Drifting apart? The U.S.–ROK alliance at risk
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Given the success of the U.S.–ROK alliance over the past five and half decades, it is far easier to envision that it will remain undisturbed than to imagine major change, let alone the end of the alliance. Yet past history is no guarantee of future success. Major shifts in American foreign policy, new transnational challenges and a changing political, economic, and security environment in Northeast Asia, call into question whether the alliance will last another 10 years, let alone another half century. By the start of the twenty-first century, the United States had increasingly conceptualized the alliance in regional or even global terms, whereas the ROK military, despite some impressive blue-water naval assets, was still wedded to the mission of peninsular defense. Ideally, the United States would like the ROK to join with U.S. forces in addressing regional and global contingencies, in addition to fulfilling its primary missions to deter and, if necessary, defeat North Korea. Yet America’s reorientation of its forces on the Korean peninsula and the ROK’s military transformation were driven more by domestic political concerns than by jointly shared security imperatives. As a result, larger questions about the future of the alliance went begging. With both partners transitioning to new force structures, these measures portended an alliance that was drifting apart, not a maturing alliance that was becoming a more equal and cohesive partnership. Questions remain unanswered, or even unasked, about whether the two partners agree on the strategic environment in the region and the respective roles both should play. Although there have been discussions on the “future of the alliance,” these have focused on U.S. base realignment and other details, not on the future security environment in the region and its larger strategic implications. It is these offshore missions, not North Korea, where threat assessments will likely diverge and where alliance disagreements will arise in the future. In short, the two parties have yet to confront the full implications of the military and defense decisions of the past few years, often undertaken unilaterally and attuned more to domestic audiences than to strategic realities. The ability to paper over a lack of common purpose and shared vision may be useful as a temporary placeholder, but it will not provide an adequate foundation for the future viability of the alliance. The good news is that consensus exists in both countries that the alliance needs to be preserved; the bad news is that charting the way ahead is neither easy nor obvious. The risk is that without the development of a clear and common vision of a shared future with defined and mutually agreed-upon roles, the United States and South Korea will gradually drift apart, along with a partnership that has proved so successful over the past half century.

In describing the rise of Spanish power in the sixteenth century, the renowned British historian, Garrett Mattingly, observed that men at that time assumed that King Philip II would march inexorably from victory to victory, ascribing Spain’s success to
“Fate” or “Divine Providence” or “God’s will.” In the twentieth century, others spoke in comparable terms about “the triumph of objective historical forces” or the “wave of the future.” “All they meant really, at either time,” Mattingly observes, “was that one success or one failure seems to foreshadow another, because it is always easier to imagine things going on in the same way than to imagine a change.”

To many, alliances are much the same. Given the success of the U.S.–ROK alliance over the past five and half decades, it is far easier to envision that it will remain undisturbed than to imagine major change, let alone the end of the alliance. The statistics attest to a record of exceptional success and a remarkable, broad-based intimacy. South Korea is the seventh largest trading partner of the United States (with a bilateral free trade agreement still pending) and the ROK is America’s seventh largest export market. Tens of thousands of Korean students study each year in the United States. South Korea has made important contributions to the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and American name-brand companies, products, music and movies are ubiquitous in the South Korean market. This evidence of partnership bears witness to a hugely successful strategy evident since the end of the Korean War. The fundamental shared objective of both countries has been to deter the outbreak of a second Korean War, thereby enabling South Korea to develop without its security or internal stability experiencing acute risk. By this measure, the success of the alliance is indisputable. The realization of ancillary objectives has been no less beneficial to strengthening the bonds between the two countries, in particular the ROK’s adoption of a free-market capitalist orientation and, over time, its transition to a vibrant democracy.

