

New Vision of Korea-US Alliance (and Warning Signs Ahead)

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In examining the ROK-US alliance and its future prospects, we should remember constantly the core purposes of any alliance. They are two in number. The first is to cooperate militarily to deter and defeat militarily a common adversary. The second is to promote stability in a given geographical region, most often by the alliance helping to create a more stable balance of power in the region. Granted, alliances also can have other important purposes. A negative purpose of some alliances in history has been to strengthen alliance partners in their aggressive designs toward neighbors. Some alliances in the last century also have aimed at promoting ideological influences over large areas of the world. Nevertheless, in fashioning our views toward the future the ROK-US alliance, these two core purposes should never be far from our minds.

Much of the reevaluations of the ROK-US alliance in the past three years have been due to the perception that the rationale for one of these core purposes has eroded. Deterring and militarily defeating North Korea is no longer viewed as the sole objective or only challenge for the alliance. That challenge, in fact, is less than it formerly was. North Korea is viewed as less of a military threat than it was ten or 20 years ago. Even the U.S. military command in South Korea (USFK) has admitted, albeit grudgingly, that the capabilities of North Korea’s conventional army and air force have weakened. The Pentagon and USFK no longer hold their frequent war games of the 1980s and early 1990s, focusing on whether an invading North Korea army could be preventing from taking Seoul. In fact, North Korea no longer appears to have the capability to launch a massive invasion of South Korea, which for years was viewed by Washington and Seoul as the core North Korean threat. Its weaponry is 40-50 years old and obsolete. The North Korea military suffers from acute oil and food shortages. Large scale training exercises are infrequent. The physical quality of military personal has eroded steadily as Pyongyang’s 16 year old draftees increasingly are the products of malnutrition from birth. North Korea’s apparent possession of a handful of atomic bombs (of uncertain effectiveness) has not arrested this decline of its core military threat to South Korea.

Other factors also have contributed to the erosion of the core purpose of deterring and militarily defeating North Korea. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the change in China’s foreign policy objectives ended the Cold War context of the North Korean threat. North Korea lost the Soviet Union as a main supplier of arms and has not found a replacement. North Korea’s economic deterioration—some would say collapse—has

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paralleled and contributed to the deterioration of conventional military capabilities. North Korea now is dependent on foreign aid for survival.

North-South relations also have changed in fundamental ways. North Korea needs South Korean aid. South Korean companies are investing in North Korea. This is a fundamental difference from the past. It likely will not change despite the current shunning of the Lee Myung-bak Administration in Seoul.

There are even prospects for improved U.S.-North Korean relations in the form of the nuclear agreement presently under negotiation. If the Hill-Kim Kye-gwan agreement is formalized as a finalization of the February 2007 six party nuclear statement, this may open up broader U.S.-North Korean contacts. Tensions in the relationship may continue, but they will focus on issues like North Korean missile and nuclear proliferation, North Korean international counterfeiting, and North Korea's support for terrorist groups in the Middle East.

In conclusion, dealing with the North Korean conventional military threat is no longer the compelling rationale for the alliance. If the trends continue, this rationale will decline further, and more discussion of the future of the alliance will emerge in South Korea and the United States.

Responses to the Erosion of the Alliance's Core Purpose

It seems to me that in the past five years, there have been three important responses to the erosion of the alliance's core purpose of deterring and potentially defeating North Korea's conventional military threat. One has been the reduction of U.S. troop strength in South Korea from 38,000 down to 28,500 and the enunciation of plans to relocate the U.S. garrison at Yongsan in Seoul and the Second Infantry Division on the demilitarized zone to new bases at Pyongtaek, well south of Seoul. The ROK-US OPCON agreement to end the combined military command structure in favor of separate commands by 2012 is part of this response.

A second response has been the discussion of ways to broaden the purposes and objectives of the alliance and developing new programs of ROK-US cooperation. Several reports from ROK and US study groups and think tanks focus on this issue; part of their examination is of ways to broaden the scope of the alliance beyond the Korean peninsula and bring it bear on to East Asian regional issues and global security issues. President Lee Myung-bak had this in mind when he proclaimed a key goal of his new administration as revitalizing the alliance.

