

A Roadmap for Expanding U.S.-ROK Alliance Cooperation Cooperation on Global Issues: Peacekeeping

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ABSTRACT

The U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement in June 2009 identified specific areas of cooperation including “coordination on peacekeeping, post-conflict stabilization, and development assistance.” One of the clearest manifestations of shared interests and values between the United States and South Korea is participation in peacekeeping operations (PKO) off the Korean Peninsula. South Korea’s ability to robustly expand its activities in this arena is a strong indication that the ROK is ready to take on a greater regional and global role, in ways that support mutual South Korean and U.S. interests. This would also serve to fulfill President Lee’s stated goal of “Global Korea.” The need for ROK contributions to PKO will only increase in the future, making this the ideal area for expanded cooperation. This paper focuses on the ROK’s PKO activities as a vehicle for U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation in the regional and global arena, examines the rationale for transforming the alliance, and assesses the relevance of PKO participation for both partners.

The United States has stepped up efforts to seek changes in existing alliance structures since 9/11 to meet counter-terrorism and proliferation priorities. For the United States, a global transformation of its military posture has been a key defense priority, with commensurate adjustments in the U.S.-ROK alliance including a request for greater ROK support not only for the alliance’s common defense but also for its new global strategy. While the United States approached the issue of transforming alliances within a global context, on the Korean side alliance transformation was filtered through the prism of national implications. These fundamentally different strategic approaches to what should be common security interests between the two allies have indeed been a source of much of the tension in the alliance in the past decade.

South Korean public debates on participation in PKO have thus far focused on the idea that ROK participation will help maintain and enhance the U.S.-ROK alliance. Embedded in this logic is the implication that the ROK is following U.S. direction rather than perceiving any real independent value from such endeavors. This argument suggests achievement of South Korean national interests is secondary to the primary goal of preserving the alliance relationship with the United States. This conception may indeed have been the driving motivation in the past to justify politically sensitive PKO activities, particularly to a skeptical South Korean public. But Korean leaders would do better in the future to validate these operations through a framework that clearly articulates and demonstrates how they directly contribute to Korean national interests and goals.

The rationale for ROK participation in multinational PKO encompasses a wide range of national interests including: contributing to regional and global security; raising the ROK's international profile through tangible contributions that commensurate with its global economic status; repaying its past debt to the international community; and enhancing the ROK's own security by establishing a reputation as a proactive stabilizing force. Current ROK investments in global PKO also increase the likelihood of future reciprocity by the international community in the event of Korean reunification, which will most likely require tremendous foreign assistance. Participation in multinational operations would provide opportunities for South Korean government officials to learn how to cooperate with foreign counterparts and build relationships and trust, while also improving ROK civil-military operation capabilities.

The ROK's active participation in PKO began with an engineering battalion dispatched to Somalia in 1993. Since then, the ROK has deployed more than 1300 forces for 11 different operations in seven regions. The ROK has contributed far more towards global security and stability operations than it often receives credit for, with the tenth largest financial contributions to the United Nations. In addition to activities explicitly organized under UN command, the ROK has been an active participant in operations coordinated under multinational forces (MNF), which have included direct involvement in the settlement of conflicts and reconstruction efforts. The two largest of such operations, in Iraq and Afghanistan, represent the most visible and tangible contributions by the ROK to international coalition efforts and to its alliance with the United States.

The growing convergence in the global strategic outlooks of the two countries is a welcome development and a necessary requirement for any further transformation of the alliance. South Korea's contribution to international peacekeeping and stabilization operations remains, however, comparatively limited. Despite its middle-power status, ROK can play a unique leadership role in the global community by actively increasing its support for and participation in peacekeeping missions around the world both by offering PKO training and through direct participation. Although it will not be an easy task, with careful coordination and management, South Korea has the potential to make a significant contribution to international stability through PKO activities.