

Cooperation on Functional Issues: Pandemic and Biological Threats

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ABSTRACT

The recent outbreak and rapid spread of new influenza virus H1N1 (swine flu) reaffirms the value of inter-governmental cooperation on pandemic prevention, detection, and treatment efforts. Multilateral coordination and capable international organizations are important, of course, but they are underpinned by strong bilateral relationships. U.S.-ROK cooperation on such pandemic threats can not only help mitigate the near-term dangers, but it can also build a more diverse and sophisticated alliance relationship that would bring together a wider range of ministries, departments, and agencies to address other common challenges.

Recent experience teaches us that even relatively mild and isolated pandemics can cause a great deal of human and economic suffering. Uncoordinated efforts of individuals and countries can also exacerbate negative economic impacts, as evident in the case of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2002 and the disproportionately large economic cost of an estimated \$50 billion in global economic and health losses. The economic impact of the H1N1 outbreak could be equally severe, and an avian flu pandemic could be worse. Thanks to the investments, planning and conferences carried out earlier in the decade in response to heightened avian flu concerns, global preparedness and awareness were improved in time for the H1N1 outbreak. However, continued efforts and vigilance are required to prepare for more intense contingencies since an influenza pandemic usually strikes in multiple waves.

Among global and regional response infrastructures such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), the WHO is identified as the central actor for coordinating global responses to an influenza outbreak. However, because of limited resources, the organization relies on leading regional actors to implement response measures and assist with rapid containment measures, such as antiviral drug distribution, quarantines, travel restrictions, and vaccine production. In the event of pandemic crises, national governments should decide in advance how, when, and under what circumstances to respond given the political and economic consequences of implementing certain measures. The U.S. and Korea, together with a few other key Asia-Pacific countries, have strong agenda-setting power in the region and are able to carry out these measures in coordination with the WHO and other organizations.

Pandemic threats present an attractive opportunity for U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation, resonating with Seoul's "Global Korea" initiative and the allies' Joint Vision statement endorsed by both presidents. While the U.S.-ROK alliance is focused on other priorities, the two countries can carry out modest but constructive bilateral cooperation on pandemic issues in support of the global response infrastructure that already exists. U.S.-ROK collaboration is not only useful to help save lives and limit economic damage, but it can also make practical contributions to global health and prosperity through coordinated development assistance programs and scientific research. In the latest case of the H1N1 outbreak in Mexico, the exchange of information with the United States not only on pandemic control measures but also on the disease itself, allowed South Korean researchers to contribute to vaccine development by beginning to develop the world's first H1N1 vaccine candidate in May.

The U.S.-ROK alliance has several advantages in fighting pandemic threats due to the unique nature of their relationship including close economic, academic, and political ties, as well as the presence of U.S. military forces in Korea. Because force protection is such a critical for both militaries, they are together among the best informed and most prepared organizations when it comes to limiting a pandemic's impact. In addition, U.S. forward deployed troops in Korea are prepared to support the Korean government upon request with rapid containment operations as directed by the secretary of defense, and there are frequent joint training opportunities. Given the military's possible support role, U.S.-ROK civil-military and military-to-military exercises are valuable for optimizing logistics, resources, and capabilities.

Another benefit to U.S.-ROK cooperation is that allied preparation for pandemic threats is a relatively easy way to enhance interoperability and integrate planning in support of civilian agencies and other first responders, so it can be applicable to a wide range of defense challenges (including dealing with potential chemical, biological, and radiological threats). The non-controversial nature of this collaboration will also serve as a basis for trilateral or multilateral cooperation. It can also provide unique opportunities to prepare for more controversial and unpredictable contingencies, such as North Korean collapse scenarios or other regional catastrophes, by involving multiple agencies, ministries, and international organizations in multilateral interactions.

Both countries have committed a large amount of resources at home and abroad to combat the emerging public health threat of an influenza pandemic. Leveraging the strengths of the U.S.-ROK alliance to address the pandemic challenge is not only a responsibility of the two countries, but is also an opportunity for strengthening and diversifying the alliance relationship while contributing to regional stability and prosperity. Together with other partners in the region, Seoul and Washington can play a key role in facilitating global efforts against various pandemic and biological threats by combining strong financial, scientific, and logistical capabilities.