

Strengthening the U.S.-ROK Alliance



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Introduction

The U.S.-ROK security alliance has demonstrated success by its longevity and ability to maintain peace on the Korean peninsula, but it has also been taken for granted, underappreciated, and a focal point for periodic expressions of anti-Americanism.² It is possible to imagine that the alliance is either in terminal decline or will inevitably be eclipsed by China's rise and pull on the peninsula.³ Circumstances have changed remarkably since the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense treaty was established in 1954 following the end of the Korean War. At that time, these two unequal partners had little in common aside from the strategic interest of deterring communist aggression. The United States was South Korea's security guarantor and patron, and South Korea was a war-torn economic basket case that had little other than geostrategic location to offer in return. Today, South Korea plays a leading role in securing its own defense and is a rising contributor of public goods in the areas of peacekeeping, overseas development assistance, and post-conflict stabilization. As the thirteenth largest economy in the world, South Korea has the capacity to shape its own interests. Its contributions to and influence on the international community are also expanding, creating opportunities for expanded partnership, both functionally and geographically.⁴

The security alliance with the United States provided stability necessary for South Korea to pursue rapid economic development and eventually to achieve a political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. These achievements have not obviated the alliance

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² See David Kang and Paul Chamberlin, "A History of U.S.-ROK Relations to 2002," in Derek Mitchell, ed., *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2004, pp. 11-23.

³ One scenario that suggests the plausibility of the decline of the alliance is laid out in S. Enders Wimbush, "A Parable: The U.S.-ROK Security Relationship Breaks Down," *Asia Policy*, No. 5 (January 2008), pp. 7-24, http://www.nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/AP5/AP5_USROK_RT.pdf (accessed January 3, 2009).

⁴ 2008 Diplomatic White Paper, October 27, 2008, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, <http://www.mofat.go.kr/english/political/whitepaper/index.jsp>.

but rather have enabled prospects for a much more far-reaching relationship on the basis of a broader set of mutually shared interests than could have been envisaged even 20 years ago in the midst of Korea's democratic transition. South Korea's transformation as a leading economic power and its transition from authoritarianism to democracy has led to the convergence of the two societies and has created opportunities for practical cooperation in new areas that extend well beyond the peninsula.

However, the U.S.-ROK alliance continues to be conceptualized primarily in bilateral terms and criticized as an "unequal" relationship, especially during periods of tension in the relationship.⁵ Many of these criticisms are justified because the vision for the alliance and its contributions has not kept up with changes in and around the Korean peninsula. Although there have been efforts in recent years to readjust alliance-based interactions from a patron-client framework to one that emphasizes mutual partnership based on shared interests and values, the basic spade work necessary to build support for and justify the expansion of the relationship both to respective publics in both countries and to third parties remains to be done. Whether or not it is possible to develop the relationship into a "21st century strategic alliance," as Lee Myung-bak referred to it in his April 19, 2008, joint press conference with George W. Bush,⁶ depends on whether or not the U.S.-ROK alliance can leave behind its Cold War-origins and adjust itself to establish a common vision that fully takes advantage of the dramatically expanded potential that derives from a common set of values and interests.

This paper argues that there is potential to establish a considerably more comprehensive relationship than has previously existed between the United States and South Korea given that both countries are fellow democracies and advanced market economies. Following a historical overview of how the alliance has developed to date, the paper will recommend key principles that might undergird the type of alliance cooperation necessary to meet the challenges of a new era and ways in which such cooperation would serve the mutual interests of both countries. This analysis will attempt to set aside the history and structure of the current relationship and will envision a mutually acceptable relationship that responds to current and future needs.

Then, the paper will analyze a number of significant obstacles in the way of thinking about a comprehensive alliance. The first critical challenge is the need to bridge the differences in perspectives that exist given that the United States views security in global terms while South Korea's focus traditionally begins and ends with the peninsula. But in a globalized world, to focus only on peninsular security is a luxury South Korea can no longer afford, while the United States must take into account the security situation on the Korean peninsula as an important consideration in promoting global stability. Second, it is critical to gain public support for broadening the alliance. This obstacle is particularly formidable in South Korea, where the public remains ideologically polarized and there is little room to imagine a new alliance concept unburdened by the legacy of past

⁵ Kim Seung-hwan, "Anti-Americanism in Korea," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 109-122.

