

A Smart Alliance in the Age of Complexity; ROK-U.S. Alliance in the 21st Century

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The alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States today faces a complex security environment, in which the threats it confronts are more diverse, more complicated, and require a more delicately balanced approach than ever before. In particular, expectations—even demands—are growing for South Korea to contribute to world peace and stability as a global partner for the United States in pursuing their mutual security interests (Campbell et al. 2009). Do the ROK and the United States share enough strategic interests to sustain such an alliance in the twenty-first century? And should South Korea assume an increasing role in maintaining regional and global peace? During the Cold War, the two countries' alliance was a military one, focused on the clear and direct threat from North Korea. Now, in the twenty-first century, the two security partners must transform their hard alliance into a “smart” alliance to meet more diverse security challenges together. A different set of hard and soft approaches are required, and a smart alliance will call for a more flexible combination of roles played by each partner, depending on the circumstances.

“Strategic Alliance” to Go Global

The election of President Lee Myung-bak in 2007 began a major shift away from what Lee dubbed “ten

years of leftist governments” under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. In the area of foreign policy, Lee promised to give priority to reviving the country's earlier close partnership with Washington while taking a tougher approach in dealing with North Korea's nuclear program. To accomplish these two goals, he proposed forging a “Strategic Alliance” with the United States that would upgrade the nature and objectives of the alliance. A strategic alliance would first seek to repair the damage that had done under the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration. During the subsequent presidential campaign, Lee criticized Roh and his government for poor, if not antagonistic, management of bilateral relations with the United States. After Lee was elected, he visited Washington, D.C., two months after his inauguration, and called for “friendship based on a helping hand when needed most.”¹ Lee subsequently became the first Korean president to be invited to Camp David for a friendly summit meeting. President Lee and President George W. Bush agreed to reopen the Korean market to American beef exports,

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which had been banned since 2003 after the Mad Cow Disease outbreak. President Bush thanked Lee for lifting the beef sanctions and promised to upgrade South Korea's authorization to buy high-tech U.S. weapon systems up to the same level as NATO members.² By the end of 2008, South Korea had been included in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program (VWP), and other significant breakthroughs in the two nations' bilateral relations had taken place as well.

What was remarkable, however, was President Lee's second effort, which involved expanding the ROK-U.S. alliance beyond the Korean Peninsula. He argued that the alliance should be upgraded to meet the challenges of the new twenty-first-century security environment. The original alliance had been based on opposing the North Korean military threat, but the basis of this new strategic alliance should be common values, mutual trust, and building peace. According to Lee, the two countries shared a liberal democracy, a market economy, and common values following South Korea's success in economic development and transition to democracy. These factors would make it possible for the two countries to forge a lasting alliance even if North Korea's military threat should disappear in the future. South Korea and the United States should, in Lee's view, build an alliance of trust with expanding common interests in military, political economic, societal, and cultural matters. And drawing on shared values and trust, the ROK-U.S. military alliance should contribute to regional peace in Northeast Asia beyond the Korean Peninsula. Lee also envisioned that the alliance should contribute to international peace making in the fight against terrorism, poverty, disease, and environmental degradation.³ Lee's argument meant a shift in the nature and mission of the alliance from a peninsular to a regional and global focus. As such Lee's vision represented a bold departure from South Korea's security strategy during the Cold War. Its new mission was to promote international peace and stability on the basis of universal values such as democracy and a free market. South Korea's active participation in

building international peace promised to be a more ambitious undertaking than the Northeast Asian balancer role that had been suggested by the Roh administration.⁴ Lee's rhetoric paid off when he met with the newly selected U.S. president, Barack Obama, during the G20 London summit in April 2009, where Obama praised South Korea as one of America's "closest friends and greatest allies."⁵

Lee, an Important but Vulnerable Ally

One of the pressing issues for South Korea in its new role has been to determine the degree of support it will offer in the U.S. global war on terrorism. Especially as the situation in Afghanistan has increasingly deteriorated with the resurgence of the Taliban, the Obama administration has called for help from its major allies. The main agenda item for the meeting marking the sixtieth anniversary of NATO's foundation held in Germany last April was Afghanistan, and NATO allies pledged to send 5,000 new troops in addition to the 37,000 troops already on combat missions there. South Korea was no exception. After the first meeting between President Obama and President Lee during the G20 London summit in April, Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy to Afghanistan, paid a visit to Seoul. Even though Washington was careful not to make a specific request for military support in Afghanistan, Holbrooke made it clear that the U.S. government would welcome a contribution from South Korea to the war effort in Afghanistan.

Notwithstanding President Lee's pledge to develop South Korea's growing role in the alliance with the United States, it is not clear whether South Korea is ready to take on an active military role in places like Afghanistan. In fact, the Roh administration had sent 3,600 troops to Iraq and a number of medical units to Afghanistan. But by the end of 2008, South Korea had completed the withdrawal of its reconstruction mission in Iraq, and it had brought home its medical units



from Afghanistan the year before. When the Bush administration asked for another troop deployment to Afghanistan, only 32 percent of the Korean public supported the idea, while 49 percent said they were against it.⁶ When asked about the management of the alliance with the new Obama administration and possible repeat of U.S. requests for military assistance in Afghanistan, a South Korean government official denied any plan to send troops there.⁷ With less than 40 percent support from the public for the idea, the Lee government has limited political capital to make a difficult decision that would go against the popular will, and Washington will need to be careful not to press Seoul on the issue. Lee's conservative background and the country's currently weak domestic economy make him vulnerable to leftist attacks on what they see as his pro-U.S. policy at the expense of Korea's national interests. Lee already paid a big political price when he agreed to the resumption of U.S. beef imports a year ago. Radical activists organized mass rallies in downtown Seoul and criticized the government for sacrificing Korean public health by importing "unsafe" American beef. Angry mass protests continued for weeks and virtually paralyzed the government.⁸ A deployment of South Korean troops to Afghanistan could provide a useful excuse for anti-American radicals to organize more mass demonstrations, which would seriously damage Lee's position as the country's leader and his efforts to rebuild a long-term ROK-U.S. strategic partnership.