As the alliance enters middle age, the parties, as with older couples, have become more tolerant of the shortcomings and idiosyncrasies of the other and more appreciative of each partner’s underlying strengths. Actuarial tables would predict a long life together, in shared purpose. And who could think otherwise? South Korea’s new president, Lee Myung-bak, has made clear that the rebuilding of the U.S.–ROK alliance is among his highest policy priorities. Barack Obama repeatedly emphasized during his campaign the need to reinvigorate America’s alliances and called Lee soon after becoming president-elect, reportedly affirming his desire to enhance bilateral economic and security relations and stating his view that the alliance is the cornerstone for peace and security in East Asia.

Yet past history is no guarantee of future success. Major shifts in American foreign policy, new transnational challenges and a changing political, economic, and security environment in Northeast Asia, call into question whether the alliance will last another 10 years, let alone another half century. A number of storm clouds already appear on the horizon. At least five major studies conducted in recent years by American and Korean scholars, and a host of individual assessments, call for the alliance’s reinvention, to preserve and extend its relevance for the challenges of the twenty-first century. All these reports argue that the perpetuation of past practices will no longer be sufficient to sustain the alliance in the future, and that a strategic reorientation is needed now to prevent a rupture later. The good news is that consensus exists in both countries that the alliance needs to be preserved; the bad news is that charting the way ahead is neither easy nor obvious. The risk is that without the development of a clear and common vision of a shared future with defined and mutually agreed-upon roles, the United States and South Korea will
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**America’s preoccupations beyond East Asia**

The Obama administration enters office with an unenviable array of domestic tribulations, ongoing conflicts and crises across the Middle East, and transnational challenges exacerbated by the global financial crisis. These issues will have first purchase on the new administration’s scarce time, attention, and resources. Concerns about widespread instability in the Middle East will very likely dominate U.S. foreign and defense planning for the foreseeable future. Neither East Asia, much less the Korean peninsula, will assume comparable priority for American policymakers.

In this sense, the relative stability in East Asia over the past decade works against a greater American presence in this region. It is not that Washington takes its Asian friends and allies for granted, or minimizes the overall importance of Asia for global prosperity and stability. Rather, at a time when the U.S. is heavily engaged in two wars, and when spending on defense is likely to be flat or even declining due to budgetary pressures, policymakers will have little time and fewer resources to devote to East and Southeast Asia. Short of a crisis on the Korean peninsula, in the Taiwan Strait or between India and Pakistan, the weight of America’s attention is likely to remain focused on the Middle East and Southwest Asia.3

No doubt this lack of attention toward Asia and the Korean peninsula may grate on the sensitivities of those who have traditionally measured the strength of the alliance by the number of high-level visits to Seoul by senior American officials; it may even stimulate misplaced nationalistic anxieties across some segments of Korean society. Yet if the fundamentals of the alliance are strong, with competent leadership and few foreign policy dramas, there would be little reason to worry if the United States devotes its attention to less stable and less secure parts of the world. Analysts in both Korea and the United States need to understand that, by itself, this is no reason for alarm over the health of the alliance. Unfortunately, there are other, more disturbing problems that the alliance will need to address.

**America turns inward**

At times of economic stress, countries traditionally turn inward, as internal concerns crowd out other issues. An increased focus on domestic priorities has often been coupled with calls to protect jobs from foreign competition by raising barriers to free trade, whether through tariffs or non-tariff barriers such as stringent environmental or labor standards. For example, many economic historians deem the 1930 Smoot–Hawley tariff responsible for pushing a weak U.S. economy into the Great Depression. Even before the global financial crisis, there were protectionist pleas in America, most notably from the Democratic presidential candidates during the primaries and later from then-Senator Obama during the general election campaign (albeit more mutedly). These pleas have increased with the steady deterioration in the U.S. economy toward the end of 2008; they are likely to become louder still in 2009 now that both houses of Congress are firmly in Democratic hands. It should be expected that the free-trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama, respectively, will be placed on hold or subject to renegotiation. To stem and reverse
this protectionist tide will require assertive leadership by the Obama administration. But the evidence also strongly suggests that the Obama administration and the Congress will give priority to domestic issues—an understandable choice given the ongoing challenges in the banking industry, a collapsing housing market, mounting job losses (with unemployment expected to grow to over 10 percent) and a budget deficit of over $1 trillion. No doubt the Obama administration will want to signal that the financial crisis has not rendered the United States a pitiful, helpless giant on the world stage. But given America’s domestic challenges, it is unclear how much emphasis will be placed on foreign policy issues, short of an immediate crisis.