⁶ "President Bush Participates in Joint Press Availability with President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea," Camp David, April 19, 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080419-1.html> (accessed April 21, 2008).

inequalities. But if the alliance can be cast on the basis of shared interests in ways that enhance South Korea's position and boost its capacity to reach its potential in both a regional and global context, it should be possible to overcome such divisions. A third obstacle lies with the perceptions of South Korea's neighbors. It will be important that the rationale for alliance cooperation derive primarily from common interests on the basis of a convergence of shared values, not in the first instance on the basis of a perception of common threat. The expansion of mutual interests on the basis of broader, more intensive cooperation should provide a rationale for enhanced coordination that should not be challenged in the region since the alliance is not primarily directed at countering a threat from a third party. Fourth, the challenge of finding the resources necessary to invest in broader alliance cooperation—and the ability of the two governments to mobilize those resources effectively to meet new challenges—will determine the robustness of an expanded relationship.

After analyzing these obstacles in greater detail, the paper will attempt to explore some practical areas where cooperation might be possible if both countries were to commit themselves to the establishment of a comprehensive vision for alliance cooperation. First, the paper will explore the political significance of a new rationale for alliance cooperation, including the expansion of shared capacities to meet global challenges, the opportunity for expanded cooperation on non-traditional security threats, and the importance of developing alliance cooperation on a framework that does not assume or invite a zero-sum, negative response by South Korea's neighbors. A policy agenda designed to achieve these objectives would promote the expansion of U.S.-ROK bilateral cooperation in global areas such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, and post-conflict stabilization in the world's zones of conflict, regional cooperation to ensure that bilateral and regional approaches to security cooperation are complementary, and the prospects for cooperation on non-traditional security areas such as preparation for pandemics, anti-terrorism, monitoring sea lanes of cooperation, nuclear non-proliferation, energy security, and environmental issues, as well as addressing changes in the traditional core areas of the bilateral relationship.

Alliance Adaptation Following the End of the Cold War

The U.S.-ROK security alliance was forged in direct response to pressing security needs on the Korean peninsula. South Korea's vulnerability to renewed attack from the North, and its strategic importance as a bulwark against the spread of Communist aggression at the start of the Cold War, knit American and South Korean security needs together. The alliance provided a security guarantee to a weak South Korea completely dependent on the United States for its defense.

Throughout the Cold War, the overarching South Korean concern was the possibility of U.S. abandonment. For this reason, Nixon's announcement of the withdrawal of troops from South Korea despite a significant commitment of South Korean troops to support U.S.-led efforts in Vietnam in the late 1960s was a shock to Park Chunghee. Likewise, President Carter's efforts to fulfill a campaign promise to withdraw all U.S. forces from South Korea on the basis of human rights concerns under Park Chunghee's authoritarian

rule posed another serious challenge to the alliance. A further complication came in the context of Chun Doo Hwan's coup d'état in May of 1980, during which time United States Forces Korea (USFK) was widely perceived by South Koreans as complicit with if not supportive of Chun's suppression of South Korea's pro-democracy movement, sowing the seeds for Korean resentment of USFK, especially among pro-democracy activists who later became known as the "386" generation.⁷

Despite the end of the Cold War, South Korea's rapid economic development, and a political transition from authoritarianism to democracy, efforts to further reduce U.S. forces and transfer key roles and missions to South Korea under the 1990 "Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim," known as the East Asian Strategic Initiative (EASI), faced strong opposition from the South Korean government, which was still pursuing an international competition for influence with the North. Efforts came to a halt by 1992 as a result of rising tensions over North Korea's nuclear development efforts. The first stage, carried out over three years from 1990-1992, involved a 7,000 person troop reduction, appointment of an ROK general officer to head the Military Armistice Commission, and the transfer of a number of operational tasks to South Korea as part of a move from a "leading" to a "supporting" role on the Korean peninsula. The second phase of the plan envisaged transfer of patrol duties at the Joint Security Area (JSA), removal of two brigades of the U.S. Second Infantry Division, and a reorganization of the 7th Air Force into one fighter wing. The third stage involved determination of the appropriate long-term size of USFK based on a joint threat assessment and other regional needs that might be met by USFK, relocation of Yongsan to another location outside of Seoul, and transfer of the area under the responsibility of the U.S. Second Infantry Division along with changes in the authority of wartime operational control (OPCON) and development of an ROK-U.S. parallel command system.⁸ Although the first stage of the EASI was implemented, the rise of the North Korean nuclear crisis in 1991-92 led then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney to freeze implementation of the EASI pending a resolution of the crisis.⁹

Although USFK made a small reduction in forces, gave up a golf course at Yongsan and ended combined forces control over Korean military forces during peacetime, there was almost no change in the essential structure of the relationship. USFK headquarters remained in Seoul with a footprint essentially unchanged since the Korean War, with U.S. bases occupying choice ground in every major South Korean city. But South Korean and American views of the world, the region, and North Korea were no longer in lockstep with each other. Differences began to emerge. For the United States, North Korea became another flashpoint for regional conflict to be managed and was no longer a second front in a global ideological stand-off while North Korea continued to be South Korea's primary concern. At a political level, this difference in views—and the fragile

⁷ Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Press, 1997).

