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Top Korean Official Indicts Carter Policy

Jimmy Carter's Korea troop withdrawal policy is a strategic, military, economic and political disaster. That was the theme of a conference held on June 20-22 in Washington D.C. by the Stanford Research Institute on Northeast Asia Security. The conference participants, which included a group of scholars and government advisors from South Korea, analysts from Japan, and a host of American participants from various areas, including Pentagon and thinktank personnel, were almost universally opposed to the Carter policy though less clear on what to offer in its place.

The most important input into the symposium was from the Koreans present and particularly the star invitee, Dr. K.W. Kim, a Special Assistant to South Korean President Pak Chung Hee and known in some circles as "Korea's Kissinger." That label is somewhat inaccurate as Kim showed far more insight and competence than Dr. Kissinger demonstrated. Kim delivered two major addresses but his first, delivered on the first day of the symposium was one of the most sophisticated and powerful indictments of the Carter Korea policy to date.

The following are excerpts from that speech.

Korea and Security In Northeast Asia

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According to conventional wisdom, "chances of war in Northeast Asia hinge on the confrontation between two hostile and powerfully armed Korean states." As with most conventional wisdom, it may be more appropriate to state exactly the converse of the Brookings assumption, namely that chances of war in Korea hinge on the confrontation between hostile and powerfully armed superstates, the United States and the Soviet Union. After all, the war of 1950 had its origins in interactions between the two superpowers. It had nothing whatever to do with "two powerfully armed Korean states." One might even say the war began because one of those Korean states was not powerfully armed. To debate the "true" cause of instability in Northeast Asia — intra-Korea competition or superpower rivalry — may seem academic, but it makes a huge difference in one's policy prescription whether Korea itself is seen as a source of trouble or, as I myself would argue, it is seen as a product of troubles that go deeper or wider than Korea. If one starts from the former assumption, the conclusion follows that "over the longer term, we (the U.S.) should try to distance ourselves from events in Korea, through measures discussed below (withdrawal of U.S. troops), and to render the U.S.-Japanese connection less vulnerable to events on the peninsula." If it is believed that Korea is the cause of threat to Northeast Asia security, it follows that disengagement from Korea is a necessary step to removing an element of instability from the Northeast Asian region. And, not surprisingly, this is precisely the formula the Brookings study suggests the U.S. government follow.

If, on the other hand, one starts from a different assumption, namely that Korea is an integral, inevitable and inseparable part of Northeast Asia, then it is clearly impossible to adopt the sort of simplistic formula expressed above, which for the sake of convenience we might label the "Brookings formula." To be sure, to the extent one is willing to ignore history and geography, one may pretend that Korea is linked to Northeast Asian security only because it is perceived to be so linked. The "Brookings formula" recommends that the U.S. try to persuade that American disengagement from Korea cannot possibly affect Japanese security interests. A campaign of persuasion then becomes equated with a security policy. The trouble with such an approach is that national security, while partly a matter of perception, is also much more than that. Whether Washington succeeds in persuading Tokyo that Korea matters little, there remains the irreducible, intractable fact that Korea has been, and will continue to be, an integral and inseparable part of Asia....

It is intellectually surprising to find the Brookings urge the U.S. government to "distance (itself) from events in Korea." Particularly, to do so under the illusion of being able to count Korea out of the Northeast Asian strategic equation will be a huge intellectual folly.

One power which is not likely to commit a similar intellectual mistake is Russia. Unlike the United States, whose relationship with Asia historically has tended to exhibit an ad hoc, on-again off-again quality, Russian interests in Korea and Northeast Asia are rooted in the fact that Russia is an Asian as well as European power. If there has been a tendency in the U.S. to view Europe and Asia as competing, hence alternative arenas for America's attention, Russia has never seriously doubted that it has to be both European and Asian. Russia's European strategy is integrally linked to its Asian strategy and that is why the Soviet strategists would never themselves ask if Russia too should not "distance itself from events in Korea" in order to concentrate on Europe. Besides, the Russians understand only too well that it is impossible for them to "distance themselves from events in Korea" without incurring consequences that are unacceptable to them. To say that the Russians are deeply conscious of their strategic interests in Korea, however, is not to say that they are determined to pursue them aggressively irrespective of constraints imposed by "objective conditions" upon their capabilities. Indeed, the Soviet Union has shown a remarkable tactical flexibility in its foreign behavior. And it is precisely this tactical

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flexibility that has enabled Moscow to remain steadfast in its long-term strategic objectives....