The third response is less about governments and lofty ideas, but it is no less important. It is the emergence of anti-American sentiment in South Korea. It was manifested clearly in the 2002 protests against the U.S. military in the wake of the killing of the two Korean schoolgirls. It seems to me that it is being manifested again in 2008 in the anti-U.S. beef protests. True, the immediate target of the thousands of protesters is the Lee Myung-bak government; but that is because he is viewed as succumbing to U.S.

pressure for an agreement on beef that runs contrary to the interests of the South Korean public. If the beef dispute involved Australian beef or Argentine beef, I doubt that we would see tens of thousands of demonstrators in the streets of Seoul. When the Chinese Embassy in Seoul reportedly recruited Chinese students in South Korea to physically assault South Korean who protested China's human rights policies during the parade of the Olympic torch through Seoul, the South Korean public reaction was mute.

It seems to me that it is important to recognize that there are two distinct strains of anti-Americanism in South Korea. The anti-Americanism of the hard core South Korean left seeks a dismantling of South Korea's alliance with the United States, a major diminution of ROK-US economic relations, revisionism of the history of the alliance taught in schools, and pro-North Korean policies. The hard core left is a small minority but well organized: university student and faculty groups, teachers' unions, some labor unions, and certain non-government groups (NGOs).

The other brand of anti-Americanism is harder to define. I describe it as mainstream anti-Americanism with a free ride proviso. Mainstream anti-Americanism affects a much broader segment of South Koreans, including the middle class. Unlike the hard core left, these South Koreans do not view the United States ideologically as a hostile force. Their attitude seems to be more a resentment at the extent of U.S. influence on the ROK Government and on South Korean society and that the Government often acts to satisfy U.S. wishes even if the actions are contrary to the perceived interests of the South Korean people. The symbols or instruments of U.S. influence also draw resentment. This is especially true of USFK, which many South Koreans have viewed as arrogant. Resentment of U.S. influence also includes blame of the United States for the unfortunate events of Korea's history, particularly the U.S. role in the division of Korea and U.S. support for South Korean military dictators. Even South Korea's often emotional hostility toward Japan affect mainstream anti-Americanism, as South Koreans often show resentment from their belief that the United States favors Japan over South Korea.

While the agenda of the anti-Americanism of the hard core left and the South Korean mainstream differ in fundamental ways, they have demonstrated an ability to coalesce when an issue involving the United States arises that draws a negative reaction from mainstream South Koreans. The organized left has been able to mobilize this sentiment into direct action against U.S. policies and against a South Korean Government viewed as too compliant and/or too protective of U.S. interests. The current massive anti-U.S. beef protests is the new example of this, and it should stir our memories of the similar phenomena in 2002.²

The depth of mainstream anti-Americanism is limited not only by the absence of an ideological base for it but also by the "free ride proviso." Resentful South Koreans still want a U.S. security guarantee as an insurance policy in case North Korea re-emerges as an acute threat. However, they view a suitable security guarantee as coming

² For a useful analysis of the role of anti-American sentiment in the anti-U.S. beef protests, see Choe sang-hun, An anger in Korea over more than beef, New York Times, June 12, 2008, p. A6.

unilaterally from the United States and ROK-US military cooperation applied only to the Korean peninsula. Mainstream South Koreans increasingly do not want the alliance to restrain South Korea from pursuing independent policies toward North Korea, although they may disagree on the nature of those policies. Mainstream anti-American South Koreans are reluctant or opposed to South Korea adopting new security policies outside the Korean peninsula to support U.S. global security interests. The majority of South Koreans opposed the deployment of ROK troops to Iraq. President Roh Moo-hyun justified his decision to send troops to Iraq not on the basis of broadening the scope of the alliance but with the proposition that he would be better able to influence (ie., restrain) the Bush Administration's policy toward North Korea. Since September 2006, South Koreans have heard appeals from U.S. commanders in Afghanistan and more recently from the Pentagon for allies to send more ground combat troops to Afghanistan to combat the resurgent Taliban. Germany, for example, has announced that it will send 1,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, adding to the 3,500 troops already in country. France has announced the dispatch of an additional 700 soldiers on top of the 1,500 French troops in Afghanistan. In contrast, South Korea withdrew its 200 non-combat military personnel from Afghanistan in 2007. There has been no debate in South Korea over the appeals of the United States to its allies for combat troops or over Secretary of Defense Gates reported request in February 2007 that South Korea send military trainers to Afghanistan.