⁸ An Kwang-ch'an, "A Study on the Military System on the Basis of the Constitution; Focused on the Operational Command Authority of the Korean Peninsula," Ph.D. dissertation, Dongguk University School of Law, pp. 195-206, cited in Open Source Center Document #: KPP20060214024006.

⁹ See *U.S.-ROK Security Meeting Joint Communique*, October 8, 1992, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/rok/1992/921008-rok-usia.htm> (accessed March 11, 2009).

psychological gap behind those views—became apparent as the Clinton administration chose to negotiate directly with North Korea over nuclear weapons in 1993, no longer deferring to South Korea over how to manage political contacts with the North.

By the mid-1990s, the international environment had undergone a transition from the Cold War to the post-Cold War era, South Korea had become an industrialized economy whose cities had begun to surround even U.S. bases that had once been located in the countryside while simultaneously undergoing a political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. North Korea could no longer compete with the South for international legitimacy, but it remained an isolated conventional military threat and had pursued development of nuclear and missile capabilities. Despite these revolutionary changes in the context surrounding the peninsula, most of the changes in the U.S.-ROK alliance were evolutionary. The United States was still primarily responsible for South Korea's defense. USFK maintained a level of operational flexibility befitting a wartime setting and had not undergone the type of consolidation of bases that had occurred in Japan in the 1970s. South Korean public perceptions of U.S. bases had changed from a source of economic opportunity when South Korea was poor to a traffic irritant and occupier of prime real estate once South Korea had become rich.

A missed opportunity to address some of these concerns and possibly put the U.S.-ROK alliance on a firmer footing came in the mid-1990s with the Nye Initiative and the reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan alliance. This review came about in part as a result of perceptions that the United States was losing its influence and might consider further force reductions in Asia, inciting concerns in Japan and a desire to strengthen the basis for a continuing U.S. presence in the region. A review of the U.S.-Japan alliance relationship led to a joint review of the regional security environment, a revision of guidelines, and a reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan relationship that was announced by President Clinton and Prime Minister Hashimoto in 1996.¹⁰ That effort had been intended to encompass the U.S.-ROK alliance, but the process with South Korea never got off the ground.

There were some attempts by USFK to adjust to new Korean conditions. In the late 1990s, the Clinton administration negotiated initial steps in a Land Partnership Plan (LPP), whereby USFK prepared to vacate and return bases and land to South Korea and revised the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to provide greater Korean autonomy and responsibility in handling offenses by U.S. military personnel in the case of off-duty offenses.¹¹ But these changes did not correspond to the scope of change in the strategic environment, the structure of South Korean domestic politics, or the political economy of the relationship of the bases to the broader Korean population.

¹⁰ Michael J. Green and Patrick M. Cronin, eds., *The U.S.-Japan Alliance: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1999).

¹¹ There were also negotiations at the end of the Clinton administration to revise the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to give South Korea's judicial system a greater role in the handling of off-duty offenses involving American service members.

Another major development influencing the context for the alliance was South Korea's change in approach toward North Korea under Kim Dae Jung's Sunshine Policy, most dramatically represented by the June 2000 inter-Korean summit. Kim Dae Jung's trip to Pyongyang and the first-ever meeting between North and South Korean leaders was an historic event that had powerful reverberations for South Korean perceptions of security on the Korean peninsula. Upon Kim Dae Jung's return from the North, he declared that his visit had forestalled the possibility of war on the Korean peninsula. Although this statement was regarded as over-optimistic, it both served to validate and facilitate a transformation of South Korean public perceptions of the North from the image of enemy to that of brother-in-need. Such a transformation carried with it a subtle implication for the U.S. force presence in Korea among Korean public perceptions from that of necessity to that of luxury or even a legacy of the past era of inter-Korean conflict.¹² Coinciding with the inter-Korean summit was an uptick in public incidents involving USFK personnel that was partially reflective of such a shift in perceptions among the Korean public. These incidents were symptoms of a much deeper problem: the U.S.-ROK alliance remained on auto-pilot, based on Cold War premises, structures, and patterns of interaction; no serious effort had been made to review and update the strategic framework underlying the alliance in a manner similar to the process that led to the reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

