THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE AND ASIAN REGIONALISM

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Asia’s foreign ministers gathered in Bali last month for back-to-back meetings of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Plus Three, and East Asia Summit. The talks were the venue for a surprising inter-Korean meeting between foreign ministers and chief negotiators that set the stage for unexpected U.S.-DPRK talks in New York a week later, implying to some observers that a renewal of Chinese-hosted six party dialogue may be just around the corner. But earlier in Beijing, the Chinese defense minister held back-to-back meetings with the American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the South Korean defense minister, where he vented about the United States to his Korean counterpart. This exchange follows the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson’s critique of the U.S.-ROK alliance as a “historical relic” prior to Hu Jintao’s first summit with Lee Myung-bak months after Lee’s election as South Korea’s president in 2008. Chinese views of the U.S.-ROK alliance raise interesting questions regarding the relationship of the alliance to Asian regionalism.

The alliance plays several roles within Asia’s regional security architecture: First, the U.S.-South Korea alliance is an integral component of the regional architecture and active contributor to global security. President Obama referred to it last summer as the “lynchpin” of Asian security. Bilateral foreign ministerial talks in Washington last June produced a MOU on development assistance cooperation, a step toward realizing the Obama-Lee Joint Vision Statement forged three years ago. South Korea is cooperating with the United States to host the 4th High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness this November in Busan and 2012 Nuclear Security Summit next March in Seoul.

Second, the alliance serves as a benchmark and standard-setter in U.S. economic diplomacy. The allies remain committed to ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), which would signify both the long-term U.S.-ROK strategic partnership and enduring role of the United States as an Asian power. In Hong Kong last month, Secretary Clinton detailed the principles for Asia Pacific prosperity and the role of the United States as a “resident economic power,” placing economics as a U.S. foreign policy priority tied to domestic economic recovery. President Obama’s pledges to double U.S. exports within five years are both more necessary than ever and will not be realized absent further trade liberalization. KORUS FTA will be an essential stepping-stone and momentum-builder toward implementing the “open, free, transparent, and fair” U.S. model in Asia through the realization of the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Third, the U.S.-ROK alliance serves as a platform enabling a more effective South Korean regional and global role. South Korea’s regional engagement is part of its new “middle-power”
strategy of “complex and total diplomacy” under Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan, through which South Korea ambitiously seeks to shape rather than simply respond to the long-term regional security order. Drawing on South Korea’s economic and cultural strengths, this strategy seeks to promote networks of cooperation as an alternative to the great-power competition surrounding the Korean peninsula—with the U.S.-ROK alliance serving as a de facto foundation for such efforts.

The U.S.-ROK alliance remains directly relevant to South Korea’s biggest foreign policy challenge for the foreseeable future: how to manage its security alliance with the United States and economic partnership with China. While closely aligned with the United States, Seoul does not want to get caught in the middle of a rivalry between the United States and China, a mutual strategic partner. For example, South Korea’s Foreign Ministry ahead of the ARF indicated that it would not take sides on the South China Sea, an issue that looms large in ROK assessments of the future regional strategic environment. At the same time, the alliance serves to ensure that China takes South Korea more seriously than it otherwise might if South Korea were to pursue regional diplomacy independent of close cooperation with the United States. The multilayered regional system envisioned by the United States and South Korea builds on the strength and transformation of the U.S.-ROK alliance as well as America’s other Asian security alliances. And to play a leading role in Northeast Asian security the U.S.-ROK alliance must ensure sustained coordination with other regional bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral mechanisms.

The influence of the U.S.-ROK alliance on the development of Asia’s regional security architecture requires the two allies to close the gaps in their own bilateral relationship. Alliance coordination on North Korea in 2010 exposed many enduring challenges for the alliance, including the credible implementation of U.S. extended deterrence and inconsistencies between the views of the two allies on how to effectively implement a strong deterrence posture. Potential differences in dealing with the nuclear issue reveal that the United States and South Korea must reconcile respective understandings of DPRK denuclearization as a global security versus Korean peninsula issue.

Amid ongoing debates on the impact of China’s rise and changes in the regional security architecture, the greatest challenge facing the United States and South Korea is how to jointly integrate and expand their strategic networks without marginalizing China. U.S. and ROK allies along with Japanese counterparts must indeed take concrete actions to indicate an “enduring commitment to building strong, productive, and constructive relations with China” based on the “common objective of creating a peaceful Northeast Asian community of nations.” South Korea’s first defense strategic dialogue with China on July 27—with senior PLA official Ma Xiaotian, China’s leading critic on the U.S.-ROK alliance—is a notable step in this direction. While the extent to which China is willing to accommodate the U.S. alliance system remains uncertain, an emerging parallel concern is the apparent conflict between China-centered economic regionalism in Asia and the U.S. regional economic model, with KORUS at its core.

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NEWS & EVENTS

SEPTEMBER 13, 2011—THE KOREA SOCIETY—
NEW YORK, NY

CHINA-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS
12:00 pm | 950 Third Avenue @ 57th Street, 8th Floor, New York
The Korea Society in New York will host Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, as part of its third session in its series on China-Korea relations.

SEPTEMBER 15-16, 2011—CENTER FOR U.S.-KOREA POLICY AND UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

NORTH KOREA IN TRANSITION
The Center for U.S.-Korea Policy will hold a closed-door workshop on North Korea’s transition as part of a joint project led by Scott Snyder, Center for U.S.-Korea Policy Director, and Kyung-Ae Park, Director of the Center for Korean Research at the University of British Columbia. This event is by invitation only.

PUBLICATIONS

“In 2010, President Obama set a goal of doubling exports by 2014 and adding two million jobs to the US economy. Congressional approval of the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement would make this goal achievable by stimulating job creating, exports, and securing US market share in South Korea’s growing economy.”


“Bipartisan democratic cooperation and support, people to people ties that underpin our shared interests and values, a changing geopolitical landscape in the region, important unfinished business on the Korean peninsula, and Korea’s global interests, and you have a formula for real, equal, effective cooperation.”

—Kathleen Stephens, Remarks at The Korea Society, New York, July 19, 2011

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VIEWS ON THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

“The benefits of KORUS extend beyond the economic bottom line. Because this agreement represents a powerful strategic bet. It signals that America and South Korea are partners for the long term—economically, diplomatically, people to people.”

—Hillary Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State, Remarks on Principles for Prosperity in the Asia-Pacific, Shangri-La, Hong Kong, July 25, 2011