Implications for the Future of the Alliance

The ROK-US alliance likely is entering into a period of greater instability. The cancellation of President Bush's trip to Seoul this month is a sober reminder of this. There seems to be a consensus in Washington and Seoul on the need to restructure the alliance. Opportunities exist in the areas of the U.S. military presence, coordination of strategies toward North Korea, and diplomatic and security cooperation outside the Korean peninsula. The ROK and US governments need to assess a number of specific issues. They also need to assess more carefully how the South Korean public will react to proposals to change the objectives and especially the roles of the United States and South Korea in new alliance policies and structures. They need to do this in order to set priorities for proposals and plans before they are agreed on and presented to the South Korean people.

In this connection, it seems to me that the two allied governments face at least three dangers ahead. The first is that the United States will overreach, demand too dominant a role in the operations of the alliance, including new operations, and not reduce its role sufficiently when South Korea is prepared to take on greater responsibilities.

A second danger is that the United States will ask South Korea to assume too many new responsibilities and burdens in a relatively short period of time and thus be perceived as overbearing and imperious. This is about careful prioritizing.

Finally, South Koreans may prove unwilling to take on any new material burdens and responsibilities in the alliance outside the Korean peninsula. This danger now appears greater as a result of the weakening of the Lee Myung-bak Administration because of the anti-U.S. beef protests.

The U.S. Military Presence. The post-2003 changes in the U.S. military presence under Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld were instituted for several reasons, but one of those was to respond to the 2002 anti-U.S. protests in South Korea. That response was needed. The 2002 protests reflected growing South Korean resentment over the U.S. policy of maintain a rigid status quo in the U.S. military presence and the South Korean Government's support for the status quo.³ The post-2003 changes displayed flexibility and a U.S. willingness to make changes. It seems to me that this contributed to the decline in overt anti-Americanism despite ROK-US tensions in dealing with North Korea.

Now, there are new signs that the Pentagon, USFK, the ROK Government, and the ROK Ministry of National Defense are reverting to status quo policies regarding the U.S. troop presence. They have cut short the Rumsfeld troop withdrawal plan before reaching the plan goal of 25,000 set for September 2008. Contrary to the Rumsfeld Pentagon's apparent intention to lower the U.S. troop strength further after September 2008, they appear to be setting 28,500 as a new fixed number of troops for the indefinite future. This will include keeping a full combat brigade of the Second Infantry Division in South Korea despite the continued deterioration of North Korea's conventional forces and thus a weak military rationale for retaining ground combat forces. Even Secretary of Defense Gates admitted during his June 2008 visit to South Korea that "I don't think anybody considers the Republic of Korea today a combat zone."⁴

The Pentagon also has announced that U.S. military personnel can bring families to South Korea. This amounts to another acknowledgment of the declining North Korean military threat. The result of this policy change will be much higher costs of housing for U.S. troops in the future, especially in connection with the relocation of U.S. troops to Pyongtaek. The *Korea Times* likely will be proved correct in its recent warning that the rising financial costs of housing for relocated U.S. troops and their families "would prove to be a political minefield" in ROK-US negotiations.⁵ ROK-US negotiations over sharing these costs, already difficult, will face an added burden and likely greater controversy.

Another sign that the US and South Korean governments and military establishments are reverting to pre-2002 policies and attitudes is the prolonged delay in the planned relocation of the Second Division and the Yongsan garrison due to the lethargy of the ROK Government and perhaps even a reluctance to have the relocations

³ The U.S. policy of maintaining a status quo in the U.S. troop presence stemmed in part from the policy adopted by the Clinton Administration in 1995 of keep a fix number of 100,000 U.S. troops in the Western Pacific. This meant that the United States intended to keep about 37,000 troops in South Korea indefinitely.

⁴ Eric Schmitt, Gates approves of 3-year tours for U.S. troops in South Korea, *New York Times*, June 4, 2008, p. A.1.

⁵ US base relocation needs closer watch, *Korea Times* (internet), June 10, 2008.

take place. The reversion to a relatively high fixed number of U.S. troops and the long postponement of the relocation of the Second Division and the Yongsan garrison to Pyongyang from 2008 to 2013 should raise doubts as to the strength of ROK and US commitments to carry out the original planned relocations. Sources in South Korea's Defense Ministry already are talking of a postponement to 2016.⁶

Another sign of reversion to pre-2002 attitudes is the grumbling within the Lee Myung-bak Administration and the Grand National Party toward the OPCON agreement and the sentiment that the OPCON agreement should not be implemented and the status quo should remain. The Pentagon and USFK assert that implementation should proceed. Their commitment to the OPCON agreement likely will be tested within the next two years if official South Korean sentiment against it continues to build.