The Greater Middle East

When the United States looks beyond its borders in coming years, it will look first not to Europe, Latin America or Asia, but to the Greater Middle East, stretching roughly from Morocco to India. Crises necessarily crowd out longer-term thinking. September 11 and its repercussions still loom in U.S. strategic calculations. America’s open-ended involvement in Afghanistan, its ongoing (but perhaps now time-limited) military commitment to Iraq, the nuclear weapons ambitions and other threats posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Obama administration’s promise to revitalize the Middle East peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians will continue to reduce the attention and (to a lesser extent) American military resources devoted to Asia. To this already daunting agenda will be added the multiple challenges posed by Pakistan—in aiding the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda, in defeating its home-grown terrorists, in reinvigorating its woefully inadequate state institutions save for the military and in preventing a larger clash with India. Regardless of the ultimate outcomes of the current conflicts in the Greater Middle East, concerns about endemic and widespread instability in this region will very likely dominate U.S. foreign and defense planning for the foreseeable future. The November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India’s financial center, underscore that the preeminent threats to global order primarily reside outside East Asia.

Transnational threats

Beyond the Greater Middle East lie a complex set of transnational challenges. The most prominent challenge facing the Northeast Asia region today (at least from an American perspective) is nuclear proliferation, particularly the danger posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea that could sell, share, or transfer its nuclear know-how to others. These possibilities have been a major motivation behind the Six-Party Talks as well as bilateral efforts by regional actors to press Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

The countries of Northeast Asia, including North Korea, face a range of other issues that have considerable potential to threaten security, disrupt economic growth, undercut political and social stability, or otherwise undermine a region whose dynamism has been the envy of much of the rest of the world. One particularly critical challenge is that of environmental degradation, which has manifested itself in many ways, including the air pollution which covers much of East and Northeast China on most days, the downstream effects of this pollution on the forests of Korea
and Northern Japan, the deterioration of water quality in the Bohai Gulf and Yellow Sea, and the “Yellow Dust” which rains down on the region, mainly in the early spring. Despite some efforts to deal with this challenge on a regional basis, little progress has been made. This leaves considerable potential for South Korea, a deeply affected country, to join with others, including the United States, to explore ways in which regional cooperation, and the technologies and know-how that countries like the ROK and the United States bring to the table, could be marshaled to deal with this challenge.

Competition over scarce energy resources is another challenge looming over Northeast Asia. Dramatic economic growth has been the hallmark of the region’s success, but this good-news story has brought with it new concerns as the energy-intensive economies of the region vie for access to increasingly limited energy resources. This phenomenon is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the China–Japan rivalry in the East China Sea—a rivalry that has its roots in competing historical territorial claims, but which increasingly concerns the untapped energy resources believed to lie beneath these disputed waters. While neither Beijing nor Tokyo wants to see a confrontation over competing claims in the East China Sea, this issue serves as a reminder of the lingering historical baggage that burdens the region and the possibility that energy-related competition could bring old rivalries once again to the fore, affecting the growth and stability that have characterized Northeast Asia for a generation.

As a major industrial power located at the crossroads of Northeast Asia and with major energy needs of its own, South Korea has a compelling interest in assuring its own access to energy resources and also in ensuring that regional competition for such resources does not get out of hand. So, too, does the United States, which has a major stake in the region’s peace, stability, and economic well-being. As major energy consumers, the United States and Korea, together with China and Japan, also have a shared interest in exploring ways to prevent their energy needs from boosting oil and natural gas prices and to bring to bear new technologies to conserve increasingly scarce energy resources.

