s underground facilities.

Because the geopolitics of Korea are different from those of Afghanistan, it would take an enormous provocation by the DPRK—such as an attack causing massive casualties—for the ROK and the US to
retaliate with an invasion aimed at destroying the regime. But the consequences of 9-11 are that it is less likely that the US administration and public will be willing to compromise in the face of North Korean brinksmanship.