The ROK-US Alliance and the Future of US Forces in South Korea

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Abstract

During the Cold War, it was “convergent interest” that supported the ROK-US alliance. However, in the new circumstances, in which the former USSR collapsed, and with it the major external enemy to challenge US supremacy, the ROK-US alliance formed in the Cold War had to be redefined in accordance with the strategic environment of the 21st century.

After the Cold War, there were largely three directions as to how the alliance should proceed. However, the only realistic format is the “redefinition” scenario, based on maintenance of the ROK-US alliance. There can be three aspects to the scenario redefinition. The first is “strengthening the alliance,” the second is “flexibility of the alliance,” and the third is “political alliance without US forces.” The first scenario is more of “reassurance of the alliance” than of “redefinition of the alliance,” in the sense that its purpose is to maintain the Cold War alliance in the post-Cold War era. The second and third scenarios can herald “transformation of the ROK-US alliance,” in that it seeks to transform the nature of the existing alliance.

Considering the new military strategy being pursued by the United States, it is believed to be not easy to present a clear direction for revising the ROK-US alliance. Whereas the United States is strengthening its alliances worldwide, the new Korean administration is maintaining a policy of moving toward a pliable alliance. So, at some point in time a clash between two opposing streams of thought on this issue is inevitable. But, if advantage is taken of the fact that the new US military strategy is developed into reduction of armed forces in the frontline, it will be possible with better efforts to develop the alliance relationship in a pliable way without damaging the traditional friendly relationship.
Introduction

The year 2003 marks the 50th anniversary of the formation of the ROK-US alliance with the signing of the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). For the past half-century, the alliance not only deterred the security threat from North Korea, but also blocked the North’s attempts to proliferate weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Furthermore, it prevented the possibility of an arms race between China and Japan, and stopped the emergence of a regional hegemonic power, all of which significantly contributed to the maintenance of peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

However, the alliance has not always been smoothly sailing. Changes in the ROK-US alliance have always been initiated by the unilateral strategies devised by the United States, and South Korea was faced with the dilemma posed by the alliance and did nothing but react to US-initiated strategic changes. It was probably inevitable, in that the nuclear umbrella provided by the United States was then absolutely necessary, given the existence of enemies such as the former Soviet Union and the socialist world led by it that existed during the Cold War era. However, in the new circumstances in which the former Soviet Union collapsed, thus removing the major external threat to US supremacy, the ROK-US alliance formed in the Cold War had to be redefined in accordance with the changing strategic environment of the 21st century.

Whereas NATO and Japan, both of which were in alliance with the United States, redefined the nature of their respective alliances, the ROK-US alliance has maintained its framework as it was in the Cold War era. In 1990, the US Department of Defense (DoD) attempted to modify this alliance, with the main elements involving a three-phase withdrawal of the US military from South Korea, based upon the “Nunn-Warner Amendment.” However, it was stopped after suspicions surfaced over North Korea’s nuclear development.

After the Cold War ended, discussion and research on a “redefinition” of the ROK-US alliance have started in many respects. One of the most representative of all those attempts was the report titled, “New Alliance for the Next Century,” co-researched by KIDA and the RAND Institute.1 This report examined the strategic environment in Northeast Asia in the post-Cold War era, and from a military relations perspective, considered what desirable direction the ROK-US alliance should take. However, a “redefinition” was not carried out due to various factors, such as the death of North Korean leader, Kim Il-Sung, and the famine and ensuing crisis in the political system in North Korea.

It was at the 34th ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting in December of 2002 that “redefinition” of the alliance surfaced again at governmental level. Both South Korea and the United States held meetings on the theme, “Future of the ROK-US Alliance Policy Initiative,” in April, June and July of 2003 and reviewed the plan for capability enhancement, Yongsan relocation, the transfer of military missions, and the realignment of US forces in South Korea.2 All sides are awaiting the outcome of the “redefinition” because the process has been under way in the midst of an unstable security environment, such as the South-North summit in June 2000, the inauguration of the Bush Administration in 2001, the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the re-emergence of the North Korean nuclear threat. Moreover, US Ambassador Thomas Hubbard to South Korea, also recognized the need for a “new division of labor” between South Korea and the United States.3

A number of scholars and experts, both at home and abroad, have pointed out the need for a “redefinition” of the alliance, which had been postponed since the end of the Cold War. However, there is no consensus, even among these experts, about the direction that this “redefinition” process should take. Not only has the strategic environment changed in a revolutionary way with the end of the Cold War and the improvement of the relationship between the two Koreas, but also US global strategies and views on the alliance have changed since the events of September 11. It is therefore inevitable that differences exist in perspectives on the direction of the redefinition according to which aspect(s) should be emphasized. In this respect, this paper examines ways to redefine the ROK-US alliance and to present a desirable direction.

