



CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY

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KOREA'S RETURN TO AFGHANISTAN

MICHAEL FINNEGAN

The Republic of Korea (ROK)'s pledge to return to Afghanistan after more than two years of absence can be viewed in several ways—as a domestic political breakthrough, as a recognition of Korea's interests in the world, or as a reflection of an evolving alliance with the United States. Perhaps it is all of these and more. The full motivation for the decision and specific plans to implement the mission will not be clear until the Lee Myung-bak administration explains his rationale and plans for deployment to the Korean people. As he does so, President Lee Myung-bak should avoid the mistakes of past Korean administrations by clearly articulating South Korea's national interests and strategic rationale for the deployment.

The Republic of Korea was one of the first countries to step up to the plate after the attacks of 9/11, invoking the "spirit" of the Mutual Defense Treaty in support of the United States. This was an important and brave declaration. The forces that eventually deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002 brought needed capacity to the struggling coalition and remained an important part of that mission until 2007. The Roh administration's unfortunate decision to withdraw ROK forces in the wake of the kidnapping and murder of Korean citizens in Afghanistan, in direct acquiescence to the demands of the Taliban murderers and kidnappers themselves, has been difficult to overcome. And the ROK military has been missed as a U.S. partner.

The fact remains that the ROK military is one of the most capable and professional military forces in the world. Its participation in almost any capacity will bring much needed capability and expertise to the multinational coalition attempting to build stability in Afghanistan and the region. The proposed deployment of some 500 civilians, police and mili-

tary as a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is a significant contribution, second only to the German PRT in size and apacity. The Afghan mission will offer the ROK forces an opportunity to hone their skills even further and develop still greater capacity for stability and reconstruction operations. As I argue in an upcoming paper for the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, such a deployment also offers the ROK and U.S. the opportunity to hone their combined skill set related to stability ops—something with real applicability should instability arise in North Korea. It is unclear at this point if the Allies will grasp this important if ancillary opportunity, but it is early days in the planning for the deployment and subsequent operations.

The Lee administration has well understood the need for ROK capabilities in Afghanistan and has attempted to work its way out of the Roh decision since coming into office in 2008. Discussions with officials and those close to the Presidential Office and the Ministry of Defense, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, reveal that the Lee administration has clearly grasped the negative implications of sitting on the sidelines in Afghanistan while simultaneously seeking constant but necessary reassurance from the U.S. that the defense of Korea remains a priority. They also clearly understand that Korea's own interests in global stability and security demand Korean contributions.

However, Lee's uphill domestic political battles since coming to office did not allow the administration to act on its conviction. Lee Myung-bak's decision to advance the proposal for the deployment in Afghanistan suggests that he has greater confidence in the political strength of his administration. This is significant and welcome news, given that it has taken time for the Lee administration to regain its footing after a succes-

sion of challenges regarding U.S. beef and the Korea-U.S. (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement, the North Korean nuclear issue, and the economic crisis.

The most significant aspect of the decision to redeploy is that the Lee administration appears to have determined that stability in Afghanistan has a bearing on Korea's own security. Arguably, one reason the Roh administration decided to cut and run from Afghanistan in 2007 was that there was no sense of Korea's interest tied to the deployment. Instead, the deployed troops were perceived as simply being in Afghanistan to "do something" for the Alliance, i.e., for the Americans. There was no significant risk to Korea of pulling the plug on the deployment.

If Korea's decision to deploy forces to Afghanistan is perceived as in Korea's own interest, versus "for the Alliance" with the United States, this important shift in the rationale for the deployment will make Korea's pledge of maintaining the upcoming deployment until at least December 2012 (or for 30 months) all the more credible and significant. This shift in rationale will be complete if Lee is able to effectively convince the National Assembly and the Korean people that the deployment's root purpose derives from Korea's own national interest.