A major incident that revealed the extent to which the standard operating procedures that had governed the alliance were out of synch with new realities on the Korean peninsula was a traffic accident in 2002 in which an army vehicle returning from exercises on a South Korean highway hit and killed two middle-school girls walking on the side of a narrow road. The South Korean public response to the incident revealed an underlying perception by South Koreans that USFK had not updated its perceptions of South Korea as a partner in line with the economic and political accomplishments of recent decades. Management of the aftermath of the incident on a timeline that met USFK needs without considering the South Korean political environment was one factor that encouraged such an impression among the South Korean public.

Second, South Koreans—fresh from a new national confidence deriving from the South Korean national soccer team's performance in the 2002 World Cup—were grappling with South Korea's improved international standing and implications of apparent progress in inter-Korean relations for South Korea's security posture, stirring for the first time a debate over whether the future direction of South Korean foreign policy should be tied so closely to the policy direction of the United States. This debate was fed by skepticism within South Korea's emerging elites over the U.S. motivations for invading Iraq as well as the rise of China as South Korea's number one economic partner.

Third, the 2002 traffic accident provided a concrete illustration of how USFK presence might intrude on and conflict with the daily lives of South Koreans in ways that appeared to reduce rather than enhance South Korea's security. Comments by President Bush in

¹² Scott Snyder, "North Korean Nuclear Factor and Changing Asia-Pacific Alliances," in In-Taek Hyun, Kyudok Hong, and Sung-han Kim, eds., *Asia-Pacific Alliances In the 21st Century: Waxing or Waning?* (Seoul: Oreum Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 221-239.

the 2002 State of the Union address characterizing North Korea as part of the “axis of evil” further inflamed South Korean opinion and raised doubts about whether the alliance would contribute in practical terms to enhancing or reducing South Korea’s security. All of these concerns served to underscore the lack of an updated rationale, shared vision, or articulation of mutual interest necessary to provide the alliance relationship with political ballast to survive what should have otherwise been easily manageable incidents in the relationship.¹³

The traffic accident and its aftermath was an important catalyst for a broader reevaluation of many aspects of the security relationship. The incident coincided with U.S. efforts under Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to review and update its global force posture to respond to new threats and new needs, as well as increasing needs for troops to serve in Iraq. In South Korea, the Roh Moo-hyun administration came into office seeking greater independence and greater equality in its relations with the United States, simultaneously seeking “cooperative, self-reliant defense” while also maintaining the alliance.

Despite rhetoric that regularly suggested that the Roh and Bush administrations were philosophically out of synch with each other, both sides cooperated well to implement the reconfiguration of U.S. forces on the peninsula and transfer of primary responsibility for security along the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Talks on the Future of the Alliance (FOTA) (2002-2004) and the Security Policy Initiative (SPI) (2004-2008) managed specific institutional and structural adjustments, including setting a timetable for replacing the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) with separate command arrangements in which the United States would play a supporting role. These efforts represented a significant evolution in the structure of alliance cooperation mechanisms, but were conducted in the absence of a jointly identified shared vision for the future of the alliance.

In the context of the Rumsfeld-initiated Global Posture Review, which sought to position U.S. forces around the world more flexibly to be able to respond to a multiplicity of uncertainties and types of threats, the United States and South Korea worked together to realign the U.S. force presence on the peninsula and revise command arrangements in support of a broader vision and regional role for the alliance. The realignment of USFK included a planned one-third reduction amounting to 12,500 troops, removal of U.S. forces positioned in several camps along the DMZ to a central camp north of Seoul, and the redeployment of one of two U.S. combat brigades from South Korea to Iraq, with the South Korean military taking over the major roles and missions near or at the DMZ. A second area of focus has been the dissolution of CFC in favor of arrangements that allow South Korea to retain sole operational control of its forces, with the United States

¹³ David I. Steinberg, ed., *Korean Attitudes Toward the United States: Changing Dynamics* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005); Derek Mitchell, ed., *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, June 2004.

providing “bridging capabilities,” especially in the areas of air support and intelligence collection.¹⁴