Strategic Environment Surrounding the Korean Peninsula and the ROK-US Alliance

In order to “redefine” the ROK-US alliance in the 21st century, the strategic environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula should first be assessed. To these days, despite the global post-Cold War atmosphere, a “regional Cold War” order has been maintained on the Peninsula. However, since the South-North summit in June 2000, the strategic environment surrounding the Korean Peninsula has started to change considerably. But, despite the changes on the Peninsula, the strategic milieu is still unstable, due to the rigidity of the Cold War structure of Northeast Asia. I will first look at the arguments of “Threat from the North” and “Chinese Supremacy,” which act as the major variables in the strategic environment of the Peninsula. I then move on to examine the alliance strategies of the United States and the current status of the ROK-US alliance after the Cold War, and then seek ways to “redefine” the alliance.

Assessment of the Strategic Environment on the Korean Peninsula in the 21st Century

Does a “Threat from the North” Still Exist?

The historic South-North summit in June 2000 brought about a new “wind of change” in Korea, which has been divided for 55 years. The most remarkable change was the fact that perceptions of the North as a threat started to weaken drastically among Southerners. Contentions that the threat from the North had dissolved emerged with Joint Declaration of the South-North summit and reached their peak when then president Kim Dae-jung announced that “there will be no war” upon arriving at the airport in Seoul after the summit.

However, support for the idea of a significant dissolution of the threat from the North did not last long. When the North refused to agree on anything regarding the building of mutual trust and measures to ease tension—it merely handed over a gift of song-i mushroom to the South—skepticism began to rise. Contentions regarding a threat from the North re-emerged with the testimonies in the US Congress by George Tenet, CIA director, and General Schwartz commander of the ROK-US Combined Force. Testimonies such as these about the North’s threat supported the skepticism that had been raised in South Korea, and conflicted head-on with the argument that the North’s threat had been dissolved, which had been prevalent in South Korea since the South-North summit.4

It was with the inauguration of the Bush Administration in February 2001 that the United States and South Korea revealed tension regarding the issue of whether the North’s threat had dissipated or not. The Bush Administration’s hard-line policies toward North Korea re-emerged with the US president’s inclusion of North Korea in an “Axis of Evil,” together with Iraq and Iran, manifesting itself most clearly when the United States named the country as a possible target of a preemptive nuclear attack in “Nuclear Posture Review” (NPR).5 The negative perception of the United States on the part of North Korea conflicted with the “Sunshine” policy promoted by the South Korean government, and underlying tension was thus generated between the governments of the two countries.

Meanwhile, at the height of World Cup fever on June 29, 2002, a North Korean patrol ship launched a surprise attack on a South Korean patrol boat, causing six deaths in South Korean territory south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL) around Yeonpyeong Island in the waters west of the Peninsula. The skirmish showed that the North’s antagonistic attitude toward the South has not changed at all. Subsequently, however, atmosphere of South-North rapprochement was nurtured when the North Korean sports team participated in the Asian Games held in the South and separated families of the two Koreas met each other. However, when the North’s plan to enrich uranium was disclosed in October 2002, it was clear that a security threat from the North still existed.

To make matters worse, in a Pyeongyang Foreign Ministry state-

5 DoD, Nuclear Posture Review [Experts], Submitted to Congress on Dec. 31, 2001 (Jan. 8, 2002).
been falling under the influence of the China-led peace order since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975.

Traditionally, the long-term goal of the United States in the Asian region has been to clear any obstacles in this region when it wants to make political, economic and military advances, and to prevent resources from being channeled into any particular country in the region to the extent that it can become an economic threat to the United States—as was the case with the former Soviet Union—to prevent any regional power from posing a threat to US supremacy in the region.\(^7\)

Seen from that perspective, China acts as an obstacle blocking the realization of US goals in the region. In fact, the United States has been designating China as a new threat in the Asian region since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had been the major enemy in the Cold War era.

The East Asia Strategy Initiative\(^8\) published in 1992, was the first literature in which the post-war United States characterized China as a “potential element of instability” in East Asia. The reasons cited were that China’s new leadership had not consolidated its power base, that the country was unceasingly modernizing its military, that it proceeded with the proliferation of nuclear and missile technologies, and that it always contained seeds of conflict in its relationship with Taiwan.\(^9\)

In the new millennium, the United States has moved its axis of security strategies from Europe to Asia, because the country is acutely aware of the potential threat posed by China. As can be seen from the fact that President Bush designated China as a “strategic contender” in his 2000 presidential election campaign, the United States considers

**Possibility of the Emergence of a Regional Hegemonic Power**

Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a coexistence of “Pax Americana,” centered on the United States, and a “Pax Sinica” with its axis around China. The two Great Powers exert overwhelming influence over the countries that fall under their sphere of power and manage East Asian countries under a bipolar system of peace. East Asian nations fall under the influence of one of the two Great Powers depending on their own geopolitical advantages.

