The War on Iraq Seen from South Korea

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On 2 April 2003, the Korean National Assembly passed a resolution that agreed to the Roh Mu-hyun administration’s proposal to send some 700 non-combat troops -- including one military engineering battalion and one medical unit -- to Iraq to help the United States. This action was taken, however, despite strong opposition from the public and some quarters of the political society. After the Roh administration indicated that it had received the U.S. request for Korean support of troops in late March, heavy public criticism began to arise. Some civil groups threatened that in the next general election they would campaign for defeat of those Assemblymen who would vote for the passage of the resolution. Even inside President Roh’s own party, a considerable number of Assemblymen made it public their opposition to the proposed dispatch of troops.

The critics argued that it was wrong for the Korean government to officially take part in the war at the U.S.’ side because the U.S.-led military operations in Iraq were simply illegitimate and unjust. They emphasized that Washington did not provide the international society with convincing evidence of Iraq’s WMD programs and, thereby, failed to obtain the United Nations’ approval of the military intervention. Of course, they admitted that Saddam Hussein’s regime was a brutal dictatorship. They stressed, however, that the Bush administration’s declared war aim of promoting democracy in Iraq by overthrowing Hussein’s dictatorship only cloaked its primary interests in Iraqi oil and in the maintenance of U.S. hegemony in Middle East. More importantly, the critics felt uneasy about the fact that, despite considerable international opposition, the Bush administration put its doctrine of preemptive strike into action against one of the ‘Axis of Evil’ countries. This seemed to confirm their greatest fear that North Korea, another Axis of Evil country, could be America’s next target in the near future. In view of this possibility which could lead to an all-out war in the Korean peninsula, the critics warned that by supporting the U.S.-led war on Iraq the Korean government would alienate the world’s peace-loving opinions, asking if Washington embark on the dangerous course in Korea unilaterally, to whom, if not those opinions, South Korea could turn in order to get international support to stop it.
In face of these criticisms, the Roh administration defended its position in terms of the national interest. It argued that, for the purpose of national security, it was imperative to maintain a close alliance relationship with the United States whose cooperation was essential to resolve the tension in the Korean peninsula centered around the North Korean nuclear program. Obviously, the Roh administration’s primary concern was not the war on Iraq itself but its implications on the North Korean nuclear crisis. Pointing out Korea’s “alliance duty to help the United State when it is in difficulty,” President Roh argued, “by fulfilling such a duty rather than by directly confronting the U.S. on the question of the war’s legitimacy, we can better serve our national security objective of the peaceful resolution of the North Korean problem.” He emphasized that he was convinced that “the U.S. would not unilaterally deal with the North Korean nuclear problem without our consent.” He also added that because many foreign investors considered conflicts in R.O.K.-U.S. relations a more serious destabilizing factor in the Korean economy than the risk of war in the peninsula, his decision to support the United States in Iraq would soothe their concerns to a considerable degree.

As described above, the Korean political debates on the U.S.-led war on Iraq took the form of ‘the illegitimacy of the war versus the national interest.’ However, it is noteworthy that, despite his decision to support the U.S. war efforts, President Roh did not disagree with his critics’ normative case against the war. He admitted that his decision to join the U.S.-led coalition was "not easy," not only because of strong anti-war sentiment among the South Korean public – many of those critics had supported him in the last President elections in December 2002 – but also because he, as an individual citizen, fully sympathized with that feeling. He emphasized, however, as the head of state, he could not risk security of the country, either.

With the demonstration of his willingness to buttress alliance partnership with the United States, President Roh appeared to succeed, at least temporarily, in lessening initial suspicions about his seemingly anti-American stance by conservative opinions in both Seoul and Washington. Also, thanks to the quick ending of the war in Iraq, the main mission in Iraq was transformed into something similar to that of peacekeeping operations, which was more or less acceptable to the Korean public. Most importantly, by the end of the war on Iraq, the Bush administration began to emphasize repeatedly that it sought a diplomatic solution of the North Korean problem, confirming President Roh’s previous statement that Washington would not unilaterally decide to adopt military measures against North Korea. As a result, the South Korean public’s feeling of uneasiness about the Bush administration’s unilateralist tendency and the initial tension in R.O.K.-U.S. alliance that had been highlighted during the Roh administration’s first month in office subsided to some
After the war phase of U.S.-led military operations in Iraq was over, no more serious discussions on the war and its impacts continue in Korea. Quite probably, this is due to South Korea’s preoccupation with its own problem. Many Koreans saw the U.S.-led war on Iraq essentially as a ‘fire across the river’ and interpreted its meanings only in its relations with, or impacts on, the situation in the Korean peninsula. This is not entirely unreasonable, however, given the gravity of the current danger that the North Korean nuclear program poses for South Korea’s security and for the international peace. Conversely, it may be argued that until the North Korean nuclear problem is resolved and a genuine peace-process begin in the peninsula, little energy would be left for South Korea to focus on broader issues of international political affairs that touch their interests only tangentially and indirectly.

It also requires our attention that beneath the surface of the alliance partnership stitched by the Roh administration’s gesture of support for the U.S., there still remain fundamental value gaps between Seoul and Washington. As explained above, the South Korean government decided to support the U.S.-led war primarily out of practical necessity of national security and explained its decision to the public in that exact term. It did not fully accept the U.S. administration’s rationales for the war. Thus, for example, the question of democracy promotion was almost entirely sidelined in the South Korean discussions about the war. This reflected a broad agreement among the population that the U.S. commitment to such an aim might be only a rhetorical pretext for the war that lacked legitimacy.

Although it is often argued that the United States and South Korea share common democratic values, their differing security needs have often caused troubles. To make these values a truly solid foundation of the alliance, therefore, for the time being, sustained mutual efforts are required to promote better understanding of each other’s needs. Most importantly, if Seoul and Washington begin to diverge greatly once again regarding the question of ways to deal with the North Korean regime, mutual mistrust rather than alliance confidence might began to develop. At the time of this writing, President Roh is in an official visit to Washington and is scheduled to meet with President Bush soon. Would they be able to produce an agreement regarding the question of how to deal with the North Korea problem? This is a moot question which may well significantly affect South Korean attitudes towards the United States and its current international position in the months (or years) to come.