



Armitage on Asia

Richard Armitage is president of Armitage International, a consulting company based in Virginia. From 2001 through 2005, Armitage served as Deputy Secretary of State. The following interview is excerpted, with permission, from the March 2006 issue of The Oriental Economist (TOE).

TOE: You came to office in 2001 looking to modernize the U.S.-Japan relationship. The October 2000 "Armitage Report" put forward a clear agenda. But 9-11 and the subsequent Iraq war complicated the plan. On balance, how much progress has been made?

Armitage: Actually, Joe Nye from Harvard and the Clinton administration was the co-chair, so it was the 'Armitage-Nye' report. It was bipartisan. Having said that: I think we've exceeded the goals we put forward in that report. Think about it. Japan has troops on the ground in Iraq, engaged in vital reconstruction work. Japanese politicians, and the public at large, are now able to openly discuss the possibility of removing the Constitution's Article 9 prohibitions on military operations abroad.

We've clearly come a long way. But it certainly wasn't my report, or Joe Nye's report, that led to this. On the U.S. side, lots of people agreed with what we wrote in that report, especially President Bush himself. And we found a very energetic prime minister on the Japanese side, Prime Minister Koizumi, together with very competent bureaucrats. So, many things came together to make this work. Bottom line is that the U.S.-Japan defense relationship is functioning very well.

How much of the improvement depends on personalities, and how much is dependent on permanent institutional upgrades?

The U.S. and Japan share national interests, and that is institutional for the foreseeable future. But personalities are very important in foreign policy. President Bush would say that Prime Minister Koizumi is one of his best friends, if not his best, on the international scene. This is well-known within the Japanese and the American bureaucracy. Thus, within the U.S. internal policy debates, over trade or other issues, Japan tends to get the benefit of the doubt. So, on a day-to-day basis, personalities play a very important role. But, they never take the place of national interests.

For many years, you argued that Japanese legal restrictions prevented effective military co-planning with the U.S., and many American officers agreed with you. There was a lot of tension at the operational level. Has that improved?

It clearly has improved. There are Japanese officers in Florida at the Centcom (Middle East) headquarters of the U.S. military. The word is out among all levels of the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon that Japan is a good ally. The

Japanese government has performed in what we call a "standup" way in response to the 9-11 crisis. The SDF (Japan Self-Defense) forces have been great, providing fuel, working well in Iraq, helping in Afghanistan, performing other roles that our troops really appreciate.

How do you evaluate the "history" controversy raging in the region?

It is very troublesome. But it's become bigger than it should be. The 'history' issue is, it seems to me, a symptom of a divisive nationalism that exists throughout Northeast Asia. China, Japan, and the two Koreas are all caught up in this. But behind this is a process we've never seen before in the region: two major powers roughly equal occupying the same space at the same time. So for many, it is uncomfortable.

In the face of arguments from China, it has become very difficult for a Japanese prime minister to not visit Yasukuni Shrine. But, if China were to pull back from much of its rhetoric, I would hope that Japanese politicians and the public would correspondingly respond.

Having said that, I really think Tokyo should resolve the textbook issue. I know that not many of the controversial books are purchased. But even those few distorted books affect the minds of young Japanese, and that is not healthy. If the textbook issue were clearly dealt with, it would dramatically show that Japan has moved on, accepted its past without in any way justifying the past, and is now concentrating on building new relations with its neighbors.

Let's talk about North Korea. Were you angry in 2002 when Prime Minister Koizumi suddenly announced that he would visit North Korea?

Absolutely no. In fact, he was kind enough to inform me of his plan, and we really appreciated that. We knew before many in Japan knew. Ambassador Howard Baker and I promptly informed Secretary of State Powell. The prime minister assured me that none of our interests would be harmed. Secretary Powell quickly informed President Bush, and then the secretary called me and said that the Bush administration was confident that Prime Minister Koizumi would protect our joint interests.

Would you clarify a controversial episode regarding North Korea policy? Early on, you testified to Congress that the Bush administration would eventually hold bilateral talks with North Korea. President Bush was said to be very angry with you. Is that true?

Some people in the administration were very angry. But members of Congress were very happy. All of our allies in Asia were delighted. And, what I said eventually became our policy. But it is true that after I initially made my comments, I

knew that some people in some quarters of the administration were very unhappy.

So, what is the relationship between the Six-Party Talks and the bilateral talks with North Korea?

I was very clear in that testimony that, in the context of the Six-Party Talks, of course we would have bilateral talks with the North Koreans. And that is exactly what has happened. We've had bilateral talks with the North.

It took a while. Some people in the administration are frightened that diplomacy is a signal of weakness. I disagreed. I was convinced that if we knew who we are, and we know what we are and what we are about, we can make diplomacy work for us. In the end, diplomacy is the art of letting the other guy have our way.

Will the Six-Party Talks work?

They are a good exercise. We have five of the six parties of a common mind, that North Korea should not have nuclear weapons. That's a good starting point. It provides a good reason for us to get together a talk. I think the process is very worthwhile. Having said that, it is not going very far, very fast. The same splits that existed in the Bush administration when I was in office still exist.

I give my highest compliments to Chris Hill, the State Department's new Asia chief. He is doing a tremendous job. But he has the same problems that we faced when Jim Kelly and I were there.

What problems did you face?