The FOTA talks consisted of twelve rounds of negotiations between 2002 and 2004 and were focused on the nuts and bolts of the U.S. defense transformation on the Korean peninsula, including the ongoing reduction of forces by one-third to 25,000, implementation of steps necessary for the redeployment of key USFK command, transfer of several missions from the United States to South Korea, return of Yongsan base to the ROK, and the repositioning of U.S. troops away from the DMZ. Alongside these proposed troop reductions, the United States also pledged U.S.\$11 billion over three years to implement force improvements in the region, designed to enhance deterrence against any possible North Korean military threat. By 2008, USFK was to have turned over the bulk of operational responsibilities near the DMZ and pulled back all troops positioned north of Seoul to a consolidated main base at Osan-Pyeongtaek (Camp Humphreys). USFK operations currently housed at Yongsan military base would also be transferred to Camp Humphreys.¹⁵

The SPI was initiated through the 2004 Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) as a successor to the FOTA. The purpose was to discuss the “broader, long-term issues that the alliance faces,” including the future rationale for the alliance, strategic flexibility, and OPCON arrangements.¹⁶ In addition, the SPI talks have been used to discuss issues related to implementation of FOTA as they arise. For instance, SPI talks have dealt with issues related to coordination of ongoing transfer of operational tasks from the United States to ROK forces, as well as questions related to responsibility for environmental clean-up of bases that USFK has prepared to return to the ROK. In addition to laying the foundations for an understanding on “strategic flexibility,” under which USFK forces may be deployed for missions off the peninsula and the South Korean government is not obligated to provide political or military support for such deployments, and on the dissolution of CFC and return of sole responsibility for operational control to the South Korean government, the United States and South Korea implemented a comprehensive security assessment and laid the foundations for the U.S.-ROK Joint Statement adopted by Presidents Bush and Roh at Gyongju in November of 2005. In this joint agreement, “The two leaders agreed that the alliance not only stands against threats but also for the promotion of the common values of democracy, market economy, freedom, and human rights in Asia and around the world,” affirmed alliance cooperation through the establishment of the Security Consultation for Alliance Partnership, and affirmed a range of security and political cooperation measures including cooperation to address the North Korean nuclear issue.¹⁷

¹⁴ Stephen J. Flanagan and James A. Schear, eds., *Strategic Challenges: America's Global Security Agenda* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), pp. 245-256.

¹⁵ Scott Snyder, “Reconfiguration of the U.S. Forces in Korea: Impact of the Global Posture Review,” in Yuki Tatsumi, ed., *Strategic Yet Strained: U.S. Force Realignment in Japan and its Effects on Okinawa* (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2008), pp. 61-74.

¹⁶ *Joint Communiqué: Thirty-Sixth Annual US-ROK Security Consultative Meeting*, October 22, 2005, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Oct2004/d20041022joint.pdf>.

¹⁷ *Joint Declaration on the ROK-U.S. Alliance and Peace on the Korean Peninsula*, November 17, 2005, <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/ROKUSJointDeclarationNov05.pdf>.

Under the Roh and Bush administrations, it sometimes appeared that the United States and South Korea had divergent interests that would result in the dissolution of the alliance. Some analysts in the United States and South Korea saw structural, political, ideological, and cultural reasons to write off the alliance as having little, if any, remaining strategic value. Adaptations on the margin sometimes seemed like an attempt to bail out a sinking ship. However, despite political differences in priority approach to specific tactical issues regarding policy toward North Korea, it is also possible to argue that underlying political interests of both countries are increasingly overlapping on a broad range of issue-specific areas where it might be possible to build new forms of cooperation. Although Roh's style of managing relations with the United States was politically contested within South Korea and entailed costs in terms of distancing South Korea from the traditional protection it had enjoyed through close security relations with the United States, the Roh administration was able to work together with the Bush administration on many sensitive alliance issues, including configuration of U.S. forces, troop dispatch to Iraq, and negotiation (but not ratification) of a potentially strategically significant free trade agreement with the United States.