Japan gave up its own independent defense line, forming a new US-Japan guideline in 1997 under the US nuclear umbrella and concluded its own “redefinition” that strengthened the US-Japan alliance. Singapore also has been providing the United States with a naval base on its own soil, and the Philippines, which once demanded the withdrawal of US troops from its soil is again redefining the US-Philippines alliance by authorizing joint military drills and training exercises since 2000 after signing the “Status of Visiting US Forces Agreement” with the United States in 1998.\(^6\) In contrast, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar—countries that are on the periphery of the Asian Continent—have

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7 Zalmay Khalilzad et al., The United States and Asia: Toward a New US Strategy and Force Posture (Santa Monica: RAND, 2001), p. 43.
China’s political and military expansion as the biggest factor that can undermine US interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, the Bush administration’s focal strategy on Asia can be summarized as: “Embracing Japan and keeping an eye on China.”

The RAND report published on May 15, 2001, also portrayed US strategies in Asia along the same lines. The same report argues that although the United States has focused its attention on Northeast Asia for the past 50 years, it should now expand its attention to encompass the whole of Asia by “coping with the potential threat posed by China, ensuring stability in Southeast Asia, and reducing the threat of nuclear confrontation between India and Pakistan.” In order for the United States to accomplish that, the report then argues that it should expand its military power further to Southeast Asia. The report suggests that the United States should prepare against China’s expansion strategies, by utilizing Guam as the pivotal base in Asia so that its naval and air forces can swiftly operate in the South China Sea and the Southeast Asia region, deploy US troops to the Ryukyu Islands situated between Okinawa and Taiwan, and expand its base even further to Okinawa, the Philippines and Vietnam.

These deterrence strategies by the United States against China will have a great impact on the direction of the “redefinition” that the ROK-US alliance will take in the 21st century. The United States has kept a wary eye on the expansion of Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula. Washington figures that the determination of allies such as South Korea and Japan as well as China’s behavior are essential in order to avoid the situation in which the now-defunct threat from the Soviet Union is replaced by a “threat from China” and to maintain stability in the region. China continues to be the only strategic supporter of North Korea since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and has emerged as South Korea’s largest export market—replacing the formerly No.1 US market. Despite the ROK-US MDT, South Korea relies on China just as much as it depends on the United States for security against North Korea and dissolution of the Cold War system. This “China factor” is most likely to be a significant factor in “redefining” the ROK-US alliance in the 21st century.

**US Alliance Strategies and the ROK-US Alliance after the Cold War**

The dissolution of the Cold War structure and the ensuing post-Cold War atmosphere, which started in Eastern Europe, spread into the Northeast Asian region. However, elements of conflict that had been latent during the Cold War and those that have newly emerged are threatening security in this region. The multi-layered process of dissolution of the Cold War structure made for a tenuous security structure in Northeast Asia, in which Cold War elements and those of the post-Cold War intersect.

During the Cold War, it was “convergent interest” that supported the ROK-US alliance. That is, both countries maintained the military alliance under the convergent interest of deterring the threat from North Korea and expansion of the Soviet Union. The ROK-US alliance, along with US-Japan alliance, played a role in the US scheme of strategies in Northeast Asia. In the 1960s, the United States attempted to tie South Korea and Japan into one regional alliance in its drive for a “Regional Integration Strategy.” However, the attempts were unsuccessful due to South Korea’s deep mistrust of and caution against Japan. Military cooperation during the Cold War started with the visit to South Korea by Yamashita who was the Director of Defense Agency in 1979, but has not progressed much further since.

However, the United States has since the Cold War yet again been promoting its plan to fit the ROK-US alliance into the framework of a

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“redefined US-Japan alliance.” This idea is a duplication of “unified regional strategies” in the 1960s that aimed for a Northeast Asia alliance by including South Korea and Taiwan (informal) in the US-Japan alliance. The US-Japan Joint Declaration on Security in April 1996 and a revision of Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation on Sept. 23, 1997 were merely the first steps toward the realization of a Northeast Asian version of a regional alliance: “The United States and Japan: Advancing toward a Mature Partnership,” a report written by Japan experts in the US Democratic and Republican parties in October 2000, supports this idea by suggesting that the US-Japan alliance be upgraded to the level of the US-Britain alliance. It is a well-known fact that the US-Britain alliance plays a pivotal role in representing US interests in NATO, a regional alliance.