South Korea's democracy is still relatively young and greatly polarized. The alliance with the United States became something of a victim of its own success in promoting South Korean democracy as it faced increasing questions and criticisms within South Korea during the 1990s. In the late 1980s, radical student activists in South Korea had accused the allied U.S. forces of being a defender of the then authoritarian government, which suppressed democratization. When in the 1990s these student group members took up leadership roles in a more democratized Korean

government and society, the members of the so-called 386 generation criticized the ROK-U.S. alliance as an obstacle to reconciliation with the North (Hahm 2005). This diverging approach taken by the Roh government, if not anti-American, certainly caused problems in managing the alliance. It was no secret that Washington had difficulties in coordinating policy with Seoul toward Pyongyang's nuclear brinkmanship during the second North Korean nuclear crisis. One interlocutor found it surprising when he heard officials from the Roh administration say that they would prefer a nuclear North Korea over regime collapse (Cha 2004, 116).⁹ As such, many South Koreans viewed President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech as even more threatening than North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship. Watching growing criticism and widespread anti-American sentiment in South Korea, Americans too became more skeptical about the future of the alliance. For some, the alliance had served its original mission and was destined to dissolve over time (Bandow 2005). Today the Lee government must maintain a delicate balance between its desire to promote the alliance and its need to avoid giving anti-Lee activists any opportunity to use the U.S. relationship as an excuse for furthering an anti-American movement. It is in Washington's interest not to put its important partner in a difficult position.

A Smart Alliance to Meet Global Challenges

Deploying troops to Afghanistan is not the only way that South Korea's global partnership with the United States can be demonstrated. The two allies share enough common security threats and strategic interests to extend their efforts beyond the Korean Peninsula in a variety of useful ways. The mechanism, strategy, and role of the two nations' work should be a flexible combination of both hard and soft approaches, depending on the context.



Examples of a Soft Alliance

First, regarding the U.S. global war against terrorism, South Korea can contribute various kinds of aid and support. Other than a hard military alliance that would involve combat missions in Afghanistan, South Korea can increase its help with reconstruction and stabilization missions, part of a soft alliance. Since 2002, South Korea has provided \$66 million worth of aid for reconstruction in Afghanistan. After the withdrawal of army medical units in 2007, there were still twenty-five civilian medical service personnel working as Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT) in Afghanistan. The Korean government announced that they will expand the PRT mission to eighty-five personnel, whose activities will include training police units. South Korea will also increase Afghan aid by up to another \$74 million.¹⁰ While not many Koreans feel an urgent threat from terrorism, South Korea is not immune from terrorist activity. On several occasions, South Korea has become a target of terrorist organizations. The first victim was a South Korean contractor in Iraq, who was kidnapped and later killed by insurgents in 2004. A South Korean soldier in Afghanistan was killed by a suicide bombing at Bagram Air Base in February 2007. In July 2007 a group of twenty-three South Korean Christian volunteers were kidnapped by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Two male members were killed during negotiations for their release. In March 2009, four South Korean tourists were killed by a suicide bombing in the ancient city of Shibam, Yemen. Later an al-Qaeda group claimed responsibility for the attack.¹¹ Some people believe that South Korea's support for the U.S. war effort in Iraq and Afghanistan has made South Korea a terrorist target. Yet according to an investigative report, Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda operatives targeted South Korea well before Iraq and Afghanistan. The interrogation of Khalid Sheik Mohammed, an al-Qaeda mastermind arrested in Pakistan in 2003, revealed a surprising story indicating that he and al-Qaeda had planned similar ter-

rorist attacks in East Asia at the time of 9/11. American military bases in South Korea as well as in Japan were the main targets. Even as early as 1995, al-Qaeda planned to hijack four airplanes from Kimpo Airport and then blow them up simultaneously over the Pacific Ocean.¹² According to the ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS), South Korean authorities arrested and expelled 74 terror suspects connected to al-Qaeda in 19 cases between 2003 and 2008.¹³ As South Korea remains open to globalization, it will increasingly realize and be vulnerable to the dangers of terrorism around the world. The public should become more supportive of South Korea's active participation in the war against terror.

Second, South Korea will be a valuable partner in fighting global poverty, forging an effective soft alliance with the United States. South Korea can provide aid, personnel, and technical support to those who are in desperate need, and, in addition, provide a useful example for developing areas with its unique success story both economically and politically. As an emerging donor, Korea has been constantly increasing the amount of its ODA (official development assistance) in order to contribute to the progress of third world countries. As a result, the amount of assistance, which was US\$110 million in 1991, reached US\$460 million in 2006, showing a steep increase. However, the ratio of ODA to gross national income (ODA/GNI) in 2006, at 0.05 percent, remained low, given that Korea's economy ranks thirteenth in the world. The government aims to substantially expand its ODA to achieve an ODA/GNI ratio of 0.128 percent by 2011, and of 0.25 percent by 2015.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in May 2009, the government launched a new program called "World Friends Korea," with three hundred young and professional volunteers. Modeled after the U.S. Peace Corps, the Korean volunteer groups will go abroad to serve various needy people and communities.¹⁵ South Korea can be an important partner for President Obama's development agenda as a good example as well as a source of free market values and liberal democra-



cy.

Third, South Korea can also be an important partner in solving the problem of global warming. Both governments have emphasized a green economy as a new strategy for sustainable development. They can forge a soft alliance in carbon emission control, promotion of green technology, and carbon tax in international organizations and conferences for addressing climate change and global warming.