In this apparent reversion to pre-2002 policies and attitudes, the Pentagon and USFK again may be overreaching in seeking to keep a large fixed number of U.S. troops in South Korea that military conditions on the peninsula do not seem to justify. If North Korean conventional forces continue to weaken, South Korean questioning and resentment toward these status quo policies are likely to re-emerge. As the new policies push up the financial costs of maintaining U.S. troops (and now their families), the Pentagon likely will escalate its already heavy pressure on South Korea to pay much of these costs, thus stimulating new South Korean resentment.

Another buildup of South Korean public resentment toward U.S. troops is inevitable, and new negative incidents involving U.S. troops and South Korean civilians will have a growing potential to set off a new mass South Korean public campaign against the United States. Expect future 2002 and 2008-type episodes.

Coordination of Strategies Toward North Korea. In March, I presented a paper at a conference in Tokyo on the new South Korean government and the North Korean nuclear issue. In it, I assessed that the status of the nuclear negotiations and South Korean public expectations of the Lee Myung-bak Administration led to a conclusion that the Lee Administration should not link its policies toward North Korea tightly to U.S. strategy toward North Korea on the nuclear issue. With the pending US-North Korean nuclear deal providing for the disabling of North Korea's plutonium installations at Yongbyon and the Bush Administration approaching its final days, the nuclear talks may be at an end or at least postponed for a year. It seems to me that the United States should not press the ROK Government to link its North Korea policies to U.S. nuclear strategy. The Lee Administration will need space in the future to take independent initiatives toward North Korea. Such initiatives need not follow all of the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun policies. They should be aimed more to promote North Korean economic reforms and opening North Korea to greater North-South people to people contact.

On one issue, however, close ROK-US coordination is necessary. If the conclusion of the US-North Korean nuclear agreement leads to the opening of negotiation

⁶ Ibid.

of a Korean peace treaty—as promised by Seoul, Pyongyang, and Washington in late 2007—a common ROK-US agenda will be important to any chance of success. The United States and South Korea must agree on a common position on the U.S. troop presence in order to respond to North Korean proposals for major changes and reductions in the U.S. presence. It seems to me that such a position should be flexible, offering concession on US troops in return for substantive North Korean concessions, especially the dismantlement of its artillery on the DMZ and dismantlement of its missiles targeted on South Korea. If Washington and Seoul repeat their stance in the 1997-1999 four party peace treaty negotiations of refusing to discuss the issue of U.S. troops, peace treaty talks are certain to stalemate and fail as they did in 1999. The worst impact of such inflexibility will be on South Korean public attitudes. South Koreans will perceive ROK-US inflexibility as due to a U.S. goal of perpetuating the military status quo and thus U.S. military dominance. It seems to me that these South Korean attitudes emerged by the collapse of the four party talks in 1999, and they helped lay the ground for the anti-U.S. protests three years later.

Diplomatic and Security Cooperation Outside the Korean Peninsula

Here there are diplomatic opportunities to strengthen the alliance but also warning signs regarding security cooperation outside the Korean peninsula. One set of opportunities is that of potential U.S. initiatives to upgrade South Korea's international status and thus elevate the stature of the alliance. Promotion of the idea of a Northeast Asia security organization by both governments would be a symbol of alliance cooperation. South Korea's status in a Northeast Asia security organization would be an important development even if the accomplishments of such an organization are modest.

Another opportunity would be that of U.S. and hopefully Japanese sponsorship of ROK membership in the G-8 group. The G-8 group is meeting in Japan this month. President Lee is attending as an observer where he will meet with President Bush as a substitute for the cancellation of Bush's visit to Seoul. This would be a splendid opportunity for President Bush to generate an initiative by advocating South Korean membership in the G-8. He could turn the cancellation of his trip to Seoul into a plus for the alliance at a time when it needs one in the wake of the anti-U.S. beef protests. At a minimum, Lee's attendance as an observer ought to generate future consideration of ROK membership.