It was after the test launch of North Korea’s “Taep’o-dong Missile” in August 1998 that this idea of US strategies in Northeast Asia became a reality. The event prompted South Korea, the United States and Japan to begin strategic discussions. The Taep’o-dong Missile led to the “Perry Report” in order to prepare joint measures to cope with North Korean missile issues, and the formation of the Trilateral Coordination & Oversight Group (TCOG) to take full charge of strategic consultation on North Korea. The TCOG has been conducting regular consultations ever since.

The formation of the TCOG and inclusion of Japan were viewed by the Japanese diplomatic strategist, Hisahiko Okazaki, as “the most remarkable diplomatic achievement on the Korean Peninsula after the Second World War.” Although the TCOG is in a limited and loose form, it carries significance in that it is an embryonic regional alliance among South Korea, the United States and Japan. It is for this reason that the Bush administration continued to support the TCOG, even when it subjected to review every policy set up by the Clinton administration, including the “Perry Process” under the “ABC (Anything But Clinton) Policy.” Although the TCOG was formulated due to the North Korean threat, it is significant in regard to the direction of progress of the ROK-US alliance.16

However, it is too early to discuss the possibility of developing the ROK-US-Japan relationship into a regional alliance. Although there is a plan to form a “Northeast Asia Command” in order to defend the Northeast Asian region, including such areas as the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan Strait, and Japan, the building of a regional alliance against such powers as China and Russia could be undesirable, in that such an alliance could undermine security in Northeast Asia. It is also a Cold War style idea to discuss regional security without inclusion of Russia and China.

Korea and the United States have embarked upon joint consultation over the “Future of the ROK-US Alliance Policy Initiative.” The process should be carried out not only in the interests of the peace process on the Korean Peninsula but also to promote order in Northeast Asia during and after the possible reunification of the two Koreas. In addition, the process of redefinition of the ROK-US alliance should be based upon a reassessment of the threat posed by North Korea and the possibility of China becoming a superpower, and also upon an assessment of Korea’s long-term national interests in regard to US-led Northeast Asia strategies. In order to make the ROK-US alliance relevant to the 21st century, the alliance should, first of all, be based upon a convergence of interests.

**Three Scenarios for the ROK-US Alliance in the 21st Century and the USFK**

After the Cold War, there are three major directions in which the alliance should proceed. The first path is to redefine the existing alliance under a new vision after the dissolution of the North Korean threat. The second path is to seek a new alliance. The third path is to achieve a self-sufficient national defense through an independent military build-up. The second path is not viable because South Korea still harbors antagonism toward Japan and lack of trust in China. The third


The first scenario for the ROK-US alliance is to strengthen the alliance to keep up with the new environment for security strategies. This scenario was presented through the US "Quadrennial Defense Review" (QDR) after September 11, and it argues for forming a community of nations that act for the same purposes and strengthening security cooperative relations among those nations. President Bush designated Asian countries such as Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, and Taiwan as those that share the same values as the United States, and named them as "free Pacific nations" and spoke in favor of the formation of an international anti-terrorist solidarity.

Therefore, "strengthening the alliance" means that the alliance will be strengthened by way of participating actively in the US-led international solidarity for anti-terrorism. More specifically, strengthening the alliance and partnership means that these countries will participate in multinational military operations to increase operational application in times of both war and peace, fortify preparation in times of peace, and expand the participation of allied countries in joint and coordinated military drills and exercises.18

In the NPR published Jan. 9, 2002, presented to the US Congress by the US DoD after the Quadrennial Review (QDR), the Bush administration proclaimed a new military strategy that stipulates that the country will "act regardless of whether there was preemptive attack or not and without being bound by existing agreements in order to root out threats in advance." North Korea is one of the "rogue states" designated by the United States, and will always remain a US target to rid weapons anytime if the former does not voluntarily give up nuclear weapons, stop missile development and discard biochemical weapons.

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Therefore, according to the scenario of strengthening the ROK-US alliance, the military purpose of the alliance is to be strengthened in order to suit joint strategies to deal with North Korea’s WMD and international terrorism that pose a great threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula and security in the East Asia region. South Korea’s defense policies and military strategies should be reorganized accordingly. In

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forces are also likely to go through a realignment process, i.e., assignment of the minimum capability of “major defense forces” and “rapid-response forces” to the ROK forces. Operational control over the ROK-US combined forces will be taken over by the US Northeast Asia Command; however, peacetime and wartime operational control over the rest of the ROK military forces will be exercised independently by the ROK military.

