An Enduring Partnership: South Korea and the United States

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The United States has had an intense military alliance relationship with South Korea for more than six decades. By occupying the southern half of the Korean Peninsula at the end of World War II, the U.S. military created the conditions for the establishment of South Korea as an independent country in 1948. The United States then rescued the new country from foreign invasion by the North in 1950. Since then, and despite the growing capabilities of the ROK’s own military, thousands of U.S. troops have remained in South Korea, along with tanks, warplanes, and other powerful weapons. While the numbers of U.S. troops in South Korea have fluctuated over the years, the general mutual defense commitment has remained solid. Meanwhile, South Korea, despite its precarious security environment and limited natural resources, unexpectedly became an international economic superstar and achieved a global presence through the hard work and skills of its people. The transformation of South Korea into a liberal democracy helped release these human resources. The ROK’s economic and political transition in turn made it a more valuable partner of the United States. Although security issues still dominate the U.S.-ROK alliance, their shared political values, robust economic exchanges, and deepening human ties have provided a firmer foundation for the alliance, which would likely persist even after Korean reunification.

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Reframing of the Alliance after the Cold War

During the Cold War, South Korean officials protested vigorously whenever it appeared that the United States or other Western governments were interested in diplomatically engaging the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The two Korean states still technically remain in a state of war. The 1950–1953 Korean War ended with an armistice, not a peace treaty. Furthermore, South Korea is not even a signatory to the armistice agreement, which was signed by the governments of North Korea and China on one side, and the U.S.-led United Nations Command on the other. As part of their commitment to anticommunism, the South Korean government deployed over 50,000 ROK troops in South Vietnam to combat the communists there in partnership with the United States and its South Vietnamese allies. They also participated actively in U.S. efforts to contain the People’s Republic of China.

The external posture of South Korea in general, and toward North Korea in particular, began a new chapter in the 1980s. While retaining its previous goals of enhancing political legitimacy, military security, and economic development by maintaining close ties with the United States, South Korea greatly expanded its diplomatic horizons by launching its ambitious “Northern Diplomacy.” The approach aimed to reconcile the ROK’s traditional ties with the West with its new opportunities in the East. In particular, the new diplomatic strategy involved the pursuit of wide-ranging relations with Communist Bloc countries, eventually to include direct contacts and dialogue with North Korea. The Northern Policy was successful in expanding the ROK’s global ties in sports, trade, and diplomacy. By the beginning of 1990, the ROK had diplomatic relations with more than 130 countries. Meanwhile, South Korea emerged as the world’s fifteenth-largest economy in the late 1980s. By then, the economic reforms and the open-door policies of China and the Soviet Bloc countries led to considerable trade and other commercial ties between South Korea and the Communist countries, which persisted even after the Soviet Union and its European allies abandoned state socialism.

South Korean relations with the DPRK began to improve after the February 1998 inauguration of President Kim Dae-jung. His “Sunshine Policy” (officially known as “the Policy of Reconciliation and Cooperation toward North Korea”) toward the DPRK tried to improve relations with the North Korean government through negotiations and diplomatic, economic, and other inducements to coax the regime out of its self-destructive isolation and to reassure the DPRK leadership about its security. These enticements included encouraging other countries to engage with North Korea, providing increased humanitarian and economic assistance, postponing negotiations on the most difficult issues dividing the two countries, and helping reassure the North Korean regime about its security concerns in the hope that a more benign security environment would encourage the DPRK leadership to pursue political and economic reforms.

Roh Moo-hyun largely continued these engagement policies during his 2003–2008 presidency under the renamed “Peace and Prosperity Policy.” Coming into office at the time of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and President George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech, Roh believed that North Korea had developed nuclear weapons in response to U.S. threats and to induce Washington to engage in a direct dialogue with Pyongyang. At times, he feared that rash U.S. actions would precipitate a war on the peninsula, which would prove disastrous for South Korea no matter what its outcome. The Roh
administration also wanted to promote DPRK economic reform while integrating the country into East Asian economic processes, hoping that such developments could help stabilize North Korea in the short-term while providing incentives and leverage for moderating its foreign policy in the long run. The Roh approach implicitly assumed that the North Korean government would not soon collapse and that the DPRK was prepared to alter policies that most threaten South Koreans.\textsuperscript{1}

Although cross-border trade and other civil society exchanges between the two Koreas increased under the Sunshine Policy, Seoul’s success in improving relations with Pyongyang’s communist allies did not result in substantially better ROK relations with Pyongyang. In addition, the policy negatively affected the traditional relationship between South Korea and the United States. The Clinton administration largely supported the Sunshine Policy. In late October 2000, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made an unprecedented visit to Pyongyang to discuss with North Korean leaders the country’s ballistic missile development efforts and other issues. President Bill Clinton himself was contemplating making a similar trip, though his term in office expired before satisfactory arrangements had been completed. In contrast, the administration of George W. Bush, at least during his first term, adopted a firmer line toward the DPRK, leading to public strains with the more accommodating South Korean administrations then in office.