South Korea meets two criteria that the G-8 has had for membership. First, the original purpose of the G-7 was to bring together leading economic powers. South Korea's international economic role now is larger than several G-8 members. Second, South Korea is a democracy. The G-7 had a democratic criteria. Granted, Russia's addition to the G-8 is controversial because of Vladimir Putin's authoritarian policies. South Korea, however, fully meets the democratic criteria. Geographical diversity has not been a criteria for G-8 membership, but it is hard to argue against increasing East Asia's participation, which now is limited to Japan.

The United States also could pay more attention to South Korea's role in human rights diplomacy in the United Nations and other international organizations. U.S. human rights initiatives often are carried out in partnership with the European Union. There is a diplomatic opportunity to upgrade South Korea's status in this kind of diplomacy.

Military cooperation outside the Korean peninsula is a more difficult proposition. The objective would be to enhance South Korea's security role in specific situations, but Washington should judge carefully which situations would be best suited for an initiative to South Korea and which would risk a South Korean public backlash. It seems to me that the United States should avoid seeking South Korean military support for any future U.S. application of the doctrine of pre-emptive attack against an adversary. Iran obviously is the most likely target for a pre-emptive attack in the near future. The Pakistan borderlands is another discussed target. A South Korean military role no doubt would be helpful in such situations. However, the war in Iraq shows that opinion in allied countries, including South Korea, opposes a U.S. prerogative to attack another country on the presumption that it is a military threat. The Iraq war also has shown allied countries the high likelihood of unintended consequences of a pre-emptive attack, making the concept even more unacceptable. U.S. pressure on South Korea for military support of a pre-emptive attack on Iran or another country easily could turn South Korean opinion very negative toward the United States and even against the alliance.

Afghanistan is in a different category. Most U.S. critics of Iraq support the war in Afghanistan. Key European allies, which refused to send troops to Iraq, have sent troops to Afghanistan. As stated earlier, Germany and France now are increasing their troop commitment. This situation justifies the United States asking South Korea for a troop contribution. South Korea should not seek a "free ride" by avoiding a military commitment. It seems to me that Afghanistan is the key test of the willingness of the South Korean political leadership and mainstream South Koreans to accept active ROK-US military cooperation outside the Korean peninsula. I can think of nothing that would boost the alliance more than a South Korean decision to join the allied military coalition in Afghanistan. The timing of the Lee Administration giving consideration to a troop commitment to Afghanistan may not be good because of the blows President Lee has taken over the U.S. beef issue. But if the Lee Administration should recover its political strength in the coming months, the issue should be at the top of any list of new visions for the alliance.

Conclusions

Opportunities for restructuring and revitalizing the alliance can best be realized if the US and ROK governments heed the yellow caution lights discussed in this paper. We need to recognize that political obstacles and tensions inevitably will arise over some proposals to restructure the alliance. Some could provoke South Korean public outbursts against the United States. The US and ROK governments will need to demonstrate two attributes in dealing with these obstacles and tensions: patience and a careful prioritizing

of proposals for change. One immediate suggestion for this prioritizing is to stop suggesting that enhanced economic cooperation, ie, the Free Trade Agreement, is essential for the future health of the alliance. It is not essential. The ROK-US alliance is primarily about security. Advocates for the FTA who continually link it to the health of the alliance run the risk of creating a self-fulfilling prophesy if they continue this argument.

It seems to me that ROK and U.S. government officials need to consult with independent experts of the other country on policy proposals and take their views into account, rather than just relying on the assessments of counterparts in the other government. I believe that the Lee Myung-bak Administration failed to give sufficient weight to the independent experts who told his officials in early 2008 that the prospects for U.S. congressional approval of the FTA were poor. Instead, he may have given too much to the Bush Administration's trade officials who were expressing optimism over congressional approval and thus rushed into the plan to end restrictions on U.S. beef imports without careful preparation of the South Korean public.

South Koreans and Americans also need to remember the second core purpose of alliances discussed at the beginning of this paper: strengthening stability in a geographical region through creation of a stable balance of power. Even if the core purpose of dealing with the North Korean military threat is declining in importance, this second core purpose applies fully to Korea and Northeast Asia where three major powers are situated and a fourth if actively engaged.

We, too, need to remember the lessons of history originating in Northeast Asia. For Americans: Japan's road to Pearl Harbor began with its takeover of Korea in 1905 following its defeat of Russia. For Koreans: the other powers surrounding Korea have long histories of predatory designs on Korea in comparison with South Korea's history with the United States—with its bad and good features.