Under this scenario, the ROK military forces will play a pivotal role in the “major defense forces,” which serves as a deterrence against North Korean aggression on the divided Korean Peninsula, with the ROK-US CPC taking charge of a US reinforcement plan, including reception, staging, onward movement, and integration in emergency, as well as combined planning. “Rapid-response forces” will be formed in a way that the US Marines and Air Forces under the US Northeast Asia Command will serve as an axis joined by part of the dispatched ROK forces. “Rapid-response forces” will serve as a mobile force with a high-level of military readiness so that they can move promptly to crisis areas in emergency situations such as terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, inflows of refugees and emergency aid, etc., on and around the Korean Peninsula. “Augmentation forces” will be a potential force to guarantee deterrence on the Korean Peninsula, which will consist mainly of forces from the US Northeast Asia Command, the Pacific Command and those from the United States proper.

If a US Northeast Asia Command is established, the US Forces Commands in Korea and Japan are likely to be dissolved automatically, with the US Forces Korea placed under the direct control of the US Northeast Asia Command. In such a case, it is expected that the ROK-US Combined Forces Command (CFC) will be inevitably dismantled and the CFC is most likely to be transformed into a tentatively named ROK-US Combined Planning Command (CPC), or at least will be reduced to a minimum scale. Should this scenario materialize, the ROK-US combined capabilities are expected to find their subordinate capabilities subdivided into “major defense forces,” “rapid-response forces” and “augmentation forces” according to the mission and role of each component. In line with such a transformation, the ROK military

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the Peninsula, with the ROK military taking over the role of “major defense forces.” Instead, the US Marines and Air Force are to fill the void left by the ground forces and become the main component of “rapid-response forces.” In this case, it will become unavoidable to modify the existing “threat-based” relocation plan for the USFK and subsequently the Operational Plan (OPLAN) 5027 devised for the ROK-US CFC. In addition, “capability-based” relocation of the USFK will become a possibility, so that they can respond to any threat in this part of the world. According to this initiative, the ROK military is to be able to join as a member the swift reaction forces to secure the stability of the region in an emergency, while focusing on the defense of Korea under its own independent command and control structure, a direction that would meet the Bush administration’s “global coalition against terrorism” initiative.

Such an initiative to strengthen the ROK-US alliance has been raised by the hard-liners within the Bush administration that have advocated an international coalition against terrorism in line with the neo-military strategy since the September 11 terrorist attacks and has now almost become a reality. The initiative to strengthen the ROK-US alliance, however, cannot escape the criticism that it is raising tension on the Korean Peninsula, based solely on the US global strategy, by labeling the North a “rogue state,” a “terrorism supporting country,” or a “target for preemptive strikes,” while failing to consider the unique situation the Korean Peninsula is faced with. Also, many Koreans are concerned that the alliance-strengthening plan promoted by Washington and its initiative of the Northeast Asian Command may pour cold water on the ameliorating atmosphere in inter-Korean relations and cause a backlash from China, thereby undermining stability on the Peninsula.

In order for the ROK-US alliance strengthening initiative to gain persuasive power among the Korean people, it is necessary more than anything else to depart from the unilateralism of the US government today. It is also imperative to be able to explain how a stronger ROK-US alliance will contribute to dismantling the Cold War structure on the Peninsula and the peace-building process. Furthermore, in order to demonstrate that such a stronger-alliance initiative is not to revert to the alliance of the Cold War era, it is essential to present a vision for the future that is based on common values which the people of both South Korea and the United States can share and pursue together, rather than promoting negative campaigns such as anti-terrorism or anti-proliferation propaganda.

**Flexibility of the ROK-US Alliance and Restructuring the USFK**

The second scenario for fostering the ROK-US alliance is to go beyond the nature of the alliance that was shaped during the Cold-War era and share norms of a new alliance, which is higher than a simple defense alliance, by reflecting the improved relations between the two Koreas, and to transform the alliance into an equal one which will fit South Korea’s stronger national power today. The report released by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff that claims that the nature of the US Forces Korea and Japan relationship should be changed in the long term to one of “guests” or “partners,” and not “occupation forces,” can be understood in the same vein.21

For a “flexible alliance” to materialize, any of either objective or subjective conditions must be satisfied. For objective conditions, it is required as preconditions that reconciliation and cooperation above all should continue between North and South Korea in parallel with the peace process on the Peninsula. Just as the threat of the North has led to the ROK-US alliance fitting the Cold-War days, it is crystal-clear that the 21st century requires the formation of a new alliance that has outgrown the previous Cold-War framework, when the North’s threat is expected to lapse and the tension may be dissolved between the two Koreas.