When Kim Dae-jung visited Washington in March 2001, President Bush prominently refused to endorse the Sunshine Policy. The administration also suspended bilateral U.S.-DPRK talks while it undertook a lengthy policy review to reassess U.S. policy toward North Korea. In his January 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush identified the North Korean regime as a core member of an “axis of evil” that also included Iran and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. When a North Korean official seemingly acknowledged in October 2002 that the DPRK had violated the spirit if not the letter of the October 1994 U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework by pursuing a covert uranium enrichment program, U.S. officials declared the 1994 agreement defunct. The United States persuaded South Korea and Japan to join Washington in suspending the deliveries of heavy fuel oil that the DPRK had considered one of the most valuable elements of the Agreed Framework. In response, the DPRK dismantled International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring cameras, expelled the international inspectors monitoring the site, resumed operations at its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, and in January 2003 became the first state to withdraw formally from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).\textsuperscript{2}

For most of its years in office, the Bush administration refused to deal with the DPRK bilaterally or to discuss offering economic and other concessions to Pyongyang until North Korean leaders committed to its “complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement” of all its nuclear weapons programs. U.S. officials would only consent to engage in discussions with the DPRK within a multilateral framework that sought these U.S. denuclearization objectives. Members of the Bush administration regularly cited the Libyan example—in which case the national government first renounced its WMD programs before receiving formal offers of Western assistance—as the model by which North Korea and other states of proliferation concern could rehabilitate themselves. The administration only changed its approach, though not its goal, after the DPRK detonated a nuclear explosive device in October 2006. The revised tactics permitted direct meetings between U.S. and DPRK representatives, but these were characterized as both occurring within the framework established by the Six-Party
Talks and as seeking to support them.

Conservative Lee Myung-bak, who became president in 2008, scaled back the
Sunshine concessions to the DPRK and focused on restoring good ROK-U.S. ties.
Even with the leadership transition in Pyongyang, the Lee government had modest
expectations regarding North Korea’s near-term evolution. He conditioned offering the
DPRK new aid on an end to Pyongyang’s provocations and placed renewed emphasis
on the goal of eventual Korean reunification under Seoul’s leadership. The North
Korean government condemned Lee’s standoffish approach and avoided engaging
extensively with his administration. The DPRK media responded with a vicious and
personal campaign of vitriol against Lee. As a result of this stalemate, the multibillion-
dollar infrastructure projects in the North negotiated between the ROK and the
DPRK under his predecessors remained suspended throughout the Lee presidency.

The Transformed U.S. Forces Korea

The ROK-U.S. military alliance has been the foundation of both countries’ strategic
policies for over 50 years. The United States and South Korea signed a Mutual
Defense Treaty in October 1953 following the 1950–1953 Korean War, in which
33,600 American troops were killed and more than 100,000 seriously injured in the
successful effort to reverse the surprise North Korean invasion. The Treaty, which
took effect in November of the following year, commits the United States to helping
the Republic of Korea repel an external armed attack and authorizes the deployment
of American military forces on ROK territory. To enhance the U.S. capability to
defend South Korea, 37,500 U.S. combat forces, consisting of approximately 28,300
U.S. Army ground troops, 8,700 USAF personnel, and 500 Marines, were until a
few years ago deployed in the ROK. Many of them were based near the intra-Korean
Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) established in 1953 to separate North and South Korean
military forces.

