

Summary

A New Security Order in East Asia and the ROK-U.S. Alliance

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The EAI has been hosting the Korea-U.S. Alliance conference since 2008 to build a dialogue on the major issues facing the alliance in the 21st Century.

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The future role of the ROK-U.S. alliance has become more complicated due to the North Korean nuclear crisis, the political situation related to North Korea's leadership succession, and the uncertain future of military governance on the Korean Peninsula. In lacking a formidable regional security mechanism for multilateral cooperation, the power transition that comes with the rise of China also complicates the security situation in the region. It is not yet certain how the ROK-U.S. alliance will contribute to the peaceful management of power balance or any possible power transition in this region. Following a series of rivalries between the United States and China in 2010, this year will be a very important time in predicting future bilateral and regional security relations, especially in light of the leadership changes that will occur across East Asian countries in 2012.

The EAI held the 5th ROK-U.S. alliance under the title of "A New Security Order in East Asia and the ROK-U.S. Alliance." This conference brought together participants from China, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States to discuss on the major security challenges shaping the region and the impact it will have on the alliance. The following is a summary of the main points and policy recommendations from the discussions in each of the sessions.

Session 1: Change in East Asian Security Architecture

1) The ROK-U.S. Alliance and Defense Budget Cuts

The dominant role of the United States in East Asia is unlikely to be challenged.

As it seeks to recover from the economic crisis, the United States must reduce its substantial budget deficit by undergoing major cuts. This has had many speculating that the U.S. role in Asia will be challenged by other powers. However, despite its economic difficulties, the United States still retains overwhelming economic, military, and political dominance in the world. Furthermore, the challenge it faces from other powers, the "rise of the rest," are also mainly countries either allied or friendly to the United States.

Defense budget cuts will not weaken the ROK-U.S. alliance.

As the U.S. defense budget undergoes drastic cuts, some experts have expressed concern that this will have a negative impact on the ROK-U.S. alliance and the ability of the United States to maintain a strong presence in the East Asia region. It is important to understand that despite the major cuts announced in the defense budget, the United States will still have a comparatively large budget. Budget cuts also will not impede upon the U.S. contingency plans for the Korean Peninsula. In this respect, logistics are the key to such efforts and United States will continue

to strengthen this area through new initiatives. For example, one way in which logistics could be enhanced is to have navy ship crews rotated on site, rather than bringing back the ships to the United States.

South Korea must continue to build its global role.

The ROK-U.S. alliance is currently in the strongest shape and represents a pillar for international security. In recent years, both Seoul and Washington have emphasized the importance of common values and the need to take on non-traditional security roles. As such, South Korea must continue to build its global role, for example expanding its peacekeeping operations to South Sudan and Somalia.

2) The Challenge of an “Assertive” China

Public perception in China is that it has not become a major power.

Since 2008, there has been the perception that China has become more “assertive” as the United States has suffered relative decline with the financial crisis. Public perceptions in China though have yet to view their country as surpassing the power of the United States or even as a major global power. This would support the current policy of Chinese leaders to “hide our capacities, bide our time” and the current path of “peaceful development.” Added to this, the global economic crisis is also a great challenge for China as it has an impact on the varied domestic difficulties such as wealth inequality.

The interest of different actors in China’s foreign policy causes difficulties.

China’s foreign policy is influenced by the voices of different actors in China from the Foreign Ministry to the People’s Liberation Army. Domestic actors are also growing in importance as public opinion is becoming more nationalistic over certain issues such as the dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. With different actors involved in China’s foreign policy, coordination in the Foreign Ministry is difficult. The South China Sea dispute is an example in which different actors expressed different

viewpoints which has resulted in competing policy approaches.

3) U.S.-China Relations and East Asia

Power transition in East Asia can proceed peacefully with the new paradigm of world politics.

The current power transition between the United States and China will be different from those of the past. The transformation of global international politics has seen the rise in international institutions and non-state actors which form complex networks. Within these complex networks, multi-layered actors and the close exchange of institutional settings and norms will guide the power-oriented process of U.S.-China power transition into a more norm-based peaceful transition in East Asia.

Effective global governance can help to shape China’s peaceful rise.

It is not in the interest of countries to balance against China’s rise, which would place countries like South Korea in a difficult position. A more effective strategy would be to facilitate global governance to shape China’s rise into a peaceful one. Such efforts should encourage China to continue to be more involved in global institutions such as the G20.

Uncertainty in the region is a major challenge.

2012 will witness major changes in the leadership of most countries in East Asia, including the United States which has its own presidential election and China which will undergo leadership change. This will be a period of great uncertainty and a major challenge as issues such as the North Korean nuclear crisis will become more politicized.

Session 2: Rise of China and the Strategy of Neighboring Countries

1) Japan's New Security Strategies toward China

Japan's strategy toward China needs to be readjusted.

With the “rise of the rest” and power transition in East Asia, the new international order will be a major challenge for Japan to adjust to. In response to this, Japan's strategy to China should adjust by seeking closer ties with some of Tokyo's neighbors. This does not mean hard balancing against China, but such a change in the regional security environment should encourage Japan to enhance its relations with countries like South Korea.

Japan-China relations can be enhanced through defense exchanges on peacekeeping.

Considering the difficulties faced by Japan and China in its political relationship, the two countries should seek ways of enhancing cooperation through defense and security cooperation. One area in which such a process could work is by cooperating in peacekeeping operations (PKO). Both sides have established official organizations for managing PKOs and developing relations between them would contribute to improved defense ties.