Such a rationale in fact strengthens the alliance. The applicability of the U.S.-ROK security partnership to mutual security concerns off the peninsula is something that both governments have sought to build in recent years. But the ROK should not go to Afghanistan for the Alliance. One might think that if the ROK ultimately makes its case—as it did in 2002—that its deployment is an important way of "doing something for the Alliance," it is a sign of commitment and the strength of the partnership. However, it would be much better for the Alliance if Korea pursues the deployment as an opportunity to do something for Korea and implements it through the Alliance. This articulation would represent a mature approach to South Korea's own security and to the U.S.-ROK Alliance.

The ROK is poised to turn a corner on Afghanistan and to put behind it the embarrassing decision to cut and run in 2007. The Lee administration still must make a persuasive case with the National Assembly and the Korean people for the ROK's return to Afghanistan. Framing the decision in the strategic context of the ROK's own national interests likely will aid this effort, further solidify Korea's "brand" in the world, and ultimately strengthen the U.S.-ROK Alliance.

Michael Finnegan is a Senior Research Associate at the National Bureau of Asian Research. He will serve as a panelist on "U.S.-ROK Cooperation in Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction" at a Center for U.S.-Korea Policy-Brookings conference on "Expanding the Agenda for Cooperation between the United States and Republic of Korea," Washington DC, January 5, 2010.

NEWS & EVENTS

JANUARY 5, 2010 – THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON, DC

EXPANDING THE AGENDA FOR COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND REPUBLIC OF KOREA 9:30am–12:00pm, 1775 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Falk Auditorium (Lobby Level)

This joint-seminar of The Asia Foundation's Center for U.S.-Korea Policy and the Brookings Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies examined U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation on non-traditional security issues. Heejun Chang, Portland State University; Peter Beck, Stanford University; and Michael Finnegan, National Bureau of Asian Research; discussed prospects for U.S.-ROK cooperation on climate change, human rights, and post-conflict reconstruction respectively. Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, served as discussant. Richard Bush, Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies Director, moderated the event. Details and the full transcript are available at:

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2010/0105_korea.aspx.

This seminar is the third of a three-part symposium series that is part of the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy's project, *A Roadmap for Expanding the U.S.-ROK Alliance*. In Asia features our November forum with The Asia Foundation Korea office in Seoul. Details and the full transcript of our October seminar with Brookings in Washington DC is available at: http://www.brookings.edu/events/2009/1008_us_rok.aspx.

JANUARY 20, 2010 – THE STIMSON CENTER, WASHINGTON, DC

WORKSHOP ON NUCLEAR ENERGY AND NONPROLIFERATION

This event is closed to the public.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy, the Stimson Center, and the Korea Atomic Energy Research Institute (KAERI) will hold a joint workshop on prospects for U.S.-ROK nuclear nonproliferation and nuclear energy industry cooperation from American and South Korean perspectives and in the context of global nonproliferation efforts.

FEBRUARY 22, 2010 – EAST ASIA INSTITUTE AND CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY, SEOUL, KOREA
DOMESTIC STAKEHOLDERS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

This event is closed to the public.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy and the East Asia Institute (EAI) will hold a joint workshop on the influence and role of domestic stakeholders on the U.S.-ROK alliance, focusing on respective U.S. and South Korean legislative bodies, media, private sectors, and civil society.

PUBLICATIONS

Peter Beck (January 2010), "U.S.-ROK Human Rights Cooperation," Abstract of paper for a conference on "Expanding the Agenda for Cooperation between the United States and Republic of Korea," The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, January 5, 2010.

Heejun Chang (January 2010), "A Roadmap for Expanding U.S.-ROK Alliance Cooperation: Climate Change," Abstract of paper for a conference on "Expanding the Agenda for Cooperation between the United States and Republic of Korea," The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, January 5, 2010.

Michael Finnegan (January 2010), "U.S.-ROK Cooperation in Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction," Abstract of paper for a conference on "Expanding the Agenda for Cooperation between the United States and Republic of Korea," The Brookings Institution, Washington DC, January 5, 2010.

Fred McGoldrick, "U.S.-ROK Nuclear Nonproliferation Cooperation," Abstract of paper for Center for U.S.-Korea Policy series, *A Roadmap for Expanding the U.S.-ROK Alliance*.