Subjective conditions are also to be met in order to redefine the alliance based on “flexibility.” Since the end of the Cold War, alliances in Europe and Japan have undergone various changes to embrace flexibility. South Korea, however, has been an exception. It is because not only the objective conditions, as was manifested by the constant threats posed by the North on the Peninsula during the 1990s, but also subjec-

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enhance the swift reaction capabilities. The scale of the USFK according to this scenario is expected to be similar to what is projected in the three-phase USFK reduction plan in the East Asia Strategic Initiative, a.k.a. EASI, drafted under the former Bush administration in April 1990. The three-phase USFK realignment plan shows that a minimum scale of US forces will remain on the Peninsula, depending on North Korea’s threats or the US forces’ regional role in the final phase. The minimum scale herein refers to retaining one fighter jet unit of the 5th US Air Force and military personnel at the level of the ROK-US combined planning team.

In this case, disintegration of the CFC will become unavoidable and most of the US installations, including the Yongsan base, training areas, powder magazines, etc., will be integrated, closed or relocated, according to the large-scale reduction plan of the USFK. These actions are also expected to resolve most of the complaints from local residents. Also, disintegration of the CFC will make for the localization of the defense of South Korea, and then the wartime operational control held by the CFC will be returned to the ROK government. The ROK-US combined command control system after the transfer of wartime operational control can be reorganized on the basis of the NATO or Japanese models.\footnote{Victor Cha and Ham, Jae-bong, “The Future of the United States-Republic of Korea Alliance” in Yoichi Funabashi ed., Comparative Studies of Alliances: New International Order After Cold War (Tokyo: Nihonhyoronsha, 2001), pp. 56–59 [in Japanese]; Ok-im Jeong, “Peace on the Korean Peninsula and the USFK: Direction for Redefinition of the ROK-US Alliance” (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 2001), pp. 47–51 [in Korean]; Geon-young Park, “America’s New Northeast Asia Strategy and the Readjusting Korea-US Relationship,” pp. 30–38, a paper presented at the 7th Sejong National Forum of the Sejong Institute held on May 17, 2002 in Seoul [in Korean].} It is suggested that the NATO and Japanese cases be compromised as a transitional model when the threats from the North still exist. And when military tension is eased, e.g., with peace established on the Korean Peninsula, it is possible to shift to a parallel command control system, as is the case in Japan. This will be similar to the situation in NATO, where the US-European security relationship is evolving increasingly into a structure that places more emphasis on bilateral partnership, moving away from the unilateral leadership exercised by
the United States—“More partnership and less leadership”—in the post-Cold War era.

A “flexible alliance” is required for a sound evolution of the ROK-US alliance; however, tough stumbling blocks should be anticipated in achieving this. We remember that although the need for a “flexible alliance” was raised following the North-South summit talks in June 2000, this scenario had to suffer setbacks due to Pyongyang’s passive attitude toward mitigation of military tension and to the appearance of the Bush administration that has adopted a hard-line position toward Pyongyang. What makes it particularly difficult for this scenario to unfold, is the fact that Washington has recently begun to place greater emphasis on the Northeast Asian region while promoting its neo-military strategy, to which there is a tendency of opposition expressed even in Europe and Japan, where “redefinition of alliance” has already been made. The initiative of an independent European integrated force that had been promoted by European countries since the 1990s got nowhere and Europe ended up being incorporated into the US-led NATO. Japan’s Self Defense Army, too, is reviewing an integrated defense consultation body with the United States, as it is joining practically collective defense activities. Given the recent state of affairs with regard to international security alliances as mentioned above, we may come to wonder if the alliance, which had been growing more flexible is about to stiffen.

In the event that the United States seeks to promote its own neo-military capabilities in a unilateral manner on and around the Peninsula, it may not be easy for the ROK and the US governments to find a harmonious solution without damaging their traditional friendship. For that reason, even if the ROK government pursues a “flexible alliance” at all, when the United States seeks to limit the change in alliance to readjusting the functionality of part of the USFK, such as integration, closure and relocation of USFK installations, subsequent relocation of the 2nd Infantry Division to south of the Han River and reduction of part of the groundforces—that is, operational flexibility rather than transformation of the nature of alliance—the two sides may find it rather difficult to reach an agreement.

**Political Alliance without the US Forces**

It is generally accepted that one cannot think of the ROK-US alliance without thinking in terms of the presence of the USFK and a ROK-US alliance without the presence of the USFK is not even imaginable. Such acceptance came to take root because of the imperfection of the ROK-US MDT. Contrary to the North Atlantic Treaty or the US-Japan Security Treaty, the ROK-US MDT does not include a provision on automatic involvement and that is why the US military’s automatic involvement has been practically guaranteed by considering the US ground forces in Korea as playing a “tripwire” role.23 In that sense, the MDT without the presence of the USFK would be merely an imperfect security guarantee document. Thus, it has been accepted that the essence of the ROK-US military alliance is the presence of the USFK and the combined command system that the USFK is maintaining with the ROK military.