There is a fundamental disagreement over how to approach the North Korea problem. There is a fear in some quarters, particularly the Pentagon and at times in the vice president's office, that if we were to engage in discussions with the North Koreans, we might wind up with the bad end of the deal. They believe that we should be able to pronounce our view, and everyone else, including the North Koreans, should simply accept it. This is not a reasonable approach.

Those of us at the State Department concluded: From the North Korean point of view, the nuclear issue is the only reason we Americans talk with them. Therefore, the North Koreans would be very reluctant to let go of the nuclear program. We knew it was going to be a very difficult process. But you have to start somewhere. You start by finding out what their needs and desires are, and seeing if there is a way of meeting those needs and desires without giving away something this is sacred to us.

Ultimately, will we have to live with a nuclear North Korea?

That is a very real possibility. North and South Korea are getting closer and closer. No question about that. And China is enormously investing in North Korea, and North Korea has become somewhat stronger economically. It is not tottering on the edge of collapse as it was a few years ago.

South Korea has become more and more involved in the North's economy. Many people in the South have concluded that Pyongyang would never attack South Korea. So, slowly on a de facto basis, we are seeing unification taking place between the two Koreas. There is nothing official about this

process. It is facts on the ground, and the facts are visual to the naked eye.

Will China put pressure on North Korea to end the nuclear program?

China wants the nuclear weapons issue resolved. I don't doubt that. The Chinese worry that the nuclear weapons issue in the North could ultimately bring a foreign power into the North, which China very much does not want. So, China will be consistent in its desire to eliminate the North Korean nuclear programs.

Having said that, the Chinese do not want to break ties with the North Korean government. China needs a good relationship with both Koreas, but especially with the North, for many reasons, including their shared border.

How big a rift is there between the U.S. and South Korea?

We are in better shape now than we were a few years ago, when there was a terrible accident involving two school children run over by one of our military vehicles. That was a very, very bad time. And that followed a difficult visit to Washington by Kim Dae-jung, who was then the president of South Korea.

The South Korean political structure is undergoing a lot of change. It is developing, and not always easy to work with. Also, keep in mind that, from a historical perspective, the U.S. and South Korea have often had some tough moments. It's true that we fought the Korean War together. But some South Koreans remain bitter that, from their view, the war started because we gave indications that we wouldn't defend the South in the event of an invasion from the North.

So, most Americans think that the South Koreans should appreciate the support we gave to protect them from the communist invasion. But, many South Koreans don't see things in quite that way. Their view is much more complex than simply: "Oh, thank you for saving us." I think Americans have to be more aware of that.

Kim Dae-jung's March 2001 visit was very contentious. What went wrong?

Secretary of State Colin Powell had briefed the press ahead of the visit. *The Washington Post* ran a very good story, but the headline was misleading. It said, essentially: "Bush to follow Clinton policy." That made the then-new Bush administration very angry, forcing Secretary Powell to face the press and say that the administration was not following the former administration's policy. The controversy grew from there.

But did you have any fundamental disagreement with Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine" policy of opening to the North?

I was somewhat critical, in this sense: I felt that to have a policy of trying to enhance ties with the North was not a bad idea. But to base his entire presidency on that idea, to leave his fate in the hands of a North Korean regime that might or might not respond, was not the best way to proceed. He could have had the Sunshine policy without making it the centerpiece of his entire presidency.

You seem optimistic about the two Koreas coming together.

I wouldn't call it optimistic. At some point, a unified Korean Peninsula could cause some complications for the U.S.-Japan relationship. Korea has a robust population, relatively young. A unified Korea would have a huge military. And Korea would be a country that, very fairly, has often been described as a "shrimp among whales." I wouldn't blame Koreans if they were to decide that they do not want to be a "shrimp among whales." The desire to end that role that history seemed to impose on them would be understandable.

Concerning China: Does the United States fundamentally have a policy of containing China, working with Japan and India, and maybe Vietnam?

No. I really mean that. Look at the facts. Look at the enormous level of American foreign direct investment in China, for example. And look at the fact that we have trained hundreds of thousands of Chinese engineers and other technocrats in American universities. We continue to do so. Our actions hardly seem to be those of a country trying to contain China. We do not have a policy to contain China.

All of us involved in the Pacific Japan, South Korea, India, the United States all of us, have a big stake in seeing China arise on the world stage in a peaceful, benign fashion. None of us know how China will emerge. China might choose a neo-mercantilist approach a zero-sum approach. That attitude would amount to: 'If it is good for Japan and India, it is bad for China'.

The other approach would be: 'A rising tide will lift all boats'. In that case, China would view the economic vitality and strength of India and Japan, and the U.S., as good for China. As long as all of us involved in Asia have the latter view, there is a good chance to integrate China into the system.

Where does India fit into this big picture?

India is a multi-racial, multi-religious democracy, which is something that Americans are accustomed to. It made no sense that the U.S. and India were not close. So, I am very happy that the two countries are coming closer.

India is a very young country, and will soon have the largest and fastest growing middle class in the whole world. India is going to be a tremendous power in the world. India's society is open, free, and transparent, so it poses no threat to the international community. India is precisely the kind of nation that we the U.S. and Japan should be working very hard to develop close ties to.

The U.S. and Japan should be working closely together to deepen ties with India. The point is not to contain China. The point is to embrace India as a nation with which we share common values of democracy and openness. India is looking East, and political leaders in Washington and Tokyo should embrace that.

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