Fourth, peacekeeping operations are another opportunity for a soft alliance. South Korea has been active in UN peacekeeping operations in East Timor, Georgia, Lebanon, Liberia, and Sudan. In the future, South Korea may expand its contribution to UN operations, especially if requested by Korean UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Fifth, at the private level, there are numerous South Korean NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) that provide countries with medical service, food aid, technical support, and other forms of assistance. As another source of aid, South Korea has the second-largest number of Christian missionaries after the United States, with more than 19,000 Korean missionaries in 168 countries as of 2009. These missionaries are mostly involved in helping needy people with modern education, basic medical service, developmental aid, and technical support.

Examples of a Hard Alliance

Certain global threats posed by non-state actors can require the two countries to work together in a hard alliance. The dispatch of naval vessels to the Somali coast by both nations is a good example. Both the United States and South Korea have felt increasing pressure to protect their national vessels and citizens from Somali pirates. In March 2009 South Korea sent a 4,500-ton Navy destroyer to the waters infested with pirates. Since then, the ROK Navy has not only provided protection to Korean vessels, but has also rescued a Danish, a Panamanian, and even a North Ko-

rean ship in separate missions.¹⁶ For this the ROK Navy is working closely with the U.S. Fifth Fleet in sharing intelligence. In the future, the two navies may combine their separate operations into a joint one that would utilize and enhance their interoperability and effectiveness. They may also expand the naval operation into an international coalition, especially with China and Japan, who also have already sent naval warships to the region.

Energy security is another area in which the two countries can work together. South Korea's keen interest in securing safe passage of imported oil from the Middle East may provide an incentive to launch combined naval operations in major international Sea Lines of Communication. South Korea should also join the nonproliferation efforts by the United States. South Korea poses a useful capability to enforce nonproliferation mechanisms such as the PSI (Proliferation Security Initiative). Indeed, the North Korean nuclear issue has complicated South Korea's full membership in the PSI. Yet as an important member of the international community, South Korea should actively participate in the efforts to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

A Smart Alliance in East Asia

At the regional level, the alliance between South Korea and the United States should adopt a soft approach. China, which represents both an opportunity and a threat, has become the most important economic partner for the two allies. With its US\$2 trillion reserve, China's economic policy will have a critical impact on the world's recovery from the current global economic crisis. During the London G20 summit, President Obama pledged close consultation with China through the "U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue."¹⁷ Since 2003 China has replaced the United States as the number one trading partner for South Korea. During his visit to China, Lee called for the upgrading of ROK-China bilateral relations to a



“strategic cooperative partnership.” For its part, China seemed to be willing to cooperate with the United States and South Korea beyond just economic issues. Among other ideas, China accepted the U.S. suggestion that it host the Six-Party Talks to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue. Despite some setbacks and a lack of substantive progress, the Beijing Six-Party Talks have provided a useful venue to discuss and stabilize the nuclear standoff between Pyongyang and Washington as well as Seoul.

Uncertainty with China

China’s future intentions and development remain uncertain, however, which present a possible threat of instability to the East Asian security regime. China does not have the intention to confront South Korea or the United States today. But how China’s plans may develop after its successful rise is unknown. China has claimed that it is not seeking hegemonic power or a new international order. Instead, it says, its rise will be peaceful and contribute to the prosperity of others (Zheng 2005). It is also true that China has a long way to go before it achieves this “rise,” whatever it will look like in terms of leadership and goals. Some argue that a security hierarchy under Chinese hegemony—if and when it is ever achieved—would be more peaceful, and that the rest of Asia, including Korea, would be willing to live within it (Kang 2003). Yet no nation is naïve enough to simply bet the future of its security on Chinese goodwill. South Korea has good reason to be cautious about the intentions of a potentially hegemonic China.

One important factor for South Korea is that China is the most important military ally of North Korea. Most Koreans suspect that China has a great interest in supporting the North Korean regime in order to keep Korea divided, to China’s benefit. Koreans also feel increasing pressure from China’s growing confidence and nationalism. One good example is the history textbook dispute over the ancient Korean dy-

nasty Koguryo, which China claims belonged to part of the ancient Chinese empire. Meanwhile, in spring 2008, thousands of Chinese students studying in South Korea occupied the streets of downtown Seoul to welcome and escort the Beijing Olympics torch relay. When Korean human rights activists showed up to peacefully protest against China’s Tibet policy, angry Chinese students clashed with the Korean police who tried to control the situation. There were numerous reports of rising anti-Korean sentiment among the Chinese public during the Beijing Olympics as well. Personal perceptions change, of course, and mistrust between China and South Korea can be overcome. However, China’s intentions and policies toward Asia and the world will become increasingly more assertive as its power grows. Whether this situation can be managed in a peaceful way remains uncertain at the moment.

The other source of uncertainty is the prospect of China’s future economic and political development. Most experts and the public in general expect the Chinese economy to maintain high growth for the coming decades. But the good fortune of such success does not mean that progress will be smooth or automatic. China’s rapid economic growth has produced problems such as a growing gap between rich and poor and between rural and urban areas, and these gaps intensify social unrest and political tension. To mitigate public anger and frustration, the government now bases its political legitimacy on the promise of a high rate of economic prosperity. Yet the more advances China makes in its economic development, the more difficulty China will face in sustaining the needed high level of growth in order to keep a lid on social tensions. Should the Chinese economy falter, China could experience serious domestic turmoil. Such turmoil, should it occur, will increase uncertainty and instability in the region. Furthermore, as the Chinese people have enjoyed more economic freedom, they have begun to demand more political freedom. So far, the Chinese government appears to be determined to maintain a