Northeast Asia is not lacking in other transnational threats and concerns. The potentially devastating effects of infectious diseases such as SARS, HIV/AIDS, and Avian influenza have become a major concern in recent years. Increased efforts to share information, encourage countries in the region to be more transparent about domestic health developments, and develop ways to stem and reverse the spread of such diseases represent areas that are ripe for expanded U.S.–ROK cooperation as a first step, and then joint leadership to move these issues to the regional level. Finally, the United States and Japan in particular have highlighted narcotics trade and counterfeiting as major regional concerns, especially in light of North Korea’s track record of involvement in these activities. But the threat posed by such illicit activities and others, including piracy, is one that extends to other countries as well, including China and the ROK. An additional set of development challenges has been aggravated by the global financial crisis. At present, an estimated 1.4 billion people live below the World Bank poverty line of $1.25 per day. Struggling economies within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries during the next few years will mean less money available for foreign assistance, which was never a high priority for many Western governments even in flush times. The
Obama administration’s commitment to doubling U.S. assistance will be delayed. Tens of millions more of the world's least fortunate will slip below the poverty line. For some of the world's failing and fragile countries, even a modest reduction in development assistance, along with reduced foreign direct investment from the developed world, may be all it takes to tip them into anarchy. For countries dependent on high commodity prices and access to global markets, like Indonesia, lower prices and higher tariffs will bring real hardship. The social fabric of many countries will be stretched, and even torn. Food riots, violence, and lawlessness are all likely to increase, along with higher rates of infectious diseases, infant mortality, famine, child labor and environmental degradation. According to the CIA, more than 50 “stateless zones” already exist where overburdened governments are incapable of exerting jurisdiction. The number of stateless zones can now be expected to rise. In these places terrorism, narco-trafficking, and criminality will continue to flourish. Regime stability will become increasingly parlous. In this deteriorating international environment, it is likely that there will be more, not less, calls on U.S. time and resources.

This international landscape presents a new set of daunting challenges for all of America’s alliances, as the original rationales and purposes for which these alliances were intended, even before the recent financial crisis, have been overtaken by new developments. This has prompted the United States to help reshape its partnerships around the world. The evolution in America’s two most important and successful alliances—with NATO and Japan—exemplify this trend. The issues that most engage NATO at present all concern challenges that lie outside Europe—integrating North African countries into a broader security and counter-terrorism framework, supporting the Middle East peace process, training Iraqi security forces and bolstering the capacities of the Persian Gulf states, defeating the insurgency in Afghanistan, fighting the global war on terror, and conditionally engaging a more assertive Russia.

Similarly, since the mid-1990s, Japan has begun removing both substantive and symbolic constraints on its security role in response to rising concerns about China and North Korea (as well as political and generational change at home). Over this period, the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) have taken on more explicit responsibility to respond to regional contingencies together with U.S. forces, to support multinational coalition operations globally and to take on limited counter-offensive operations in the defense of Japan. In recent years, Tokyo has also passed legislation strengthening the government’s emergency management authority; launched indigenous spy satellites; developed missile defense capabilities with the United States; elevated the Defense Agency to a Defense Ministry and established a joint Defense Intelligence Headquarters. For the most part, these are developments that have been sought by U.S. policymakers for decades. Calls for changes in Article IX of the Constitution have also grown; either through revision of the Constitution itself or reinterpretation of whether Article IX should continue to bar Japan’s forces from participating in “collective self defense” with U.S. forces.

This reshaping of alliances has been difficult and at times contentious, as longstanding ways of planning, training, deploying, and budgeting have been challenged and overturned. NATO has developed elaborate procedures for working through these issues; Japan has more often responded to outside prodding, such as the two Nye-Armitage Reports, and patient, persistent, and quiet diplomacy. By
comparison, the United States and South Korea are laggards; they have barely started to have this conversation. During the past few years, ideological differences and personality clashes between the Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations poisoned the atmosphere; during the past year, the Lee Myung-bak administration has been preoccupied largely with domestic issues, while the Bush administration has continued to concentrate on the Greater Middle East. When it has turned its attention to Northeast Asia, it has focused on China and North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. To date, Washington and Seoul have not devoted the same degree of attention to planning a joint strategy to cope with these new challenges. It is as yet unclear whether the Obama administration will reverse this strategic drift and instead reaffirm a sense of common purpose in the alliance.