Scott Snyder (January 2010), "Kim Jong-il's Successor Dilemmas", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 35-46.

Scott Snyder (January 7, 2009), "North and South Korean New Year's Resolutions," *Asia Unbound*, Council on Foreign Relations.

Scott Snyder (December 30, 2009), "Can the North Korean "Peace Offensive" Drive a Wedge in the U.S.-ROK Alliance?" GlobalSecurity.org.

Scott Snyder (December 18, 2009), "Are China's Neighbors Being Too Deferential to Xi Jinping?" *Asia Unbound*, Council on Foreign Relations.

John Brandon (December 16, 2009), "Dengue's Rise in Asia: Battling a Deadly Side Effect of Climate Change," *In Asia*, The Asia Foundation.

Scott Snyder (December 14, 2009), "North Korea's H1N1 Watch: Isolation Vs. Contagion," *Asia Unbound*, Council on Foreign Relations.

Fred McGoldrick (November 25, 2009), "New U.S.-ROK Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreement: A Precedent for a New Global Nuclear Architecture," Center for U.S.-Korea Policy.

Scott Snyder (November 2009), "The Korean Peninsula: On the Brink?" in Victor Mauer and Myriam Dunn Cavelty, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Security Studies*, New York, NY: Routledge.

For a complete list of publications, please visit www.cen-terforuskoreapolicy.org.

VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

"Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Obama have already held two prior summits and have developed a smooth working relationship and genuine friendship...President Obama's Asia trip and first major Asia policy address send the clear message that "America is back.""

--Ralph Cossa, President of Pacific Forum CSIS, "America's Back!" *The Korea Times*, December 22, 2009.

"We want the troops to be regionally engaged and globally deployed, but we'll never forget that our No. 1 responsibility in Korea is to defend the Republic of Korea...Sometime in the future we could have forces that could, with consultations between both nations, be able to be deployed in different places around the world."

--Gen. Walter Sharp, Commander, UN Command, Combined Forces Command, and U.S. Forces Korea, CSIS Military Strategy Forum on "U.S.-ROK Alliance – The Future," December 14, 2009, Washington DC.

"The benefits of the Korea-US FTA go beyond economics, as the agreement would help to solidify the two countries' long-standing geo-strategic alliance...Considering the importance and the potential benefits of the Korea-US FTA, the agreement should be ratified by both countries sooner rather than later."

--Lee Hye-min, ROK Deputy Trade Minister, remarks at an international conference on global trade in the post-crisis era, Korea International Trade Association and Peterson Institute for International Economics, December 7, 2009, Seoul.

"Korea last month joined the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) to make Korea the first aid beneficiary becoming a donor in the OECD DAC history...Korea's development story is an eloquent reminder to the global community what free trade can do in alleviating poverty and improving quality of life."

--Il Sakong, Chairman, Korea International Trade Association, remarks at an international conference on global trade in the post-crisis era, Korea International Trade Association and Peterson Institute for International Economics, December 7, 2009, Seoul.

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please visit:
www.centerforuskoreapolicy.org.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy aims to deepen and broaden the foundations for institutionalized cooperation between the United States and South Korea by promoting a comprehensive U.S.-ROK alliance partnership on emerging global, regional, and non-traditional security challenges. A project of The Asia Foundation, the Center is based in the Foundation's Washington DC office.

The Asia Foundation is a private, non-profit, non-governmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region. Drawing on 50 years of experience in Asia, the Foundation collaborates with private and public partners to support leadership and institutional development, exchanges, and policy research.

The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy is based in the Washington DC office of The Asia Foundation with seed funding from the Smith Richardson Foundation. The Center accepts donations from the public and private sector for its programs and operations. Inquiries should be directed to Scott Snyder at ssnyder@centerforuskoreapolicy.org.

This newsletter is produced by the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy to provide updates and analysis on current policy issues related to the U.S.-ROK alliance partnership. All views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).

To be added to the newsletter listserv, please contact info@centerforuskoreapolicy.org.