However, after the Cold War, the Pentagon’s need to send U.S. forces from South
Korea to Iraq and Afghanistan, changing global security threats, improving military
technologies, anti-Americanism among some South Koreans, and other factors led the
United States to decide to reduce the number of U.S troops permanently stationed in
South Korea and to change the location of these forces. After analyzing and discussing
the issue for several years, U.S. officials decided in late 2002 to relocate most USFK
forces from their prominent locations in Seoul and along the DMZ and consolidate
them in two locations further south in less prime real estate. A major component of
the realignment was the transfer of the main U.S. military base in South Korea out of
central Seoul to Camp Humphreys in the Osan-Pyeongtaek region, situated 70 kilo-
meters south of the ROK capital. The Pentagon also withdrew U.S. soldiers belong-
ing to the U.S. Second Infantry Division from positions located near the DMZ to
Osan-Pyongtaek. At the same time, the USFK have been transferring combat mis-
tions to ROK forces, whose capabilities have continually improved. American offi-
cials have argued that the need for U.S. troops to serve as a “tripwire” located along
the intra-Korean border to guarantee that the United States would intervene militari-
ly to halt any North Korean invasion has become outdated. Instead, enhancements in
U.S. transportation, logistics, and long-range precision-strike capabilities could enable
U.S. forces to rapidly reinforce the Peninsula.
The changing nature of the U.S. military deployments in South Korea spurred interest in restructuring other elements of the ROK-U.S. alliance. At the 34th Security Consultative Meeting held in Washington in December 2002, the U.S. and ROK defense ministers signed terms of reference for the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative. Formal talks began in 2003 and continued through nine rounds of discussions. The parties’ original intent was to undertake a comprehensive study of how to strengthen their bilateral alliance over the next decade. Because the discussions over the repositioning and withdrawal of American forces from the peninsula proved so complex and decisive, however, ROK and U.S. negotiators made limited progress in addressing longer-term issues such as revising military command arrangements and responding to transnational threats and extra-peninsular contingencies. These talks were later replaced by the Security Policy Initiative and plans were drawn up for U.S. forces in Korea to be re-aligned. At a 2005 summit, the United States and South Korea agreed on the need to pursue a “comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial alliance.”

Under a 2006 agreement called, the “Roadmap for the New Alliance Military Structure in the post-OPCON Transition Era,” the countries agreed to transfer Operational Control (OPCON) of the South Korean forces even in wartime to the ROK sometime between October 15, 2009 and March 15, 2012. In November 2009, the first U.S.-ROK “2-plus-2 Talks” occurred as a joint meeting of both countries’ foreign and defense ministers in Seoul. In June 2010, the parties, citing the elevated insecurity evident in the recent DPRK provocations, decided to defer the wartime OPCON transition until the end of 2015. The postponement may also have been designed to assuage the worries of many analysts that the 2012 date would have been premature. After the OPCON transfer occurs, the USFK will change its name to the Korea Command, when it will become a supporting command to the ROK forces as well as engage in extra-Peninsular operations.

In addition to transferring wartime OPCON of South Korean forces to ROK command, changing global security threats and requirements, the improving conventional weaponry of both militaries, and other factors have led to the mutual decision to reduce the number of U.S. troops permanently stationed in South Korea. In justifying the relocations and the closings of dozens of U.S. military bases in the ROK, U.S. officials argued that the need for U.S. troops to serve as a “tripwire” located along the intra-Korean border to guarantee American military intervention against any North Korean invasion has become outdated. Instead, U.S. forces would rely on superior mobility and air and naval power projection to crush a DPRK attack. U.S. troops also could more easily participate in non-Korean contingencies from their new location. In addition, the Bush administration argued that troop realignment reflected a desire to reduce the burden on local communities, making the military relationship become more sustainable over the long-term. The changes in the U.S. military footprint in South Korea also represented one element of a larger process of realigning the U.S. military presence to accord better with the imperatives of the post-9/11 world. The Pentagon wanted to reduce the number of U.S. troops in enormous permanent bases in Western Europe and Northeast Asia while relying more on short-term deployments to forward operating bases in potential or actual conflict regions. Enhancements in U.S. transportation logistics and global strike capabilities would enable U.S. forces to exploit their increased flexibility and counter adversaries’ improving anti-access strategies.
The changes have proven somewhat controversial among South Koreans who worry that these moves could cause the DPRK leadership to misperceive a decline in the U.S. willingness to defend them against a North Korean attack. Although the Americans see the move as upgrading the ROK’s status and underscoring U.S. confidence in the ROK’s improving military capabilities, many South Koreans interpret the realignment as reflecting American eagerness to reduce its ROK-related commitments to reallocate U.S. defense resources to higher security priorities. For some South Koreans, the move triggered the same anxieties that they experienced when President Richard Nixon removed the Seventh Infantry Division in 1971 and President Jimmy Carter proposed in 1976 to withdraw all U.S. troops from Korea. The fact that many of the arguments American officials cited to justify the transformation highlighted global rather than Korean-specific factors appears to have also engendered resentment and increased South Korean fears that the changes could increase the prospects of the ROK’s becoming “entrapped” in conflicts between the United States and other countries as U.S. forces based in South Korea participated in these distant missions. Furthermore, South Koreans complained about the seemingly unilateral manner in which the U.S. government decided to alter the location and size of its military deployments on the peninsula. Finally, thousands of South Korean civilians employed by the U.S. military feared losing their jobs.