one-party system dominated by the Chinese Communist Party. It is not clear how long the government can control the growing demands for loosened political controls. Whether China can make a gradual transition to a more pluralistic system remains a big question. Meanwhile, some suggest that China's transition to a more democratic society could itself present an even greater danger to its neighbors and the United States. In a more open and competitive political system, Chinese foreign policy could be more driven by hyper-nationalist rhetoric. Especially in the early stages of democracy, there might be a case or a situation in which the Chinese leadership will be inclined to resort to assertive external policies as a way of rallying the Chinese people and turning their energies and frustration outward. At least for some time, a democratic government in Beijing could well be more nationalistic and assertive than the present regime (Friedberg 2005). Such a regime "could make the rising Chinese power a much more assertive, impatient, belligerent and even aggressive force, at least during the unstable period of fast ascendance to the ranks of a world-class power" (Wang 1999, 35). For the realist school, China's rise poses a fundamental challenge to the United States and the world regardless of China's intentions. One way or another, China's future development requires a cautious approach from both Seoul and Washington.

Engaging China while Preparing for Uncertainty

Since the Chinese threat has not yet materialized, hard balancing by the ROK-U.S. alliance has not been required. Instead soft balancing, engaging China while preparing for uncertainty should be the policy of the two countries. The two allies should engage China in a way that can build a constructive bilateral relationship between them and this huge, fast-growing economy. In fact, that is exactly what is happening as President Obama has promised to build "positive, cooperative, and comprehensive" bilateral relations with China.

And South Korea and the United States both acknowledge that China's role is critical in solving the problem posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Without Chinese support, whether in Six-Party Talks or via coercive diplomacy, neither South Korea nor the United States can expect any success in dealing with North Korea. At the same time, however, the two allies must understand that China has different interests in the North Korean nuclear issue and the Korean Peninsula. China is more willing to live with a nuclear North Korea than to watch the North Korean regime collapse. China seems to prefer a divided Korea over unification with absorption of the North by the South. This suggests at times that South Korea and the United States must make their desire to solve the nuclear problem and the unification issue more clearly understood by China through a resolute and unified voice. At the same time, it is always critical for them to send a clear message that the ROK-U.S. alliance is not a threat to China.

Building a More Effective Multilateral Mechanism

The ROK-U.S. alliance needs to work on building a multilateral security mechanism as a complementary tool. Developing a more peaceful and stable security architecture in East Asia is in both countries' interest. Given the United States' long, hard, and continuing fight against the global terror network, the superpower is losing its ability to play the role of a single security provider through formal and informal bilateral security mechanisms in the region. Both its available manpower and its commitment are flagging. At the same time, it does not want to see any other country in the region, that is, China, fill the power vacuum. Meanwhile, South Korea is under increasing financial pressure to build a more self-reliant defense capability. The 2008 deadline for the Yongsan base relocation to Pyeongtaek has already passed due to disagreements between Seoul and Washington over the sharing of the financial burden. Even though the two allies agreed on



the transfer of Wartime Operational Control (WOC), it is still not clear how and whether South Korea will be able to meet the new 2012 deadline. There is currently a mass movement to get ten million signatures on a petition demanding that both governments reconsider the transfer of WOC, and so far more than eight million South Koreans have signed the petition.¹⁸ South Korea's ambitious Defense Reform 2020, established under the Roh administration, is also under serious revision, as the Lee government has found it simply impossible to fund a \$621 billion project under current economic circumstances.

A multilateral security mechanism may provide a useful solution for both countries. For the United States, such an agreement could reduce the heavy burden of acting as a single offshore balancer and still avoid giving China the opportunity to replace the U.S. role. For South Korea, a multilateral defense mechanism will create a more stable security environment in which it will feel less of a burden to build up a stronger military. Furthermore, a multilateral approach to security could provide a useful venue for assuring China of the nonthreatening nature of the ROK-U.S. alliance while also testing Chinese intentions. President Obama has already expressed his interest in building "a more effective framework in Asia that goes beyond bilateral agreements, occasional summits, and ad hoc arrangements" (Obama 2007). The latest ASEAN meeting fiasco in Thailand also suggests that it is time for Northeast Asian countries to take the lead in building an East Asian multilateral mechanism rather than taking a free ride on the ASEAN initiative. The United States and South Korea should take the initiative in bringing together China and Japan and others who are interested in such an endeavor.

A Smart Alliance in Dealing with North Korea

North Korean Threat Remains as Hard as Ever

North Korea's growing WMD capabilities, along with its continuing conventional threat, requires hard balancing by the ROK-U.S. alliance. The nature of the threat remains the same as during the Cold War for South Korea. Since then, North Korea's nuclear and missile development has made the North more threatening for the United States in the age of nuclear terrorism. Despite of, or because of, North Korea's weakening economy and regime instability, it poses a serious military threat to both South Korea and the United States. Notwithstanding a decade of engagement and reconciliation efforts by South Korea, the military situation on the ground remains the same even two decades after the end of the Cold War. Today there are two million heavily armed troops facing each other along the 155-mile-long, 2.5-mile-wide Demilitarized Zone.¹⁹ Since the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak administration in 2008, inter-Korean relations have deteriorated significantly. In a break from the Sunshine Policy pursued over the past decade by his two liberal predecessors, Lee has signaled that henceforth expanded inter-Korean cooperation will depend on progress in denuclearization under the Six-Party Talks. Not only has this linkage displeased Pyongyang in principle, it has also resulted in a stalemate in the nuclear negotiations, with negative repercussions for the general relations of the two states. In May 2008, a South Korean tourist on a tour of Mt. Kumkang in North Korea was shot dead by North Korean military guards, who claimed she had crossed over into a restricted area. North Korea refused Seoul's demand for a full investigation of the incident, and tours of Mt. Kumkang were suspended indefinitely. Since early October 2008, North Korea has been threatening to halt operations of, and subsequently close, the Kaesong Industrial Complex in reaction to propaganda leaflets that South Korean civic groups have been sending across the border.²⁰ North Korean authorities also disconnected the North-South direct phone line established by the Red Cross for humanitarian purposes. In April 2009, the North Korean Supreme Military