2) Taiwan's Strategy toward China

There is a lack of domestic consensus on policies toward China.

Since his election in 2008, Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou has pursued a policy of engagement with China that has seen economic links strengthened. Despite the positive ties with China, the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has been critical of some of Ma's policies to the Mainland. With the presidential election approaching in 2012, such criticism has increased as the DPP puts forward different strategies toward China. The lack of a basic consensus on policies toward China is an area that needs to be resolved in order to avoid uncertainty and conflict.

Taiwan would benefit from broader international participation.

China strongly opposes Taiwan's participation in any international organization as part of its policy to keep Taiwan diplomatically isolated. However, since 2009 China has not opposed Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly of the World Health Organization as an observer. Taipei should continue to develop more its participation in international organizations where possible. Such international participation can then provide Taiwan with more room to maneuver when it deals with China.

3) India's Strategy toward China

India's strategy toward China is evolving.

China-India relations are very complex. Distrust exists on both sides as a result of border disputes yet trade has enhanced ties between the two countries. This is due to the way in which both sides have not let the border issues get in the way of strengthening bilateral ties. Despite the strong economic links though, there are still many areas in which the two sides can cooperate further.

India and China should enhance cooperation on combating terrorism.

There are many areas where there is the potential for conflict between China and India including competition for resources, regional influence, and policies to Pakistan. However, terrorism is a threat that both countries face and should cooperate more on. As yet cooperation between Delhi and Beijing on this issue is very limited.

Session 3: Issues on the Korean Peninsula and Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance

1) ROK-U.S. Alliance Cooperation over North Korea

The impact of “strategic patience” is still open to debate.

The Lee and Obama administration have used “strategic patience” to guide their approach to North Korea over the last few years. It is a medium to long-term approach which seeks to increase pressure on Pyongyang by withholding economic and diplomatic benefits. The expectation was that this will lead to North Korea changing its behavior over time as the effects are felt. However, this also has vulnerabilities over the short-term such as North Korea’s provocations and progress in its uranium enrichment program (UEP). The question therefore of whether “strategic patience” has worked is still open to debate.

Domestic politics can affect the “strategic patience” approach.

Over the next year, the United States and South Korea may be pulled in slightly different directions due to domestic politics. In the United States, “strategic patience” has worked well politically by not engaging North Korea. However, another provocation from North Korea could provoke more criticism toward the Obama administration. On the other hand, “strategic patience” is less politically sustainable in South Korea and the Lee administration has to find a balance. Public opinion now tends to favor a more flexible approach and the Lee administration has tried to appease such sentiment. Still, as last year’s provocations showed, public opinion can change to favor stronger approaches when responding to such attacks.

2) The Future of the Alliance

More improvements are required to meet the OPCON transfer deadline of 2015.

The transfer of wartime operation control (OPCON) and the relocation of U.S. Forces in Korea have long been delayed and this in turn has driven up the costs. Furthermore, a number of crucial areas on command structure, burden-

sharing, and operational planning have yet to be fully agreed. With the deadline of 2015 approaching, it is not clear if all these requirements can be met by then.

South Korea is too focused on North Korea’s immediate threat.

North Korea will continue to use its conventional forces to achieve both political and diplomatic objectives in unconventional ways. As a result, South Korea’s defense policies have become more short-term focused following North Korea’s provocations in 2010. For example, the recently proposed Defense Reform 307 is a rather short-term plan that does not take into account long-term trends, such as South Korea’s global and regional role. This new plan also does not consider North Korea’s long-term strategic objectives that should be carefully considered.

3) China’s Growing Military Strength and the ROK-U.S. Alliance

It is important to have an accurate evaluation of China’s military capabilities.

In understanding China’s military modernization, it is important that the right assessment is given that neither overestimates nor underestimates the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Along with varied military strategies, the PLA consists of both new and old equipment from different foreign sources that make combat system integration difficult. It is also critical to take into account that while the PLA is not at the level of the United States military, it is still significantly stronger than some of its neighbors.

Regional powers should seek ways to cooperate more with China to enhance transparency in its military modernization.

China’s “military rise” will have a major impact on the region’s security requiring close assessment and analysis of the development of the PLA. Closer cooperation among the regional powers will also facilitate a better understanding of China’s military modernization efforts and the direction in which its strategies are heading. ■

Biographies of Participants

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Kang Choi is a professor and Director-General for American Studies at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Professor Choi received his Ph.D. from the Ohio State University. From 1992 to 1998, and from 2002 to 2005, Professor Choi worked in the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA). When at KIDA, Professor Choi assumed various positions such as Chief Executive Officer, Task Force for Current Defense Issues, Director of International Arms Control Studies, and one of the editors of Korean Journal of Defense Analysis (KJDA). He has done researches on arms control, crisis/consequence management, North Korean military affairs, multilateral security cooperation, and the ROK-US security alliance. From 1998 to 2002, he served in National Security Council Secretariat as Senior Director for Policy Planning and Coordination. He was one of South Korean delegates to the Four-Party Talks. Professor Choi has published many articles including "An Approach toward a Common Form of Defense White Paper"; "International Arms Control and Inter-Korean Arms Control"; "Inter-Korean Arms Control and Implications for the USFK"; "Future ROK-US Security Alliance"; "North Korea's Intentions and Strategies on Nuclear Games"; "A Prospect for US-North Korean Relations: beyond the BDA issue." Professor Choi holds several advisory board membership including Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Unification of National Assembly, Ministry of National Defense, Ministry of Unification, and the National Unification Advisory Council.

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