These ROK objections, as well as gratitude for the South’s substantial troop contribution in Iraq and concerns about weakening the U.S.-ROK’s bargaining position vis-à-vis North Korea, induced the United States to delay the planned troop withdrawals. After four months of contentious negotiations, the two sides agreed to spread out the planned redeployment of the 12,500 U.S. troops into three phases. In 2004, about 5,000 American troops, including the soldiers of the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, would leave South Korea. During the second phase of 2005–2006, the United States expected to withdraw another 5,000 troops (3,000 in 2005; 2,000 in 2006). During the final phase of 2007–2008, another 2,500 troops would depart. Altogether, the Bush years saw a 40-percent decrease in the number of U.S. soldiers based in South Korea and a reduction in size and number of bilateral military exercises. The U.S. troop reductions in South Korea continued until 2008, when President Bush halted the drawdown at 28,500. Bush’s freeze, announced at an April 2008 summit, left a larger U.S. military force in the ROK than his administration had initially planned. Coming shortly after Lee Myung-bak’s inauguration, Bush’s decision may have been aimed at improving U.S.-South Korea relations following the years of tension during Roh’s time in power.14 In addition, U.S. officials agreed to keep certain military assets in South Korea following specific ROK requests, including the Multiple Rocket Launching System stationed along the DMZ, the AN/TPQ radar that detects the movement of DPRK long-range artillery, and two squadrons of upgraded Apache helicopters. Furthermore, the Pentagon in 2003 launched an $11 billion multi-year effort to improve the U.S. military systems deployed in and near South Korea. The modernization program included more than 100 separate enhancements of the U.S. military capabilities in the region. The American forces that likely would intervene in any South Korean contingency acquired upgraded AH-64D Apache Longbow helicopters, GPS-guided Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) bombs, Shadow-200 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and Patriot PAC-3 ballistic missile interceptors. Other planned improvements included deployment of Global Hawk and Predator UAVs, M1A1 Abrams tanks, and
improved multiple rocket launchers. More recently, to deal with low-level DPRK armed provocations such as the 2010 cross-border artillery shelling, or possible short-range air strikes and ground incursions, the U.S. Army is deploying GPS-guided XM982 Excalibur “smart” 155 mm shells, additional Patriot PAC-3 air defense missiles, and ATACMS surface-to-surface missiles to South Korea. In October 2012, the U.S. Army announced that it would return the 61st and 62nd chemical companies, as well as the headquarters and headquarters detachment of the 23rd Chemical Battalion, from the United States to South Korea, where they had been based until 2004. The some three hundred soldiers will augment local capabilities for “nuclear, biological and chemical reconnaissance, equipment decontamination and consequence management assistance.” As a bonus, the move will save the Pentagon almost two million dollars annually due to lower base operational support costs in South Korea.

As part of the restructuring of the U.S. military presence in South Korea, ROK and U.S. defense leaders agreed that South Korean forces would assume responsibility for 10 strategic defense missions previously assigned to U.S. forces between 2004 and 2006. This redistribution of tasks also aimed to encourage ROK efforts to enhance their own indigenous defense capacity. More recently, the United States has agreed in principle that, in the event of further North Korean provocations, the Korean JCS can use support elements of the USKF, including U-2 surveillance planes, E-8 Joint Star radar planes, artillery from the Second Infantry Division, Apache attack helicopters and UH-60 medevac helicopters, as well as select USAF and USN personnel. This arrangement aims to supplement ROK capabilities that are lacking or in short supply. The nature of these U.S. support elements is geared toward battle management and the application of rapid response firepower, both of which are critical in conducting and sustaining joint service warfare on the digital battlefield.