By declaring that restoration of the U.S.-ROK alliance is his top priority, Lee Myung-bak articulated South Korea's traditional policy approach, but contrary to his own expectations. The day after his election, Lee Myung-bak affirmed his intent to "restore the U.S.-ROK alliance based on the established friendship"¹⁸ as a primary anchor of South Korea's foreign policy, suggesting that a decade of progressive rule had aimed at making Korea more independent at the expense of its ties with the United States. During his first stop in the United States in April of 2008, Lee declared that the "politicization of alliance relations will be behind us" and pledged that the alliance going forward should be based on the principles of "common values, trust, and peace."¹⁹ In his meeting with President Bush at Camp David, Lee got a warm personal reception and the two presidents announced the establishment of a "strategic alliance for the twenty-first century." Lee likely went home confident that he had laid a strong foundation for renewed relations with the United States.²⁰

However, the task of defining in concrete terms how a "strategic alliance for the twenty-first century" should be built in practical terms has been more difficult. Aside from the concepts "common values, trust, and peace," there was little practical guidance on how the two countries should coordinate. Korean scholars have described: 1) "a value-oriented partnership based on the principles of democracy and the free market; 2) an alliance that cultivates deeper trust through political, social, and economic interchanges; and 3) teamwork that promotes both regional and global peace," including on humanitarian relief, peacekeeping operations, and counter-proliferation and counter-

¹⁸ "President Elect Vows Creative Diplomacy," *Korea Times*, December 19, 2007.

¹⁹ Lee Myung-bak's address to The Korea Society 2008 Annual Dinner, April 15, 2008, <http://www.koreasociety.org/dmdocuments/20080415-LeeMyungBak-English.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2008).

²⁰ "President Bush Participates in Joint Press Availability with President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea," Camp David, April 19, 2008, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080419-1.html> (accessed April 21, 2008).

terrorism operations.²¹ A long-expected Joint Vision Statement was delayed to the summer and then set aside in the context of the major public protests over beef that had engulfed Seoul in May and June of 2008. By the time President Bush finally visited Seoul prior to attending the Beijing Olympics in early August of 2008, it was too late for the two sides to issue a meaningful statement presenting a joint vision for the alliance. The task of determining what the strategic alliance for the 21st century” will mean in practical terms now remains to be worked out between the Lee and Obama administrations.

Establishing a Mutually Beneficial Rationale for a 21st Century Alliance

The U.S.-South Korea alliance has long ago outgrown the patron-client status that characterized the relationship when it was first established. The institutional structures for cooperation have also adapted in line with changes in respective military capabilities and needs, most notably in the transition to South Korea’s leading role in providing for its own national defense, with USFK providing critical support. But despite enormous changes in both the international environment and in South Korea’s domestic political system, it has not been possible for the two governments to frame a broad and enduring strategic vision for cooperation, to evaluate changes in the respective rationales for alliance-based cooperation, or to determine what sorts of shared objectives are likely to sustain such cooperation in the future.

The existing institutional structures, vested interests, and deeply-ingrained routines of cooperation tend to inhibit a ground-up assessment of the respective interests, trends, and emerging challenges that are likely to demand future attention and cooperation if they are to be effectively addressed. Is there a role for a U.S.-ROK alliance in today’s world, or is it a “historical relic,” as was suggested by the Chinese foreign affairs spokesman during Lee Myung-bak’s first visit to Beijing as the president of South Korea?²² What sort of vision is necessary to sustain meaningful security cooperation in the service of American and South Korean shared interests? Does such cooperation inevitably benefit one party at the expense of another? Is the institutional structure of cooperation so rigid that parties are entrapped and obligated to take up tasks that are peripheral to their national interests? To what extent is asymmetry in the U.S.-ROK relationship a natural product of the differing characteristics and circumstances faced by each country? Are inequalities inherently contrary to the national interests of either or both partners in the relationship? If it were up to South Korean and American national leaders to build a new political and security relationship from scratch, would an alliance or special relationship be in the cards, or do the respective interests of the two countries share little in common?

Perhaps the most effective way of determining the type of cooperation that would be most conducive to the mutual interests of alliance partners in the 21st century might be to try to build the relationship from the ground up, without the benefit or constraints

²¹ Sang-hyun Lee, “ROK-U.S. Relations in the Lee Myung-bak Government: Toward a Vision of a ‘21st Century Strategic Alliance,’” *Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2008), pp. 1-32.

²² Michael Ha, “Chinese Official Calls Korea-U.S. Alliance ‘Historical Relic,’” *Korea Times*, May 28, 2008.

imposed by the existing institutional structures that bind the United States and South Korea together. The critical variable underlying such an approach will be the task of determining the qualities and characteristics of the type of relationship most likely to serve the mutual interests of the two countries. The first step toward identifying those characteristics is to identify the main factors shaping the international security posture and needs of the two countries. This paper makes the following assumptions regarding the respective security interests of the United States and South Korea.