Command warned that South Korea's plan to join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) after North Korea's long-range missile launch would be seen as a declaration of war. The statement reminded its southern neighbor that Seoul is within North Korean artillery range from the DMZ.²¹

North Korea's nuclear and missile development makes its military threat even more dangerous and global. No matter what inter-Korean reconciliation efforts are made, true peace on the Korean peninsula will be an impossible dream for South Korea. North Korea's nuclear weapons, along with its other weapons of mass destruction capabilities, will continue to pose an existential threat to the South. Meanwhile, Pyongyang's nuclear development also makes North Korea a more direct threat to the United States. Throughout the Cold War, North Korea was a threat to American allies like South Korea and Japan, but not to the U.S. mainland. Even during the first nuclear crisis in the early 1990s, North Korea's unknown nuclear capability was seen as only a symbolic deterrent that could be easily dealt with by America's absolute nuclear superiority. Yet the 9/11 terrorist attacks changed this whole dynamic. Traditional nuclear deterrence does not work anymore in the world of nuclear terrorism, and the proliferation of WMD poses an existential threat to the United States. North Korea is the only rogue state that has both nuclear and missile capabilities, in addition to its history as an active proliferator to other rogue states such as Iran, Sudan, and Syria. North Korea's continuing efforts to develop a long-range Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), no matter how primitive at this stage, make the North a prime target of U.S. missile defense and nonproliferation efforts such as PSI. The United States as well as South Korea will face an increasingly clear and present threat from North Korea.

U.S. Military Commitment in Korea

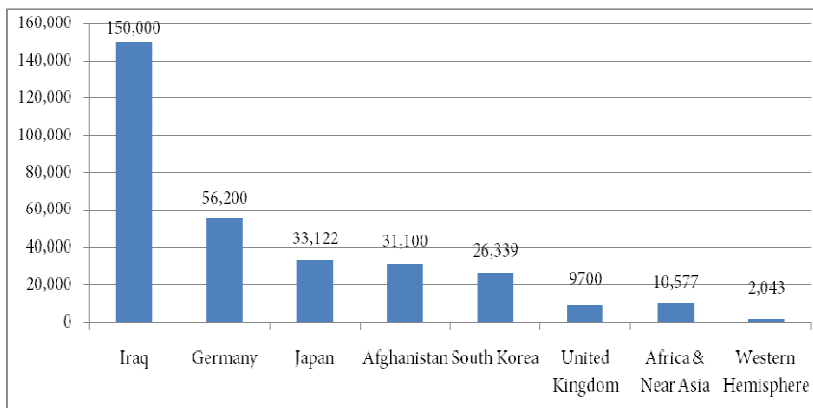
An ever more threatening and growing North Korean military capability requires vigilant military

deterrence by the ROK-U.S. alliance. The two countries have to keep a military capability sufficient to check any military aggression from the North, and therefore the United States maintains a large military force on the Korean peninsula in an era of fierce military campaigns in other places like Afghanistan. As of March 2008, there were 28,500 U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula. That makes the United States Forces Korea (USFK) the third-largest U.S. military force deployed overseas, not including Iraq and Afghanistan.²² Figure 1 shows the size and number of U.S. military personnel in major allies and regions. Only Germany and Japan have more U.S. military personnel than Korea. In fact, during the summit in April 2008, President Bush promised President Lee that the United States would keep its force level in Korea at 28,500. Meanwhile, during her first visit to Asia as secretary of state in March 2009, Hillary Clinton signed an agreement with the Japanese foreign minister to redeploy 8,000 U.S. Marines from Okinawa to Guam, which will reduce U.S. forces in Japan to 25,000. This will mean that South Korea will have the largest number of U.S. troops among other countries in the region.

As shown in Figure 1, during the same period the United States has deployed only about 31,000 forces in Afghanistan, where it has been engaged in a major war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorist groups. U.S. forces in South Korea represent a much bigger military commitment by the U.S. compared with other regions in the world. For example, the United States has deployed only about 10,000 troops in Africa, the Near Asia, and South Asia combined. Meanwhile there are only about 2,000 U.S. troops in the whole of the Western Hemisphere outside of the United States. Given the worsening military situation in Afghanistan, which desperately calls for a major military "surge," U.S. forces in Korea represent a serious military commitment by Washington's standards.²³



Figure 1 U.S. Forces in the world (March 2008)

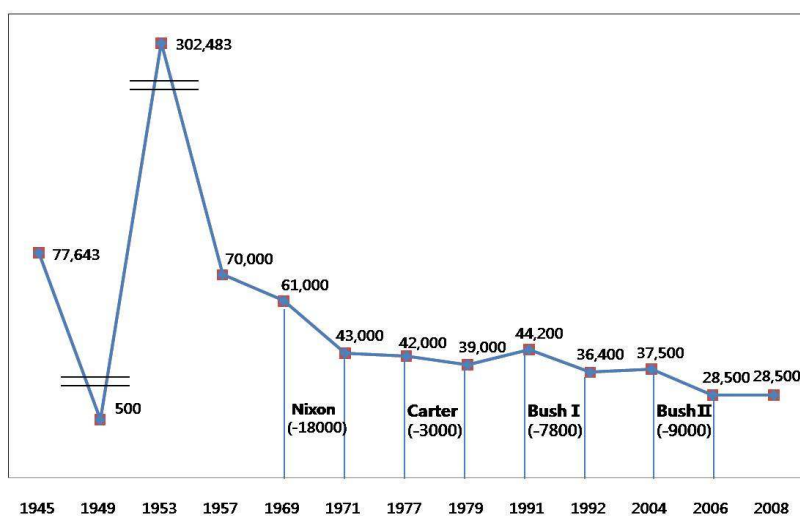


Source: U.S. Department of Defense.