At their 43rd annual U.S.-ROK Security Consultative meeting, the two sides established the Korea-U.S. Integrated Defense Dialogue (KIDD), to coordinate and integrate various bilateral defense consultation mechanisms by providing them with high-level political oversight. In their comments at their October 2012 44th annual U.S.-ROK Security Consultative meeting, the two defense ministers agreed to keep the number of U.S. troops deployed in South Korea unchanged, enhance their capabilities and readiness, and ensure the timely provision of reinforcements. They expressed concern about the situation in North Korea following the 2010 provocations, the April 2012 missile launch, and the ongoing political leadership transition in Pyongyang. They pledged to resist further provocations by augmenting their readiness through combined exercises and training, increase combined surveillance activities near the Northwest Islands and the Northern Limit Line, and developing a U.S.-ROK Counter-Provocation Plan based on shared concepts and principles.

Furthermore, the parties agreed to create a working group to develop plans for a new joint command structure within the structure of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff to ensure military efficiency after a “strong and seamless” transition. Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin was at pains to stress that, while the two governments saw “great strength” in the CFC and was hoping to leverage what they had learned from it, “we are trying to build a system following the dissolution of the Combined Forces Command. We are not trying to build another Combined Forces Command.” He noted that after 2015 the ROK forces would have OPCON and the USFK would be supporting them. Still, analysts speculated that the move aimed to reassure those South Koreans worried that the CFC’s dissolution would weaken the alliance’s defense
and deterrence capabilities by emboldening the DPRK leadership and weakening the U.S. commitment to the ROK’s defense.23

At times, sudden changes in the troop size, or the withdrawal of all U.S. nuclear weapons in the ROK, have aroused concern among South Koreans regarding the credibility of U.S. commitments, but this anxiety is misplaced. The United States has always planned to defend South Korea by moving forces from other locations in the advent of a crisis. In addition, U.S. conventional forces have become more powerful over time, which has also allowed them to fulfill many of the missions previously assigned to nuclear weapons.

What is new, however, is that North Korea is developing the capacity to launch a nuclear-armed missile against U.S. cities, which raises questions about whether the United States is really prepared to use nuclear weapons against North Korea and thereby place its homeland at risk from North Korean retaliation. North Korea’s imminent acquisition of a long-range nuclear strike capacity against the United States is a novel and unacceptable development for Washington, which refuses to accept a mutual hostage relationship with Pyongyang. Even if one discounts the brazen threats of the North Korean government, the fear is that the DPRK would use a nuclear shield to immunize itself against retaliation for any future provocations as well as a means to earn foreign revenue through selling its special weapons technologies. Yet, the United States and its allies have only been able to delay North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, not halt them. U.S. officials have sought to overcome doubts about its credibility through its robust joint exercise program with South Korea, its support for South Korea’s conventional military modernization, and by restructuring its ballistic missile defense program more directly against Pyongyang, but doubts will persist as long as the DPRK retains its nuclear arsenal.

At the time of the 2010 provocations, the South Korean government received some domestic criticism because its contingency plans for responding to North Korean aggression required direct ROK presidential authorization for retaliation, which meant the ROK counterbattery fire only occurred well after the shelling. In the new counter-provocation plans adopted in March of this year, the U.S. and ROK militaries agreed that threatening a more immediate response could better deter these provocations. Nevertheless, Washington pushed to localize the response to reduce the prospects of dangerous escalation. Specifically, the plan allows for retaliation “against the point where the attack originated” and possibly against “a second point.”24 Under the new plan, South Korea will have the lead in any military response, but Seoul should consult with the United States before retaliating and must request the use of any U.S. assets. This situation provides Washington with some control over a hasty or excessive South Korean response that could escalate the conflict in unwelcome ways due to North Korea’s misperceiving the response as a counter-escalation rather than an equivalent “tit-for-tat” response.25 Although still controversial, the counter-provocation contingency plan has clarified each country’s role and removed sources of possible disagreements and tensions.26

From Cold War Allies to Global Partners

Americans have generally welcomed the advent of “Global Korea.” At their first summit in Washington in June 2009, Presidents Obama and Lee issued a Joint
Vision statement expressing support for continuing to expand the global role of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The declared intent was to move beyond the traditional “hub-and-spoke” bilateral alliance model that sustained the U.S. security position in East Asia during the Cold War and create a more comprehensive and better integrated regional security structure that addresses transnational security challenges, such as those emanating from transnational terrorism, natural disasters, and WMD proliferation. The foundation of the ROK-U.S. alliance remains defending South Korea from external attack, but the alliance has also evolved to address extra-Korean issues, where the two countries share important interests. The two governments have adopted a common policy toward many international issues. South Korea and the United States now closely coordinate their mutually supporting policies regarding regional security, nuclear security, Afghanistan, and development assistance, “Our alliance is evolving into a truly global partnership where we are working shoulder to shoulder to resolve global challenges.” Lee said at the press conference with Obama during the U.S. president’s visit to the ROK in late March 2012 for the Nuclear Security Summit. Although they sometimes differ on how extensively Seoul should apply U.S. sanctions on Iran, which exceed those authorized by the UN Security Council, the entry into force in March 2012 of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) further deepened their economic interdependencies.

