

The Korean Legacy of President George H.W. Bush

Posted on 05 December 2018. Tags: [diplomacy](#), [US - ROK Relations](#)



By Kathleen Stephens

Like many others, I have been inspired in recent days by the many remembrances of President George H.W. Bush, and his eventful and admirable presidency. Coverage of his foreign policy legacy unsurprisingly focuses on the dramatic late-Cold War scene in Europe, which culminated in the break-up of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany. Meanwhile, his policies on the Korean Peninsula have received little notice. But President Bush's role in strengthening the alliance with a democratizing South Korea and engagement with North Korea in support of inter-Korean reconciliation and denuclearization should be reviewed and remembered. They remind us of the abiding strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the need to build on past experience and past efforts in confronting the challenges that are still with us.

I was working on post-Cold War issues in Europe during the George H.W. Bush administration, including a difficult tour in imploding Yugoslavia. But having departed Korea in 1989 after six years of diplomatic service there, I carried with me vivid memories of the movement for democracy that culminated in the democratic election through direct popular vote of Roh Tae Woo in 1987, and the successful-beyond-all-expectations hosting of the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics. So I followed President Roh's efforts to build on those successes, including his "Nordpolitik" policy of trying to broaden South Korea's relations with the former "Soviet bloc" and China.

I've learned most about President Bush's Korea policy through conversations spanning many years with two distinguished public servants and remarkable men: Donald Gregg, U.S. ambassador to the Republic of Korea from 1989 and 1993; and the late Hyun Hong Joo, ROK ambassador to the United States from 1990 to 1993. Fortunately, I don't have rely just on my memory; KEI's book "Ambassadors' Memoir," published in both Korean and English, discusses in vivid detail those dramatic years.

President Bush's interest in Asia was deep. He had headed the U.S. Liaison Office in China during the critical period before full normalization of U.S.-China relations. As Vice President to Ronald Reagan, his national security advisor was Donald Gregg, one of the U.S. government's top Asia experts. When he transitioned to the oval office, President Bush

demonstrated his continued attention to the U.S.-Korea alliance by selecting Donald Gregg to serve as ambassador in Seoul.

Welcoming South Korea's transition to democracy, in 1991 he invited President Roh to make a state visit to the United States, the highest form of official invitation that can be extended to a foreign leader, making President Roh the first South Korean leader to be so honored since Syngman Rhee in 1953.

President Bush also extended his support to South Korea's efforts to build relations with Moscow, Beijing, and the countries of Eastern Europe. As retold by Ambassador Hyun, Seoul's ultimate objective was to join the United Nations and create avenues to improve relations with Pyongyang. President Bush supported this approach. In addition to facilitating a meeting between President Roh and Gorbachev in San Francisco that helped pave the way to the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two countries in early 1991, President Bush supported the two Koreas' membership in the United Nations, as articulated in his speech of the UN General Assembly on October 1, 1990:

We believe that universal UN membership for all states is central to the future of this organization... the United States fully supports UN membership for the Republic of Korea. We do so without prejudice to the ultimate objective of reunification of the Korean peninsula and without opposition to simultaneous membership for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

This speech was notable because it not only represented an important step toward joint Korean admission to the United Nations, but also the first time an American President had referred to North Korea by its official name in a public speech. This helped set the stage for U.S. engagement with North Korea, which had intensified its pursuit of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War aftermath.

Ambassador Gregg highlights in his memoir how he felt strongly that the United States would be in a "far better position to tell the North Koreans to stop their program of weapons development if [the United States] had no weapons on the scene." Building on this insight, the Bush administration broke from U.S. policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of nuclear weapons in a particular location, and announced on October 20, 1991 that the United States was withdrawing its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea. Moreover, the White House unambiguously announced that there would henceforth be no nuclear weapons in South Korea. The White House also expressed its hope for reciprocal gestures from North Korea, including allowing international inspection of its nuclear plants.

In an additional step to build the atmosphere for dialogue and negotiation with Pyongyang, the U.S. announced the cancellation of the coming year's "Team Spirit" joint military exercises in late 1991, long a source of loud complaint from the DPRK.

These steps helped pioneer discussions between Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Arnold Kanter and Kim Young Sun, secretary for international relations of the Korean Workers' Party, in January 1992 (although unfruitful). Inter-Korean dialogue also found its footing, resulting in two important agreements between the ROK and the DPRK: the "Basic Agreement" on December 13, 1991, which pledged both countries to work towards "reconciliation, non-aggression, exchanges, and cooperation" and the "Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," signed on January 20, 1992.

I won't try to tell the longer story here on why denuclearization, peace, and reconciliation failed to take root during these years. What matters is that efforts continue, as they must. As we remember President George H.W. Bush, I hope and trust that engagements will continue to be informed by the spirit and principles that informed that period: The foundation

of the strong values-based alliance between Seoul and Washington, a commitment to ridding the Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons, and to a process of peace and reconciliation.

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