

Enhanced United States and Republic of Korea Alliance Cooperation The Navy to Navy Dimension

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ABSTRACT

For a half-century U.S.-ROK Army-to-Army interaction has been the central feature of the bilateral military relationship. Now, as the alliance evolves into one of greater regional and international scope, it will out of necessity increasingly rest on a strong foundation of navy-to-navy cooperation. For many years, the inherent maritime orientation of South Korea was not translated into naval power because of the threat posed by North Korea and because the ROK has throughout its existence relied on its surrogate navy—the U.S. Seventh Fleet—to ensure its maritime interests. Even though both the North Korea threat and the U.S. Seventh Fleet remain as credible as ever, South Korea has for the last decade and a half been constructing a very credible ocean going (blue-water) navy. The focus of this chapter is on this change in ROK naval capabilities, the rationale behind it, and implications for the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the U.S.-ROK navy-to-navy relationship that exists because of the alliance.

Since 1945, the U.S. Navy (USN) has been the provider of both resources as well as necessary advice, management and training approaches for the development of the ROK Navy (ROKN). However, due to the growth of the ROKN from a coastal defense force to a burgeoning regional navy of note, its relationship with the USN must evolve to one that is more equitable. A number of factors have shaped South Korean decisions to build up its Navy. First, and most important, is a political and strategic *weltanschauung* that supports a much broader and important global role for the Republic of Korea. The evolution of South Korean strategic thought from a peninsula-oriented view to one with ambitions to be a regional or even global player is an interesting evolutionary trend in Northeast Asia. Geographic and economic factors have also contributed to ROK naval development. Foreign trade represented approximately 70 percent of South Korea's 2008 GDP, and a whopping 99.7 percent of its trade was conducted via sea routes. The government of South Korea, led by the ROKN, has recently "discovered" the importance of sea lanes of communications (SLOC).

Factors surrounding South Korea's relationship with China and Japan have played an important role in its decision to actively build up its Navy. For enhanced U.S.-ROK cooperation, there exists a rich menu of topics for discussion between the ROKN and USN, such as regional stability, China, cooperation among Northeast Asian navies, and the Global Maritime Partnership. There are also issues that both navies have in common with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). The U.S. can advance its interests and regional stability if the

USN is able to develop an operational relationship with the ROKN that is as close as the relationship the USN currently has with the JMSDF.

Among the first steps in any expanded U.S.-ROK Navy relationship will be the development of what South Korean interlocutors have called a “common strategic vision” with the USN. To achieve this vision, U.S. interlocutors will need a clear vision of where the United States wants to be in its alliance with South Korea, as well as patience while the ROK sorts through its own issues with China and Japan. In this context, a broad agenda can include issues such as trilateral naval cooperation with China and/or Japan, shared assessments of Chinese intentions, cooperation on non-traditional maritime security issues, such as the on-going cooperation on anti-piracy patrols, disaster relief, and SLOC security. A “common strategic vision” will evolve into a single operational plan (OPLAN) so that both navies can cope with war with North Korea as well as more probable issues such as North Korean regime instability. Having a “common plan” will be especially important after the transfer of operational control (OPCON) is complete since there will be no combined staff to readily orchestrate operations. The ROKN recognizes that effective ROKN-USN operations require achieving “perfect interoperability” between the C41 systems. Both navies must have the ability to conduct real-time information sharing and common maritime domain awareness.

Not surprisingly, South Korea faces a strategic dilemma as it moves to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance. China looms large in the security calculations of South Korea, and for reasons of geography, history, culture and growing economic connections, South Korean strategists are careful to take Chinese perceptions into account when its security relationship with the United States goes beyond the defense of South Korea. This means that U.S. interlocutors with their South Korean colleagues will need to be sensitive to the fact that South Korean interlocutors cannot ignore China’s potential reaction to a new alliance based on so-called “strategic flexibility.” Some recognize that the most important strategic challenge in ROK security strategy in the future will be achieving harmony between the U.S.-ROK alliance and the ROK-China strategic partnership.