That is why the Russians have always understood the fact that their interests in Korea are rooted in the geopolitical realities which define the necessary parameters of Russia's security requirements. Unlike many American commentators who seem to have elevated into an article of orthodox faith the familiar catechism that Korea is important only for the defense of Japan, Soviet strategists have never suggested that their strategic interests in Korea are derivative from their Mongolian policy or any other policy related to a third country. In a way, this difference results from two contrasting intellectual traditions. If an empiricist is uncomfortable with an explanation of a policy unless its rationale can be stated in terms of "hard facts" — and numbers are viewed as hardest kind of facts — in the opposite intellectual tradition which is more attuned to the intangibles of history, politics and geography, a policy has to lack depth to be completely quantifiable. The reason Japan is regarded as more important than Korea is because Japan is "more." To the Russian strategic planner, the meaning of Korea, however, is organically linked to the regional framework, the entire Northeast Asian configuration of power and influence of which Korea is a part. And a part can be understood only in the context of a whole, and not just in relation to another part, although the latter may be a larger part.

In the last analysis, Russian strategic interests in the Korean peninsula cannot be divorced from her strategic interests and requirements vis-a-vis Western Europe and the Middle East as well as China, Japan and the United States. A suggestion of linkage among Russia's regional strategic interests, however, may lead a Western student to wonder why the Soviets are not as actively involved in one area, for example, Korea at the moment, as they seem to be in some other parts of the world. The answer lies in the remarkable tactical flexibility the Soviets have shown in their foreign policy behavior. The most important explanation of their relative coolness in Korea, for example, can be found in the Soviet belief that a more visible and active Soviet policy in Korea — for instance, an all-out support for North Korea's revolutionary unification policy or an attempt to gain strategic access to the peninsula by letting revolutionary commitments fade into empty rhetoric of the past — can lead to a U.S. reaction, which may very well escalate to an open U.S.-Soviet confrontation. In other words, the Soviets are merely being prudent, not disinterested....

A country whose strategic posture is even more explicitly based on an assumption concerning the U.S. military role than even in the case of China is Japan....

There is, however, a body of opinion afloat now which suggests that Japan's security orientation need not be what it is today. It seems to be based on two different kinds of arguments.

In the first case, it is simply announced that "the importance of South Korea to Japan's security is a product of our (U.S.) constant repetition of the theme to Japanese audience." Besides being an intellectual insult to the Japanese, who are portrayed as being incapable of understanding their own strategic requirements except through American lectures, the suggestion is also indicative of the tendency among some quarters to seek freedom from history through a fiat....

The second approach is a little more subtle but no less unrealistic. It consists in an attempt to reject power politics and substitute for it economic and functional relations ("interdependence"). It is an approach with obvious appeal, because it seems to promise an end to military and strategic approach and usher in a new era of ever-expanding functional web of interdependencies among industrialized democracies. A cynic may observe that the attraction of the new approach consists in the promise to clothe what in effect amounts to a 19th century kind of "Concert of Europe" in an 18th century kind of rationalist language. An added bonus is that it promises to lift Japan out of Asia and place it somewhere in the Atlantic. And like all plausible theories, this one too is not without considerable merit, if it is not carried too far.

The difficulty is that, as Professor Donald Hellmann, an American political scientist, pointed out, economics notwithstanding, "geographically, culturally, racially, and historically, Japan is part of Asia. It cannot be towed to a position off the coast of France." Furthermore, as Professor Hellmann continues, Japan's economic ties with the advanced countries are not as strong as assumed by many....

In the long run, security cannot be divorced from the general health of society. To the extent Korea's on-going economic growth and modernization increasingly generate the socio-political substance of the country as well as military strength for the nation, we can afford to be confident about the future security of Korea. And the prospects of increasing security for Korea should augur well for the security of Northeast Asia as a whole. After all, North Korea too will have to come to terms with the reality of South Korea's success as a modern state, a development which may very well facilitate the process of reconciliation among the powers in the region as well as bring about genuine improvement in the relations between two Koreas.