Koreanization of Korean Defense

Despite its repeated commitment to South Korea's defense, the United States has tried to relieve its military burden, if not its commitment, from the Korean Peninsula. South Korea faced a serious security setback when Presidents Nixon and Carter announced substantial troop withdrawals from the country. Although the planned reduction did not go through as originally intended, a steady reduction of the size and numbers of U.S. troops in South Korea has nevertheless taken place.

Figure 2 USFK Troops Level (1945 – 2008)



Source: ROK Ministry of National Defense.

Figure 2 shows U.S. troop level reduction from the Korean Peninsula since the Korean War.²⁴ The George H.W. Bush administration, on the basis of its new Asia security initiative,²⁵ withdrew 7,800 U.S. troops in just one year between 1991 and 1992. Compared to this, the more controversial troop reduction plan put forward by the Carter administration only achieved the withdrawal of

3,000 troops over a two-year period between 1977 and 1979. On November 11, 2003, President George W. Bush announced the "Global Posture Review" (GPR), which called for repositioning U.S. forces in Europe, Asia, and other regions around the world. On August 16, 2004, Bush announced a major reduction of 60,000 to 70,000 U.S. military personnel in Germany and the ROK over a ten-year period. It was argued that the former global deployment of U.S. troops, established during the Cold War, made little sense in a world of threats posed by the global terror networks. The Global Posture Review means two things in South Korea: reducing the U.S. military footprint there while making sure that the remaining forces are kept more flexible and agile for future contingencies beyond the Korean Peninsula. Under the plan, the United States will relocate the Yongsan Garrison and the USFK Second

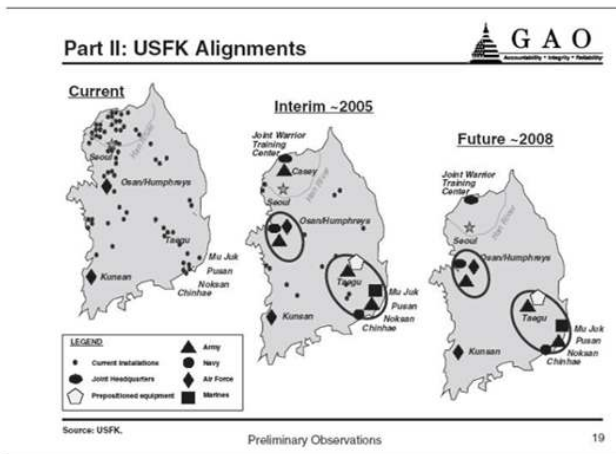
Division to Pyeongtaek, a move that was scheduled for 2008. Relocation plans will center around two major hubs in Pyeongtaek and Pusan/Daegu. The purpose of the Pyeongtaek relocation was to increase both the allies in the South's survivability in case of a North Korean attack and the capability to deploy forces elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, the United States will reduce its present level of 37,000 troops to 28,500 troops



by the end of 2008. The plan will also transfer ten military missions, such as managing the Joint Security Area and anti-artillery operations, to the ROK army. Figure 3 shows the U.S. base relocation plan under GPR into two major hubs in South Korea.

Figure 3 USFK Alignments

Source: Government Accountability Office (GAO).



The U.S. military restructuring and troop withdrawal elevate South Korea's responsibility for keeping up the military deterrence against the North Korean threat. It means that South Korea needs to continue with its military reforms and modernization, which will require considerable investment. Upon receiving the U.S. request for USFK force restructuring, the Roh administration went one step further and suggested the transfer of WOC to South Korea. This significant change was not in the original U.S. plan to revise the existing command structure, in which WOC belonged to the Combined Forces Command (CFC) headed by a U.S. general. There have been other continued efforts by South Korea to build up a more self-reliant defense capability. Over the past decades, South Korea has vigorously pursued the goal of building a military strong enough to deter or fend off military aggression by North Korea. Yet the South Korean military has remained very much dependent upon the U.S. war plan and military protection for a decade since the end of the Cold War. In the case of a war on the Korean Pe-

insula, the South Korean military would be under the command of the Commander of the USFK, who exercises the WOC authority as the Commander of the Combined Forces Command as well as the United Nations Command. In the early 1990s, the Kim Youngsam government had also sought to regain WOC. Peacetime Operational Control was returned to South Korea in 1994. Because of the developing nuclear crisis with North Korea, however, discussion of WOC transfer was postponed indefinitely.

It was the Roh government that expressed a strong interest in taking up more military responsibility by bringing WOC back to South Korea. In March 2005 in a graduation speech at the Korean Air Force Academy, Roh declared that the country's military should build a "self-defense capability" along with close cooperation with the United States. He told graduates: "We have sufficient power to defend ourselves. We have nurtured mighty national armed forces that absolutely no one can challenge." Within a decade, he added, "we should be able to develop our military into one with full command of operations".²⁶ And recovery of WOC was seen as a symbol of building a self-reliant defense capability. In an interview Roh argued that the old agreement giving the Americans wartime control of South Korean troops was anachronistic, something that South Koreans today should feel ashamed of. He continued, "To say that we South Koreans are not capable of defending ourselves from North Korea is to talk nonsense. It's shameful. I hope we kick the habit of feeling insecure unless we have layers of guarantee that the Americans will automatically intervene in the case of war."²⁷ Despite growing concern and opposition from the conservatives, in 2006 at the 38th Security Consultation Meeting between U.S. and South Korean defense ministers, the two governments agreed to a transfer of WOC,²⁸ with April 2012 set as the completion date.