The presence of US forces in Korea, however, may not always be a precondition for an alliance with the United States. The United States today maintains bilateral alliances with South Korea, Japan, Australia and Thailand in the Asia-Pacific region. And yet, it has 110 and 450 personnel stationed in Australia and Thailand, respectively, as liaison officials, contrary to the way the alliance is being implemented in South Korea and Japan. Instead, Australia not only participates in the US-led multinational military exercises—including the RIMPAC and the Team Challenge—but also conducts the Australia-US joint military exercise called Tandem Thrust on a biennial basis.24 Thailand, too, holds joint military exercise programs with the United States, such as Cobra Gold and Cope Tiger. As for the NATO member states that are alliances of the United States, the US forces are not stationed in all of the allied states. As can be understood from those cases, the presence of the US alliance...
forces is not a necessary precondition, but a sufficient condition for alliance.

The scenario that redefines the current ROK-US alliance produced in the Cold-War era as a political alliance without the US forces envisages that the USFK, whether being its ground forces or its air force, will be entirely pulled out of the Peninsula, while guaranteeing the US forces free access to the facilities within South Korea, joint military exercises to provide against emergency situations and continued presence of the Military Advisory Group. If this scenario ever becomes a reality, the ROK-US alliance will evolve into one that will face no friction with local residents over problems related to military installations or training areas or no burden of sharing cost for stationing forces. It is what this scenario envisages: Developing into a political alliance without stationing US forces in Korea.

This scenario of a “political alliance without USFK” may sound very radical, and yet, it does have aspects that match the modification of the US military strategy, currently under review by the Bush administration. Washington’s neo-military strategy is based on the following three conditions: Firstly, regular collective military exercises with alliances within a bloc to be equipped with joint reaction capability in an emergency; secondly, smooth cooperation with alliances and friendly nations so that the US forces are guaranteed free access to local sea ports or airports, with storage of ammunition and military equipment as well as provision of military supplies being facilitated; and thirdly, reinforcing its swift troop deployment capability and precision strike capability. Thus, an “alliance without US forces” is not impossible to implement, since Washington’s neo-military strategy does not presuppose a local presence of the US forces as described above.

This scenario can be an option in consideration of the anti-American sentiment and political activism currently spreading among the Korean public, and yet, it carries a number of fundamental limitations. Once the forward deployment of the US forces disappears on the Korean Peninsula after the “political alliance without USFK” materializes, this

would have an immediate effect upon the capacity of the US forces in Japan. Because the US-Japan Security Treaty commits the US Forces Japan not only to the “safety of Japan” but to “peace and safety of the Far East Asia,” if the US forces are pulled out of South Korea, it is a foregone conclusion that the US 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force stationed in Okinawa would be put under pressure of withdrawal. If that ever happens, a big security issue will emerge as to who would be able to fill the role that has been assumed by the United States as a balancer and stabilizer in East Asia after the US forces withdraw from the region.

Another problem inherent in this scenario is that, in an alliance without the USFK, there is no sure method of securing the biggest support for peace management tasks following the establishment of a peace regime on the Peninsula, or for the unification process on the Peninsula. The question is raised that when it is indispensable to secure participation of major powers in an international body for guaranteeing and administrating peace in the process of building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, will that be achieved properly with the US forces withdrawn? Furthermore, just as the United States played an essential role in the process of German unification, the USFK is likely to be requested to play a significant role if a peace process makes progress on the Peninsula, even if the North’s military threats diminish in the future as a result of increased reconciliation and cooperation between North and South Korea. However, if a unification process starts off in one way or another in the absence of the USFK, e.g., due to the collapse of the North Korean regime, it is doubted that South Korea alone will be able to manage that process in a peaceful manner. For the presence of the USFK means that it will prevent a situation where a unification process on the Korean Peninsula develops into international or inter-Korean military conflicts and it remains the biggest supporter that would assist us throughout the process of a possible Korean unification.


Toward a Desirable ROK-US Alliance in the 21st Century

It has been 50 years since the ROK-US MDT, the starting point of the ROK-US alliance, was concluded, but nowadays the alliance, faced with uncertainty, is facing many challenges both from within and outside the country. With the end of the Cold War, the enemy of the past was also gone, but threatening new powers are arising in the form of delinquent countries and terrorist organizations, as the asymmetrical threat increases. Moreover North Korea, which has been fingered as a delinquent country and a terrorism-supporting country over and over, is proceeding with its plan of nuclear development, which destabilizes the security situation on the Peninsula, while the rise of China presages a large-scale change of system in Northeast Asia.