The United States and the rest of the international community have benefitted from South Korea’s growing global leadership and engagement. South Korea now stations 1,200 troops overseas, and has twice commanded multi-national counter-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. It has deployed a Provincial Reconstruction Team to Afghanistan and is augmenting the Afghanistan National Security Forces as they prepare for the departure of Western combat forces. The ROK is also a committed member of various international nonproliferation regimes, such as the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, the Missile Technology Control Regime, and the Proliferation Security Initiative. In October 2012, several years after a South Korean foreign minister was selected as UN Secretary General, the ROK was elected to hold a non-permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council for the 2013 and 2014 terms. South Korea has firm supported U.S. initiatives on key global issues such as fighting climate change, countering international terrorism, and helping construct a new economic world order in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis. Energy security and climate change look to be another set of important issues to ROK-U.S. cooperation. The United States and South Korea are also coordinating more effectively and comprehensively their global diplomatic, development, and defense efforts, part of the “3-D” foreign policy agenda embraced by the two governments. South Korea has more development workers serving abroad than any other country than the United States. Not only does the ROK accept the necessity for U.S. Forces Korea to contribute to its possible extra-peninsular missions, but South Korea’s own military modernization program, the Defense Reform Project 2020 adopted in 2005, has increased its capacity to participate in out-of-Korea missions. It reduces ROK ground forces from 680,000 to 500,000 troops and grouped them into more agile, modular structures. In addition, the ROK air force and navy will receive enhanced long-range surveillance and strike systems, including some AWACS planes and UAVs as well as KDX Aegis-equipped destroyers, Dokdo class amphibious warships, and longer-range Type 214 attack submarines. In April 2009, the ROK established a dedicated Cheonghae counter-piracy task force to join the international fleet of warships combatting pirates in the Indian Ocean. Unlike
the previous cases, future instances of ROK foreign military operations will more likely occur within the framework of the bilateral alliance rather than independently. ROK and U.S. planners have discussed ways that their two militaries can support each other in humanitarian and disaster-relief missions as well as other extra-Korean contingencies by building on their existing Peninsula-based cooperation. Now the United States and South Korea are contemplating extending their security partnership into even newer realms, such as cyber and outer space, working group that will address space policy, architecture, training and personnel exchange.28

New Leadership in Seoul

In South Korea’s December 2012 presidential elections, Park Geun-hye of the governing Saenuri (New Frontier) Party defeated Moon Jae-in of the opposition Democratic United Party. Park is the daughter of South Korea’s most important modern dictator, General Park Chung-hee, who ruled from 1961, after a military coup, until 1979, when he was murdered by his intelligence chief. While cherishing her father’s legacy, which saw South Korea rise economically as one of the Asian Tigers, Park notes that South Korea has transformed into an enduring advanced industrial democracy for which any form of dictatorship is inappropriate. The elections saw little if any of the anti-Americanism common in earlier ballots.

Since her inauguration the following February, President Park’s foreign and defense policies have differed little from those of President Lee. During the election campaign, she advocated a “trust-based diplomacy” that implies gradual and conditional reconciliation provided Pyongyang meets Seoul halfway, which it has yet to do. The Obama administration has backed Park’s line, which accords with the U.S. policy of “strategic patience,” of waiting for some concrete indication that Pyongyang will reciprocate before offering additional U.S. concessions. Despite her rhetoric of seeking greater engagement with Beijing, President Park’s foreign policy is clearly eager to retain a strong U.S.-South Korean alliance. She had a successful White House summit in May. She and President Obama issued a joint Anniversary statement that reaffirmed the 2009 Joint Vision statement. Her speech before Congress was notable for Park’s excellent English as well as her stress on reunification. The meeting demonstrated unity and strength in the face of Pyongyang’s recent threats and provocations and sends a signal of resolve to the North Korean regime and other parties, including the Chinese government.