The transfer of WOC will mark the major turning point in the ROK-U.S. alliance, representing a major step toward the Koreanization of Korean defense. For



the transfer to occur, South Korea will have to bear a considerable financial obligation to successfully assume a main role as opposed to a subsidiary role in dealing with the North Korean threat. If the transition is successful, it will significantly enhance U.S. security interests not only in Korea but also at a global level since, as we have seen, North Korea is becoming a serious military predicament for the United States in the global war against terror. Having South Korea assume the major responsibility for the military threat of North Korea would take a large burden off the shoulders of U.S. forces. In turn, the transfer will free a considerable amount of U.S. military assets from the Korean Peninsula for use in the global war on terror and elsewhere.

Working Closely to Solve the North Korean Issue Peacefully

The two allies must simultaneously adopt a smart approach to deal with North Korea's nuclear program. First, they should seek a diplomatic solution through negotiations. They should actively promote the Six-Party Talks while engaging North Korea in a bilateral way. They should work closely with the other parties to the talks: China, Japan, and Russia. Second, the diplomatic efforts should be based on a smart combination of the "carrot and stick" method. More important, the steps of the "carrot and stick" method should be closely coordinated through consultation between the United States and South Korea. The two allies should send one clear message and choice to North Korea with the synchronization of the "carrots and the sticks" from both allies. North Korea should not be allowed to drive a wedge between the two allies or be allowed to have a second thought. Third, South Korea and the United States should give careful consideration what the future of North Korea and the allies' relationship to it might be, including the possibility of unification. Despite numerous reports of Kim Jong-Il's deteriorating health, the North Korean regime

seems to be stable and in control of its population. Given Kim's age, he could eventually disappear from North Korean politics in a decade if not in just a few years. His eventual departure from the political scene will create serious uncertainty and instability in North Korea. The United States and the ROK must discuss whether unification is desirable if the situation allows. If not, they must set up criteria for alternative outcomes that would satisfy U.S.-ROK strategic interests. The two allies also need to discuss how to coordinate their approach in dealing with the strategic interests of other important parties, such as China and Japan. Fourth, for this, whether the peninsula becomes unified or not, the allies must discuss what the basic principles and mechanisms for establishing a peace regime there will be.

How to Make a Smart Alliance Work

Throughout the Cold War, the ROK-U.S. alliance shared an unquestionable goal: defending South Korea from North Korean aggression. At the beginning of the Cold War, South Korea was not a part of U.S. strategic interests nor was it in the U.S. defense perimeter in East Asia, as defined by then-Secretary of State Dean Acheson in 1950. The alliance was created not by any merit in South Korea's inherent strategic value, but by default in response to North Korean aggression. The United States defined its strategic interests in defending South Korea under the broader banner of containing Communist expansion and defending freedom (Kissinger 1994).²⁹ Yet despite such sky-high aims, the alliance turned out to be quite successful. By the end of the Cold War, it evolved into a modern and strong military alliance with a closely integrated command structure. The alliance also contributed to South Korea's transformation from a war-torn and impoverished country in the 1950s to a thriving democracy with an advanced economy before the end of the century. The alliance was not, however, without its



problems. In the 1990s, generational change in South Korea brought about a polarized South-South division in which the alliance became a major target of growing anti-American sentiment among radical activists. Diverging approaches to North Korea and the global war on terror caused tension in the alliance management between Seoul and Washington. Alliance restructuring brought another challenge regarding its specific conditions and implementation as well as a more long-term impact on the alliance mission and organization. With a change in government on both sides as the first decade of the new century ends, the two allies are looking forward to building a new chapter in facing more complex security challenges. The focus of the alliance on Korea is now expanding toward new regional and global missions beyond the Korean Peninsula. It will require a smart approach to define these new missions and face their challenges.

To achieve an effective and smart alliance to deal with a complex world, the two governments must address the following issues.

Accept the Differences

The United States and South Korea must not expect too much from each other. Korea's security interests are still largely dominated by traditional power politics between nation-states, simply because in its geographic location, balance of power politics rules the day. Meanwhile, the focus of the United States has to be on the global war on terrorism, which involves the Middle East and South Asia. North Korea should be the first priority for South Korea, but less so for the United States. For the same reason, South Korea's position toward China cannot be identical with that of the United States, especially when it comes to the Taiwan issue. Forging a new smart alliance should start by acknowledging these differences. Nevertheless, the two countries will almost certainly find enough reasons and interests to build a better and smarter alliance.

Focus on Common Interests, not Differences

The two countries share enough strategic interests to work together. Both of them face a clear threat from North Korea and its nuclear program. Building a peaceful and stable Asia and forging a constructive relationship with China are also goals in their common interest. Nor is South Korea free from the global threat posed to the United States and many other countries by nonstate actors. Simply put, the world is dangerous enough and full of enough uncertainties that the two countries still need each other. And South Korea is more capable than ever before to be a true alliance partner for the United States.

Completing the Alliance Restructuring and the WOC Transfer

The two governments are in the midst of implementing an important restructuring of the alliance. The relocation of the Yongsan Garrison from central Seoul is important politically as well as militarily. It will remove an important source of political friction between the South Korean public and the U.S. military. The sixty-year-old American base is a Cold War anachronism in the heart of Seoul, an ever prosperous and trendy capital of ten million people. Transfer of WOC is another necessary change in the ROK-U.S. alliance. Notwithstanding South Korean anxiety about the scheduled transfer in 2012, the decision has been made and it is in the right direction for the long-term future of the alliance. Even though some disagreement and delay as well as technical complications may occur in the process of the transfer's implementation, the two governments have to make their best effort to complete the restructuring successfully.