At present, regarding the ROK-US alliance and the US Forces in Korea, public opinion in Korea varies from radical ideas supporting the dissolution of the alliance and withdrawal of US forces, to conservatives supporting the maintenance of the status quo to permit no changes to the present ROK-US alliance. As it is expected that the United States will maintain its singular military supremacy for the next 50 years, it is admitted that it is necessary to keep the ROK-US alliance, including the US Forces, in Korea for the sake of national interests, but in the 21st century it is undesirable to adhere to the alliance form which was molded in the Cold War era.

The author would like to conclude this article by recommending the following three desirable ways forward for the development of the ROK-US alliance:

Joint Ownership of New Alliance Patterns and Development into a Symmetrical Relationship

These days the adhesive strength of the ROK-US alliance is being weakened because of the prevailing anti-American sentiment in the country, and even the coordinate axis of the alliance seems to be lost in the post-Cold War period and the reconciling mood between South and North Korea. Unless flexibility is applied to keep pace with the times, the alliance will possibly enter a crisis. Now the ROK-US alliance has to cope with the new security situation after the Cold War, get out of simple military alliances of the past, and find new methods of survival through forging new types of alliance for the 21st century.

In revising the past alliance formed during the Cold War period into one suitable for the 21st century, just a simple change of its structure and function is of no use but shared values and a common strategic vision for the future are needed. Until now, the ROK-US alliance never had a common strategic vision and outlook, but existed only for two very practical purposes: preventing North Korea from invading again and defending Japan. If ever there existed a common goal, it could be “anti-communism.” But it is no longer possible to keep a Cold War-type alliance for coping with external threats together.

Now the ROK-US alliance, suitable to Korean democratization and a higher international position, needs to transcend being a simple military one, and be transformed into a balanced comprehensive alliance including cooperation in the non-military field. And its aim should not be to become a by-product of the American-Japanese Alliance, but rather one with its own value. And this value can be shared not only right now but also in the process of unification and afterwards. As values to be shared, there will be democracy, freedom, human rights, a market economy and so on. Then, as the new aim and vision of this new ROK-US alliance is realized, there can be security on the Peninsula, peaceful unification and forming a symmetrical relationship to make every common effort for peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

Developing into Partners for Regional Security—Looking beyond Korean Peninsula Security

Next, the ROK-US alliance has to move its focus from checking North Korea, which has been its common threatening factor, to promoting regional interests. Judging from the practical existence of the ongoing North Korean threat and continuing unstable social conditions in North Korea, its traditional role of checking North Korea should not be overlooked. However, the alliance should also focus on regional security cooperation in order to confront the challenge of many global issues, such as racial and regional conflicts, international terrorism, piracy and so on.

Revising the ROK-US alliance on a regional scale covering North-
east Asia will ensure that the alliance for countering the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula contributes to stabilization of Northeast Asia. It will also send a clear message that after the termination of the North Korean threat, the alliance will contribute to peace and stabilization in Northeast Asia, a vital question to Korea, as well as to the settlement of peace on the Korean Peninsula and unification.

To realize this, it is necessary to enlarge its sphere of activity from defense only on the Korean Peninsula, by exclusive bilateral contract, to encompass all of East Asia to be consistent with a multi-security cooperation system, thus strengthening security within the area and also boosting its role in maintaining and firming up peace. If the ROK-US alliance develops into any regional scale alliance, the revision of the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty (hereafter MDT) would be inevitable. Because the present MDT prescribes only Korean safety in the Pacific area, in order to enlarge its sphere of activity into a regional scale through changes of concepts of the alliance, it is essential to revise the original treaty.

At the same time, the ROK-US alliance should be wary of establishing a relationship with the US-Japan Alliance, which is another key alliance for the United States in East Asia. The promotion of close security cooperation needs to be carried out with a lot of care, as it should not be so exclusive as to bring repulsion from surrounding countries like China and Russia. In addition, the ROK-US alliance should narrow the gap with the ASEAN Regional Forum and other multi-security cooperation organizations, and positively take part in building up a regional armament management system through a security dialogue within the area.

**Reorganization into a Pliable ROK-US Combined Command System**

In order to reorganize the ROK-US alliance into a symmetrical partnership and enable it to assume a role for regional security, it is necessary to change the present US-led combined command system into a more equitable one. Its revision can be facilitated by two conditions: one is after the Korean Peninsula peace regime is built, and the other is an early revision before the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.
of time a big crash between two streams is inevitable.

But if we can take advantage of a reduction of US forces in Korea, it will be a golden opportunity for the two alliance partners to develop from the traditionally friendly relationship into a mature and flexible alliance relationship.