What Can We Explore to Enhance the ROK-US Alliance?

Dear Chairman Lee, Hong-Koo, Mr. Scott Snyder, Mr. Ed Reed, and other distinguished participants.

I really appreciate Chairman Lee’s kind introduction. And thank you to the Asia Foundation for inviting me today. I am currently serving as a Member of the Korean National Assembly and chairing the 2nd Policy Coordination Committee of the Grand National Party (GNP). The committee is responsible for coordinating national policies in the areas of national defense, foreign relations, unification, and international trade between the ruling party and the government. Before beginning my remarks, I would like to clarify that the following opinions are my own and do not represent the official positions of the ROK government or the Grand National Party.

It is an honor to deliver a keynote speech to such a distinguished audience. I trust today’s conference will promote a deep and constructive discussion about exploring new areas of cooperation between the ROK and the US, particularly in light of the joint vision statement agreed to between President Lee and Obama last June. The ROK-US alliance is one of the strongest alliances in the world and the two nations have done well to strengthen, deepen, and expand the alliance until now. I would like to explore possibilities for making the alliance even stronger and broader.
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The beginning of the ROK-US relations was originally the 1882 Treaty between the United States of America and the Kingdom of Chosen. However, this treaty was terminated in 1910 because of the Japanese illegal annexation of the Korean Peninsula. The relationship was restored in 1945 after the end of World War II, strengthened during the Korean War, culminating in the signing in 1953 of the Mutual Defense Treaty, which has successfully sustained the relationship until now. In fact, the ROK-US alliance is often called one of the most successful and robust bilateral alliances. The road we traveled was not always smooth, but we have worked together to overcome challenges and make new opportunities.

The traditional strategic foundation of the ROK-US alliance is based on security cooperation between the two nations. Before the end of the Cold War, the strategic priorities of the ROK-US alliance were exclusively focused on bilateral issues such as deterring North Korean attacks and developing South Korea’s economy and democratic system. But the end of the Cold War portended the beginning of a new era of uncertain times, and the ROK-US alliance was not an exception to this uncertainty. The end of the Cold War brought about domestic transitions in political, economic, cultural, and social areas, as well as international changes. By adapting to these changes, we have developed and sustained an alliance system. In this light, it is worth rethinking whether or not a security-centric view is an appropriate perspective to understand the current status
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of the alliance moving towards comprehensive and global partnership.

Before entering into the 21st century, in the 1990s, the roles and responsibilities of the ROK-US alliance began transforming. The two nations launched and reached the revision of Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) in 1991 and the 1st Special Measure Agreement (SMA) regarding defense burden-sharing. In addition, due to a political demand from both countries and increased Korean military capabilities, the leading role of US Forces in Korea under the Combined ROK-US Defense Structure has began to shift to the supporting role, particularly the transfer of peacetime operational control to the ROK Forces in 1994. During this period, there were remarkable changes of the status of the Republic of Korea in the international arena. The ROK government deployed its first peacekeeping operation forces to Somalia from 1993 to 1994. By graduating from the World Bank’s lending list in 1995, Korea changed from being a recipient to a donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA). With rapid economic restoration and growth from a war-torn country, Korea joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1996.

Over the past few years, we witnessed remarkable changes in the ROK-US alliance. These changes include agreeing to the transfer of wartime operational control, signing the KORUS FTA, upgrading Korea’s status of Foreign Military Sales (FMS) into “NATO+3” level, including Korea in the
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US’s Visa Wavier Program (VWP), and the launching of the WEST student exchange program. A series of these positive changes in such a short time has never happened in the history of the alliance.

I briefly reviewed the evolution of the ROK-US alliance over more than a century. Along with Koreans’ strenuous efforts and cooperation, the alliance played a successful role in developing the Republic of Korea into a leading and responsible member of the international community. In adapting to the changed status of the Republic of Korea in the international arena, the Republic of Korea is no longer seen as an allied partner whose role and responsibility are defined mainly by US regional and global strategic interests.

Now, the alliance is faced with a complex set of future challenges and opportunities in a regional and global context beyond the Korean Peninsula. It is imperative to articulate a joint vision and, accordingly, make mutual efforts to attain common strategic goals for a deeper, broader, and global alliance. In order to successfully overcome these challenges, both allies are required to explore what we can do to enhance the ROK-US alliance further.

I would like to stress the following strategic principles for strengthening, expanding, and upgrading the ROK-US alliance.
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First, before recommending the strategic principles for a future ROK-US alliance, both Koreans and Americans have to realize their views in understanding the changing status of the ROK-US alliance. For instance, within Korean or American society, there is a generational gap in discussing the alliance’s future goals. While the old generation in both societies emphasizes US contribution to the various developments in Korea and thus overestimating the relative importance of a bilateral alliance in comparing to a global alliance, the young generation appreciates the alliance’s changing status and thus the importance of transforming the alliance’s structure into a future-oriented contour with taking into consideration Korea’s increased capabilities and the demand of expanding the area of alliance-based cooperation.

I am not attempting to discern which view is right or wrong, rather pointing out the coexistence of different views. Without understanding and harmonizing these different views, exploring what we can do to enhance the ROK-US alliance by considering the following principles would not be effective.