The United States will remain a global leader, but is no longer in a position to be the sole provider of public goods in the area of security. Moreover, global leadership in the 21st century will require a mix of specialized economic, political, security, and technical requirements that no single country will be able to provide on its own. Thus, U.S. leadership will be constrained by a need for cooperation with other states, but no other state except the United States is likely to be willing to bear the lion's share of the burdens of leadership. The United States will continue to play a leading role in responding to international crises, but it will increasingly seek partnerships with other like-minded countries to meet the political, security, and technical requirements to supply public goods necessary to ensure global stability, security, and prosperity.

South Korea, as the world's thirteenth largest economy, has expanded its capacity to the brink of the first rung of global leadership, but has not yet broken into the most exclusive international leadership clubs. South Korea's military capacities have grown in selected areas, but given the size and advanced level of neighboring military forces in the region, South Korea will still not feel completely comfortable on its own as an independent player in East Asia. South Korea will also have difficulty broadening its view of global affairs—seeing over the shoulders of China and Japan, respectively—in order to make contributions requisite to its size and status in a global context. Although South Korea has grown as an increasingly capable actor in a regional context, the fundamental choices of independence, alignment within the regional context of Northeast Asia, or alliance with a distant offshore balancer remain essentially the same. South Korea's diplomatic profile has become more multi-dimensional at the same time that its political dependency on the United States has diminished, enhancing both South Korea's desire for diplomatic independence and its potential attractiveness as a partner with a different type of history and development experience from that of the United States.

On the basis of these trends, one might argue that the following are potentially important characteristics of a newly reformulated partnership between the United States and South Korea: 1) a comprehensive alliance should be formed on the basis of a broad convergence of political interests and include security components as one among many areas of cooperation rather than as the primary focus of cooperation; 2) a comprehensive alliance should reflect a mutual commitment in which needs and responsibilities are shared, rather than being a one-way commitment in which there is an obligation by the United States to provide security without a reciprocal commitment to the partnership; 3) a comprehensive alliance should derive its primary *raison d'être* from common values internal to the alliance rather than being driven by an external threat (although it is entirely possible that provocative actions by third parties could become the focal point for

alliance-based cooperation); however, alliance relations will continue to require exclusivity in sensitive spheres of security cooperation; 4) a comprehensive alliance, in principle, might be expanded or regionalized to include other partners with shared mutual interests in such a way that expands the capacity for security cooperation and production of public goods that enhances regional and/or global stability; and 5) a comprehensive alliance will spread the risk and cost of provision of public goods and will be most effective when partners bring unique skills to meet common traditional or non-traditional security challenges. These five characteristics, or principles, of a comprehensive alliance between the United States and South Korea have the following implications for considering how to revamp the existing alliance relationship to more effectively meet shared needs of the two countries:

- a) The U.S.-ROK alliance should be based on a broader foundation of political cooperation than currently exists. The existing structure of security cooperation has been critical to sustaining the alliance, but is not sufficient to meet the needs of the expanded political and security partnership. The security alliance has important implications for South Korean security in the event of military conflict, but the true benefits of comprehensive alliance for South Korea are political—not military. A primary benefit South Korea seeks to derive from the alliance relationship in its modern diplomacy is to utilize the alliance as a platform and as a basis on which to enhance its political leverage in dealing with neighboring countries and to strengthen its position and status in the international community. These needs are not fully served by a relationship that is inordinately focused on military cooperation. As a country that is outside the core power groupings but is nonetheless an important secondary actor in international affairs, South Korea faces the challenge of how to improve its influence and standing to make a difference on global issues. Cooperation with the United States can be a politically effective and cost-effective way of enhancing South Korean influence without necessarily sacrificing South Korea’s status as an important and independent actor. Instead, a much broader structure of political coordination must be established in order to derive full advantage from the political aspects of alliance cooperation.
- b) In line with its economic and political transformation, South Korea has already taken a leading role in providing for its own defense, relieving the United States of the full burden that was originally assumed when the United States took responsibility for South Korea’s defense. Given these changes, the terms of the military alliance need to be rewritten—and accompanied by a revolution in the way both countries think of the military alliance. Military commitments to mutual defense should be reciprocal, involving responsibilities and obligations to work together in response to peninsular, regional, and global threats. South Korea has already taken on such burdens in practice in Vietnam and Iraq, reflecting a step toward mutuality in security relations, but the fundamental terms of the relationship should be revised to reflect mutuality in the relationship.