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North Korea will continue to challenge the alliance's cohesion. Ending the ROK-U.S. alliance is one of the



most important objectives of North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship. In past nuclear negotiations, the subtle but important differences between the Roh and Bush administration regarding how to deal with North Korea seriously damaged the effectiveness of negotiation strategies for both governments. And what is more, the disagreements seriously damaged the cohesion and reputation of the alliance. This outcome must be prevented in the future. The two allies share clear and common interests in removing North Korea's nuclear capability, and the North must not be allowed to pit the two against each other.

Take Initiative in NEAPSM

The Six-Party Talks provide a useful venue to discuss a multilateral security framework led by Northeast Asia. Under the provisions of the September 19, 2005, Agreement and February 13, 2007, Action Plan, participants created a working group to discuss a Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism (NEAPSM). Chaired by Russia, the working group has not made much progress yet. But given the common interests shared by the ROK and the United States, they can take a new initiative and discuss more concrete plans to build a more effective multilateral framework into Northeast Asia that can expand to a broader regional mechanism in the future.

Conclusion

Forged by blood during the Korean War and created officially by the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1953, the ROK-U.S. alliance has been the main pillar of South Korea's national security policy. The alliance provides protection from North Korean military aggression. At the same time, it plays an increasing role as a balancer against the growing rivalry in Northeast Asia between China and Japan. For the United States, the alliance

initially represented American commitment to resisting Communist expansion and defending the free world. The Cold War is over and a new global war on terrorism has started. Yet for the Korean Peninsula the Cold War continues while a rising China creates a new uncertainty. Although many questions remain unanswered, it is clear that the two allies need each other to face both old and new challenges. The alliance needs change to deal with those challenges more effectively. A smart alliance combining a hard and soft approach will provide answers for one of South Korea's "closest friends and greatest allies" of the twenty-first century. ■

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Notes

- ¹ Lee Myung-bak, "Speech at the Korea Society Dinner in New York," April 15, 2008, <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/northamerica/index.jsp> (accessed October 22, 2008).
- ² Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, "Press Briefing by President George Bush," April 20, 2008, <http://www.mofat.go.kr/state/areadiplomacy/northamerica/index.jsp> (accessed October 22, 2008).
- ³ See note 1.
- ⁴ The Roh Moo-hyun government envisioned that South Korea would play an important role as a balancer to promote peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. National Security Council, *Pyongwha Bunyoung-kwa Kukga Anbo* (Seoul: National Security Council, 2004).
- ⁵ The White House, "Remarks by President Obama before Meeting with President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea," April 2, 2004, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-President-Obama-before-Meeting-with-President-Lee-Myung-bak-of-the-Republic-of-Korea



rks-by-President-Obama-before-Meeting-with-President-Lee-Myung-Bak-of-the-Republic-of-Korea/ (accessed October 22, 2008). REMOVE COLOR

- ⁶ *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, August 8, 2008.
- ⁷ *Chosun Ilbo*, January 29, 2009.
- ⁸ After months of mass protest in downtown Seoul criticizing his policy, Lee replaced his top advisors and issued a public apology (*The Guardian*, June 25, 2008).
- ⁹ Victor Cha recalls that during his meeting with special envoys of the Roh government in 2003, when pressed to pronounce themselves on whether a nuclear North Korea was worse than collapse of the regime, those representatives clearly gave priority to avoiding collapse even at the expense of the proliferation issue.
- ¹⁰ *Joongang Ilbo*, May 7, 2009.
- ¹¹ *Yonhap News*, April 10, 2009.
- ¹² The plan was called Operation Bojinka, which intended to hijack and blow up a total of twelve planes from Japan, Manila, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan (*Chosun Ilbo*, April 20, 2009; *Magazine Wolgan Chosun*, May 2009).
- ¹³ *Yonhap News*, September 21, 2008.
- ¹⁴ ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “ODA Policy Direction,” <http://www.odakorea.go.kr/> (accessed May 10, 2009).
- ¹⁵ ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, “‘World Friends Korea’: Korea Launches Integrated Overseas Volunteer Program,” Press Release 09-231, May 7, 2009.
- ¹⁶ *Munhwa Ilbo*, May 9, 2009.
- ¹⁷ The White House, “Statement on Bilateral Meeting with President Hu of China,” April 1, 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-On-Bilateral-Meeting-With-President-Hu-Of-China/ (accessed May 10, 2009). REMOVE COLOR
- ¹⁸ *Chosun Ilbo*, April 24, 2009.

- ¹⁹ The North Korean military has 1.2 million soldiers while South Korea has 600,000 troops (ROK Ministry of National Defense, 2009).
- ²⁰ *Chosun Ilbo*, November 10, 2008.
- ²¹ *Chosun Ilbo*, April 18, 2009.
- ²² U.S. Department of Defense, “Active Duty Military Personnel Strengths by Regional Area and by Country,” March 31, 2008, <http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/history/hst0803.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2009).
- ²³ The Obama administration will send 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, bringing its troop level there up to 55,000. ADD DATE OR DATE OF ANNOUNCEMENT
- ²⁴ See ROK Ministry of National Defense (2003) and “USFK Reduction Negotiation Results,” ROK Ministry of National Defense News Release, October 6, 2004.
- ²⁵ See U.S. Department of Defense (1990).
- ²⁶ *Ohmynews*, March 8, 2005.
- ²⁶ *International Herald Tribune*, August 10, 2006, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/08/10/news/korea.a.php> (accessed December 27, 2006).
- ²⁶ *Yonhap News*, October 21, 2006.
- ²⁶ U.S. officials thought that defending South Korea was crucial in protecting Japan from the communist threat (Kissinger 1994, 473-492).

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