

Counter-Terrorism Cooperation and the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Ongoing Efforts and Upcoming Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The “post-post Cold War era” stimulated an overdue realignment of the U.S.-ROK alliance, while political differences between Washington and Seoul led to what some perceived as a weakened alliance. Despite this perception, South Korea was supportive of U.S.-led efforts in the War on Terror while building its own counter-terrorism capabilities.

After almost a decade of U.S.-led efforts to combat terrorism, Washington needs the help of its allies more than ever. Washington’s ongoing concern with terrorism in Southeast Asia presents a timely opportunity for South Korea to strengthen its alliance with the United States and establish an important regional role for itself by coordinating counter-terrorism efforts with the United States. By playing an active role in the War on Terror, Seoul can create an incentive for U.S. commitment to the alliance while reassuring others in the region. In this regard, the June 2009 Joint Vision Statement has set the stage for South Korea’s active cooperation in the U.S.-led global campaign against terrorism.

This paper highlights ongoing cooperative efforts between the United States and South Korea on counter-terrorism, and assesses South Korea’s relative strengths and opportunities to deepen counter-terrorism cooperation as a component of U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation.

Although the Lee Myung Bak administration has expressed its intention to improve the alliance, many Koreans express concern over South Korea’s role and doubts about U.S. commitment. As the Lee and Obama administrations move to strengthen cooperation while transforming the military alliance on the peninsula, South Korean efforts to bolster its military capabilities and its diplomatic role as a middle-power Asian state and active United Nations member provide the impetus for counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States.

North Korea's response to South Korea's increased participation in counter-terrorism efforts could be a factor in U.S.-ROK cooperation. Public opinion regarding expanded cooperation and active troop dispatch will also be a challenge for both administrations. President Lee's weakened public support following several domestic political clashes suggests that any further cooperation with the United States must be carefully executed so as to gain public consensus. Also, South Korea's current military expenditures are focused primarily on ground forces that are unlikely to leave the peninsula. Such obstacles must be overcome in order to further facilitate bilateral and multilateral international efforts against terrorism

ROK and U.S. counter-terrorism efforts in ASEAN and the UN are aligned and mutually beneficial. Cooperation in these contexts should continue to expand. As South Korea continues to broaden and strengthen its capabilities in ways that can also support U.S. global efforts to fight terrorism, it will not only further solidify relations with Washington but also reinforce its image as a powerful player in the international community and a source of stability in Northeast Asia.

The Obama administration's "diplomacy of listening" provides an opportunity for South Korea to propose to Washington cooperative schemes in areas in which it is relatively stronger. South Korean expertise in security, chemical-biological-radiological (CBR) warfare, cyber warfare, criminal investigation and financial oversight should continue to serve as a basis for South Korea to play roles in regional training and capacity-building. Deepened cooperation in these fields will strengthen the alliance, as these are vital interests in Washington's anti-terrorism campaign. South Korea's growing role as a middle-power Asian state and its regional leadership and cooperation on counter-terrorism offers an opportunity to further strengthen alliance cooperation with the United States by filling a role Washington cannot, thus solidifying its value as an active and equal partner. This is a win-win burden-sharing strategy that will broaden and deepen the alliance while most effectively maintaining an eye on relative strengths and national interests.