Second, it is unquestionable that the success of forming and managing the alliance depends on balancing the national interests of both allied partners. Balancing interests requires partners to build political confidence and trust, articulate a joint vision for achieving mutual goals,
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and lastly continue strategic consultation. This process takes place at both
domestic and bi-lateral level. At a domestic level, reaching a public
consensus is a foremost goal. In democratic societies like Korea and the
US, a number of actors from government and the private sector can
influence the process of decision-making about how best to achieve
national interests as a result of negotiations between allied partners. An
obvious example is the Korean public’s opposition to the US beef import
agreement in 2008. Due to public demonstrations in the streets of Seoul,
the two nations made an additional agreement to strengthen the safety
conditions of US beef imports in Korea.

On a bi-lateral level, state representatives deal with both domestic and
international variables. International variables include the impact of
negotiations on international relations and allied partners’ relations with
other countries. As the scope of the ROK-US alliance expands in various
areas such as security matters, trade, culture, education, religion, and so on,
managing and sustaining the alliance becomes more difficult.

Balancing does not mean a mathematical balance of each area separately,
but balanced trade-offs among areas in a comprehensive manner. For
instance, the KORUS FTA is a result of balanced trade-offs among all
provisions. Some provisions may give a bigger interest to Korea or the
US than other provisions, but the two parties reached balanced trade-offs.
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The more difficult it is to pursue balanced trade-offs between national interests, the bigger the gap of national power. In other words, a small power allying with a big power often fears potential abandonment and entrapment by the big power. In order to maintain the successful balance of national interests, it is critical to expand the benefits of alliance and create public consensus about mutual interests of the alliance.

Third, although the ROK-US alliance is no longer solely a security-oriented alliance, North Korea’s military threats such as nuclear weapon development and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction seem to be a continuing significant variable in discussing the future of the alliance. For instance, the ROK-US alliance traveled a troubled road for the past decade because the two nations’ different perspectives on addressing North Korean issues. It should not be understood mistakenly that the ROK-US alliance is solely a strategic means to discuss and resolve North Korean issues, including cooperation with other issue-related countries if necessary. In other words, North Korea should not become an obstacle to the ROK and the US achieving the future-oriented strategic goals of the alliance. The reason is that in a strategic context the alliance covers a range of issues directly or indirectly associated with the broad national interests of the two nations.

The United States’s strategic priority with North Korea is denuclearization.
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and the prevention of WMD proliferation from the Korean Peninsula. In order to achieve these goals, the US has initiated multilateral efforts such as the launching of PSI in 2003 and close cooperation with the UN Security Council. Currently, Korea actively participates in US-led multilateral efforts. In this context, alliance-based cooperation between Korea and the US aims to promote international consensus and consistency in dealing with North Korean issues.

In order to remove potential uncertainty caused by North Korean issues which may endanger the future of the alliance, it is essential that both governments should not deflect attention from addressing other strategic issues that will shape the configuration of the future-oriented ROK-US alliance. This does not mean underestimating the importance of resolving North Korean issues such as making a collective strategic plan for preparing for North Korea’s sudden change. But we have to remember the danger of North Korea’s traditional approach of driving a strategic wedge between Korea and the US by luring the alliance to excessively focus on North Korean issues to the exclusion of our broader strategic interests.

Fourth, exploring new areas of cooperation is vital to enhance the ROK-US alliance. As a responsible member of the international community and the world 11th largest economy, the Republic of Korea

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takes new initiatives of improving and increasing its contribution to addressing international issues such as global peace and prosperity, climate change, development assistance, human rights, and so on. In this light, it is a welcoming signal that the two major highlights of the Lee administration’s foreign policy are to strengthen its commitment to international peacekeeping operations and increasing the volume of Korea’s Official Development Assistance (ODA). In line with this policy direction, the Korean National Assembly has been seriously working with the government in order to introduce and pass related bills. In addition, Korea’s hosting of G20 meeting in November 2010 is not for being taken granted, but representing the increasing roles and responsibilities of Korea in a global arena.

Between the two nations, President Lee and Obama agreed to a joint vision of the ROK-US alliance last June at their Washington summit. Moving towards a joint vision requires the alliance to expand its scope, roles, and responsibilities at every level. In this process, one important caveat is that the ROK-US alliance should not be a constraint on the two nations’ respective engagement in Asia and other regions.

Fifth, compared to the past history of the alliance which was focused on the achievement of explicit and short-term mutual goals, the future of the alliance should be guided by the strengthened sharing of common
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values such as democracy, a market-oriented economy, human rights, and so on. As the alliance expands extensively in a political, economic, social, and cultural context, an object-based alliance would not be a sustainable foundation for the future of the ROK-US alliance. For instance, the alliance is faced with global issues such as the international financial crisis and climate change. These issues could not be addressed on the basis of a short-term plan, but enduring and consistent mutual efforts. In addition, benefits from resolving these global issues go to not only Korea and the US, but also the international community. For this reason, shifting the basis of the alliance from being object-oriented to value-oriented is important for establishing a robust and solid foundation for the future ROK-US alliance.

This effort is already underway. The inclusion of Korea in the US’s Visa Waiver Program (VWP) and the launching of the WEST student exchange program greatly contribute to people-to-people exchange between the two nations. Koreans and Americans take advantage of these new opportunities to increase their mutual understanding about each other, thus having a bigger attraction to each other than ever before in history. As this natural exchange increases at various areas and levels, the two nations certainly would be able to strengthen their common values.

Challenge and opportunity usually coexist. The future waits for those
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who are grasping opportunities while overcoming challenges. I strongly believe that challenges and opportunities facing the ROK-US alliance will converge as a strategic catalyst for transforming the ROK-US alliance into global partnership.

Thank you very much