U.S.-ROK Cooperation in Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction

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ABSTRACT

Recent experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have drawn keen attention to the area of stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction and questions about how governments should cooperate on these important tasks. This paper explores why and how closer cooperation in stabilization and reconstruction would make a difference to the U.S.-ROK relationship. There are distinct strategic and operational benefits to be gained from such cooperation, not only in terms of international security and in terms of strengthening the alliance, but also in much more practical, tactical terms.

Arguably, the single most challenging operation the U.S. and ROK will likely face on the Korean peninsula is a situation of collapse in North Korea to which they must jointly respond. Such a situation will demand critical skill sets that must be developed and practiced together. Stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction operations away from the peninsula allow both countries to develop the skills, processes, and procedures to work together in a potential post-collapse scenario. Such cooperation would better prepare the allies, collectively and individually, to manage a post-instability situation in the North and deliver the needed stability and security to both minimize the immediate effects of instability and establish conditions necessary for Korea's long-term economic and social development.

The current ROK administration has clearly put increasing emphasis on preparing for North Korean instability, but remains cautious about how far the alliance can or should go in planning, building capacity, and exercising that capacity. Current U.S. efforts recognize that the ROK should lead any post-conflict stability and reconstruction effort in North Korea, while seeking to understand what the ROK plan is and ensure that the two allies know how to act together. This provides a situation where the United States is eager to find ways to build upon years of U.S.-ROK combined planning and combat training to expand capacity in the area of stabilization and reconstruction operations.

The United States has developed an interagency framework for planning and carrying out such operations through a civilian-led, military supported and whole-of-government approach. The five essential tasks of this framework are: 1) establish civil security, 2) establish control, 3) restore essential services, 4) support governance and 5) support economic and infrastructure development. The ROK takes a similar approach to its planning for North Korea. When the political decision is made to act together, the two governments can synchronize all the tools of their respective national power—diplomatic, economic, and military—to achieve the mutual goals of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

One specific suggestion for expanding cooperation and enhancing coordination would be to develop an alliance post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction management system, modeled on and drawing from existing U.S. and ROK interagency planning systems. Such a strategic-level system would be the foundation for a new series of assessment and training initiatives aimed at improving alliance coordination. The two militaries should also develop a combined doctrine for stability and reconstruction operations. Such doctrine development could be embedded in a larger effort to establish a combined doctrine for a broad range of non-traditional military actions across the spectrum of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, stability and reconstruction.

Cooperation within the alliance on planning and tasks in a post-conflict situation is not limited to a North Korean context. Taking this out of a pure North Korean context, in effect depoliticizing such cooperation, can bring significant advantages to the ROK, as expanded cooperation leading to a "generic" approach to stabilization and reconstruction would go a long way in filling critical gaps in the current level of planning for on-peninsula contingencies. In this discussion, the immediate issue of interest is Afghanistan. Expanded U.S.-ROK cooperation in Afghanistan would create large dividends for both allies. Security forces drawn from the ROK could provide the bulk of forces necessary to establish local security and train local security forces, while U.S. forces could provide additional offensive capabilities necessary to deepen stability in the area of operations.

Previous ROK experience and contributions in post-conflict operations in Iraq also presents important lessons. Using a model similar to its approach in Iraq, the ROK should lead reconstruction and development efforts, integrating assets from both allies.

In reality, there are significant political impediments that must be addressed if expanded cooperation is to be achieved within the alliance. The primary obstacle remains public opinion in the ROK and the resulting lack of political will of the ROK government. The clear solution to this is for the ROK government to make a clear argument to the Korean people that ROK interests—not alliance politics—demand an expansion of cooperation in specific areas. The ROK public can likely be made to understand why expanding cooperation is in their interest, and why doing so in the context of alliance is advantageous.

Increasing cooperation in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction, improving coordination mechanisms, and building new operational and tactical capacity would address critical gaps in the alliance's toolkit. Moreover, such new capacity would increase Korea's ability to utilize the alliance to not only meet a potential contingency in North Korea, but also set the conditions for a successful transition to long-term stability and a unification process. Strengthening cooperation in such strategic and operational areas would provide for a stronger alliance and, by extension, a stronger position from which the ROK can engage its neighbors.