The North Korean threat continues to provide the fundamental basis for the ROK-U.S. security relationship. Park has expressed a greater willingness than her predecessor to provide humanitarian aid to North Korea without preconditions, but the DPRK has until recently been cutting off ties with the South. As expected, North Korea tested Park during her first few months in office to with various provocations—mostly rhetorical threats. The most recent period of tensions flared up after the North’s long-range rocket launch in December 2012 and underground nuclear test in February 2013. Pyongyang’s militant rhetoric intensified in March after the UN Security Council tightened sanctions on North Korea following the tests and after the annual U.S.-South Korean military drills in South Korea known as Foal Eagle was conducted. The North’s angry pronouncements grew when the United States carried out shows of strength that included, for the first time, flying nuclear-capable
B2 stealth bombers and F-22 stealth fighters, the most sophisticated warplane in the world. That North Korea has been testing the new administration has been unsurprising since Pyongyang has confronted all new ROK presidents with provocations. Although the DPRK has tested long-range missiles and nuclear weapons, its recent provocations are arguably of a lesser magnitude that those of 2010, when the DPRK sank the ROK corvette Cheonan, revealed the existence of a new uranium enrichment facility, and conducted an artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island, located along the intra-Korean maritime border, an act of aggression that represented the first direct attack on ROK territory by the DPRK regular military since the 1950–1953 Korean War.

**Whither the Alliance?**

With ROK-U.S. relations presently so good, one fears that things can only get worst. The Obama and Park administrations face a region in flux. In 2012 nearly all of the major powers in East Asia have had leadership transitions. North Korea saw the ascension of Kim Jong Un in December 2011. China underwent its own transition with the 18th National Congress in November 2012, the same month as U.S. voters headed to the polls to determine which party would control the House, Senate, and White House. Finally, elections in Japan and South Korea in December 2012 rounded out this year of change.

The growing unconventional nature of the North Korean threat to the ROK and the United States challenges their efforts to sustain a well-integrated response. Although the two governments have closely coordinated their policies toward North Korea in recent years, differences between Seoul and Washington in their preferred response could easily arise in future years. Obama officials have made clear that they support Park’s goal of re-engaging with the North as long as Pyongyang reciprocates by curbing its provocations. It remains unclear if Park will demand an end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile testing in exchange for the resumption of major ROK assistance. Although President Lee made this a core demand, neither activity presents a major additional threat to South Korea, which already is highly vulnerable to North Korean artillery and other conventional forces. But North Korea’s imminent acquisition of a long-range nuclear strike capacity against the United States is a novel and unacceptable development for Washington, which rejects a mutual hostage relationship with Pyongyang.

Another source of continuing tension is the planned 2015 transfer of wartime military operational control (OPCON) from the current Combined Forces Command (CFC), which is led by a four-star U.S. General with a ROK four-star deputy commander, to a new joint command led by a South Korean commander. The two governments have reaffirmed their intent to continue implementing the scheduled transfer of OPCON from a joint ROK-U.S. command to one led by South Korea as a means of signaling to North Korea their mutual determination and support. Opponents of undertaking the transfer in 2015 argue that it will send the wrong message to North Korea, but so would another postponement. Park’s administration has said that the transfer will proceed as scheduled but only after a comprehensive mid-term review and implementation of any required additional safeguards.29

The United States has been augmenting its military presence in South Korea in support of the transfer. The Obama administration has continued to stabilize the number
of U.S. troops in South Korea while expanding the size of joint exercises and upgrading U.S. military capabilities in the USFK. Faced with sequestration and the need to diversify its Asia-Pacific security programs beyond Northeast Asia, however, the Obama administration is likely to press South Korea harder on the cost-sharing negotiations over the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) between the two countries.

The Obama administration remains committed to the “action for action” approach that combines the use of positive and negative incentives with a willingness to engage the DPRK within the multilateral context of the Six-Party Talks. Under its policy of “strategic patience,” the Obama administration has demanded that the DPRK give some concrete indication, before resuming the Six-Party Talks, that the DPRK would make progress toward ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, including its newly confirmed uranium enrichment program, and improving intra-Korean ties. This policy of patiently waiting for verifiable changes in DPRK policies possesses several risks. First, it provides North Koreans with additional breathing room to refine their nuclear and missile programs. It also risks that the DPRK might again launch more ballistic missiles or detonate another nuclear device to confirm and support this development process or out of simple frustration about being ignored. Critics of the administration’s policy toward the DPRK worry that the United States and other countries have rewarded Pyongyang’s past bad behavior so often that they no longer fear Washington’s response. North Korean negotiators were selling Americans the same concessions time and again as they continue to develop their nuclear and other potential power while waiting for the upcoming changes in leadership in Beijing, South Korea, and perhaps elsewhere that might open new opportunities for them.