- c) The *raison d'être* for a U.S.-South Korea comprehensive alliance in the 21st century should derive from the common interests of the countries in alliance and focused on contributing to a broad conception of security rather than being justified on the basis of targeting a single threat; instead, military cooperation should be organized in such a way as to maximize respective capacities and contributions to preserve regional stability. If military coordination is organized in such a way as to maximize capacity to respond to multiple threats and is embedded in a broader politically-based partnership designed to respond to regional, global, and functional security needs, it will be harder for neighbors to object to such cooperation. While there is no immediate reason for alliance coordination to be targeted against a single country, such coordination would retain a level of readiness sufficient to respond to the emergence of threats regardless of their origin.
- d) An interest-based comprehensive alliance might lay the foundation for cooperation with like-minded countries on missions that serve common interests, both within and beyond Northeast Asia. Such an approach would allow for flexibility to develop a bilateral and a regional response capacity in the event of natural disasters and humanitarian missions such as tsunami relief, environmental accident response, and search and rescue missions. Such cooperation might form the core of an eventual mechanism for multilateral security cooperation that would respond to common regional and global threats.
- e) A comprehensive alliance already provides a means by which to reduce security costs through burden-sharing. Determining a more equitable and sustainable method for spreading those costs, while also developing planning capabilities through which it might be possible for South Korea to develop specialized capacities that might be utilized as a means by which to contribute to public goods, would in principle yield cost efficiencies that would free up budgets in both countries for investment in non-military areas. Clear delineation of benefits from cost-sharing and recognition of the alliance as a means by which both countries can yield "cooperation dividends" in the area of security would be an important step toward laying a sustainable foundation for such cooperation.

Synchronizing Views of Alliance Cooperation: Reconciling "Inside-Out" and "Outside-In" Perspectives on a Comprehensive Alliance

A major challenge to establishing a comprehensive alliance is the need to reconcile the perceptions, priorities, and interests of the United States and South Korea as partners with each other. This is really about defining the parameters, foundations, and limits of broadened international political and security cooperation to meet new circumstances.

As security analysts in Washington look toward Korea from the "outside-in," they are likely to see an increasingly capable international actor that has great potential to make middle-power level contributions to international security. American policy makers might think about existing political and security partnerships with Australia and Canada

and ask themselves if South Korea is also capable of performing at the same level. They may see South Korea developing certain specialized types of military capabilities that go beyond what other middle powers may have and wonder whether South Korea might be willing to utilize those capabilities in response to international threats to stability and security. Although South Korea's capacities are in many cases newer than those of other middle-power contributors, South Korea's international contributions are likely to be benchmarked against the contributions of those countries.

But despite having risen to the status of a leading industrialized economy, South Korea has not yet fully embraced the idea that it is a middle power and potential leader in the provision of international public goods. The Lee Myung-bak administration has championed the idea of "global Korea," a phrase that would appear to augur well for enhanced Korean involvement in international peacekeeping and post-conflict stabilization missions away from the peninsula, but also requires winning South Korean public support given that South Korea remains surrounded by larger neighbors and faced with real and present security dangers, including the legacies of conflict and division on the Korean peninsula. According to this "inside-out" view of South Korea's potential status and influence, it is difficult for South Korea to "see over the shoulders" of its neighbors to get a clear view of South Korea's standing, responsibilities, or obligations in an international context. South Korea's national history of security vulnerability induces a natural caution when it comes to utilizing resources abroad that might best be husbanded in the case of insecurity closer to home.

One task of a comprehensive alliance will be to harmonize the gap between "inside-out" and "outside-in" views of what Korea can and should responsibly contribute to off-peninsula security needs and what sorts of resources are necessary to ensure continued stability on the Korean peninsula. The reconciling of these views will require a careful mutual understanding of both the broader international security environment and South Korea's potential role and contributions as well as a deeper U.S. understanding of the unique political constraints South Korea faces in justifying to its own people how the alliance is contributing to peninsula and regional security as well as South Korea's regional political-security interests.

One way of thinking about how alliance cooperation can serve to bolster South Korea's off-peninsula contributions to international peace and stability is to think of the alliance as a platform that makes it possible for South Korea to project its influence and contributions more effectively in the international community, enhancing the value of South Korea's international contributions and raising South Korea's profile as a contributor to peace and stability. With the U.S.-ROK alliance as a platform, South Korea should be able to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the region with its neighbors China and Japan while also seeing its way clear to projecting regional and global influence that might not otherwise be possible if South Korea were to act on its own.