Although “Global Korea” remains a popular concept among Korean admirers in Washington, Park’s Asian focus harmonizes well with the Asian Pivot, something she herself noted in her speech before Congress. Under the Obama administration, the United States has been rebalancing U.S. military, economic and diplomatic assets from other locations to East Asia, which will tend to increase the U.S. resources assigned to issues of concern to South Korea. At the same time, one element of the Pivot is the rebalancing of U.S. assets within Asia, with the goal of reducing the Cold-War legacy concentration of U.S. assets in Northeast Asia and dispersing them more evenly across other areas, such as Southeast Asia. Another is to strengthen U.S. economic ties with Asian countries.

Neither Park nor Obama wants their relationship to be needlessly dominated by North Korea, which currently presents an unsolvable problem that can at best be managed until it becomes riper for a solution. For this reason, economic issues will likely become more prominent in their bilateral agenda. During her May visit, Park led the largest commercial delegation to ever accompany a ROK president on a foreign visit. Her delegation included Samsung Group’s chairman Lee Kun-hee, Hyundai Motor Group’s chairman, Chung Mong-koo, and LG Group chairman, Koo Bon-moo. Their presence helped highlight commercial issues and that U.S. investors can safely work with South Koreans despite intra-Korean tensions. Nevertheless, South Korea will probably need years before joining the U.S.-backed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) given the only recently completed struggle among South Koreans to negotiate and ratify the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) that entered into force last year. There is little interest in Seoul in negotiating and ratifying another major trade deal so soon, especially given domestic opposition to further trade liberalization and the hostility of China. It is unclear how much additional benefit
South Korea would gain from the TPP since the KORUS FTA is very comprehensive and it will take years to implement fully. Although the agreement should help lower prices for South Korean consumers, many ROK businesses do not welcome the additional competition, which might even become greater if the ROK were to join the TPP.

With respect to Japan, an important U.S. goal in coming years is to dampen tensions over Japan-South Korea territorial and history disputes. The sharp deterioration in their bilateral ties, which began more than a year ago, has been extremely unwelcome in Washington. Not only does it make it more difficult to present a united trilateral front against Pyongyang’s provocations, but the poor relations between the two most important U.S. allies in East Asia pose an insuperable obstacle to U.S. efforts to transform Washington’s traditional hub-and-spokes alliance network into a more flexible multilateral structure. The Obama administration, while seeking to maintain a public balance between its two main Asian allies, presumably encouraged their reconciliation when Washington hosted both President Park and Japanese Prime Minister Abe earlier this year. Even before her Washington summit, Park indicated that she would not repeat Lee’s visit to the islands that South Korea disputes with Japan, which escalated tensions, but she expects Tokyo to make the first diplomatic move toward reconciliation. Neither Park nor her Japanese counterpart seems prepared to make important concessions on their disputed islands anytime soon. However, since Park and Abe are strong leaders who will likely remain in office for years, possibilities exist for their both reaching a compromise on their territorial dispute and selling it domestically.

Planning for Future Shock

The DPRK suffers from several serious vulnerabilities, including its potentially contested dynastic succession, horrid economic conditions, and weakening conventional forces. North Korea could slowly die due to its economic failings, but it could also abruptly collapse (an ongoing fear of the Chinese government, given the likely upsurge in refugees and border conflict this will cause), with military intervention by neighboring countries. China, South Korea, and the United States should informally establish clear rules of behavior for such a scenario. In the interim, the United States and South Korea need to cooperate closely to manage the DPRK’s succession process and future evolution. Given the unpredictable security environment in Northeast Asia, Washington and Seoul should undertake extensive contingency planning. In particular, it will probably make sense to review, update, and make more detailed the 2009 Joint Vision Statement in the next few years.

Notes

2. These events are described in detail in David Kang, “The Avoidable Crisis in North Korea,”


18. Klingner, “Transforming the U.S.- South Korean Alliance.”


20. “Joint Communiqué between the U.S. and South Korea, Security Consultative Meeting,”


25. Ibid.


Notes on Contributor

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