**Tensions—and more—in the alliance**

In any alliance, planning for the future generally takes a back seat to addressing more immediate matters; the urgent often crowds-out the important. The United States and South Korea have experienced a number of troubling bilateral incidents and issues in the past few years, ranging from minor irritants to the truly tragic. Some have involved local concerns, such as when embalming fluid escaped from the Yongsan garrison into the Han River; the defacing of General Douglas MacArthur’s statue; debate over the applicable environmental standards for the return of U.S. bases to Korean control; media attention to a Korean War-era massacre of civilians at No Gun Ri; and the fatal accident involving two young schoolgirls trampled underneath a U.S. armored personnel carrier and the ensuing public outcry when two American soldiers were subsequently acquitted of any wrongdoing. Although these incidents were all highly regrettable, such tensions are not unusual between allies, especially when one country forward-bases its military.

These periodic eruptions of public indignation could be viewed as signs of a rambunctious South Korean democracy, greater ROK self-confidence, and healthy alliance relations, but they have all occurred during a period of leadership and generational change in the South. The resulting public attention reflects also a growing sense of nationalism and the search for a new identity in Korean society and politics. Indeed, they are best understood in light of underlying demographic changes, which have redefined the domestic political context. Fewer Koreans today are reflexively pro-American. Only an aging generation can personally recall the bravery of U.S. forces during the Korean War and America’s generosity after it. Instead, a new, younger generation has come to maturity associating the United States with its support for South Korean military regimes and the Gwangju massacre.

Consequently, during the past few years many South Koreans have favored a more active and independent foreign and national security policy, and a regional and global status commensurate with their new power and wealth. This has translated into calls, especially by the younger generation, for a more mature partnership with the United States based on mutual respect and a dismantling of the Cold War security structures on the peninsula. These calls were adopted enthusiastically by the Roh Moo-hyun administration; critics would say that President Roh played to the most nationalistic, xenophobic, and emotive sentiments of the Korean people at the
expense of the United States. Unsurprisingly, his rhetoric and actions strained personal relations with American officials and tested alliance ties.

It would have been easier to manage these tensions, along with the usual alliance irritants, were it not for the concurrence of more serious differences that went to the substance and structure of the underlying partnership. These issues included the relocation of American forces from the front lines near the DMZ to two hub areas south of Seoul, the draw-down of U.S. forces stationed on the Korean peninsula, a reallocation of burden-sharing to increase the ROK’s contribution from approximately 38 percent to 50 percent, and the transfer of wartime operational control of Korean forces from the United States to the ROK.

These measures indicated a major strategic reorientation in the American view of the alliance, with important implications for its future. First, they suggested that the United States would move gradually to an offshore-dominant role, reducing the need for large American forces on the Korean peninsula (although there were calls in both the United States and the ROK for Washington to maintain a sizable residual presence, on the order of at least 25,000 personnel). Second, they suggested that the United States would want the ROK to assume a larger share of the security responsibilities on the Korean peninsula that had been previously performed by the United States.

At the same time, changing social and political forces inside Korea, harnessed to Roh’s ambition and vision of a more equal partnership, compelled Seoul to expand, at least in its declaratory policy, its concept of the alliance’s mission beyond the Korean peninsula. There was a growing appreciation of transnational threats and a recognition that instability, terrorism, and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) outside of Northeast Asia could threaten peace and stability in Northeast Asia. But this shift also reflected internal confidence that conventional and nuclear deterrence toward North Korea would continue to work without precluding ROK forces from adopting other roles and missions off-peninsula.

All these developments suggest an alliance that is moving out smartly to address the new challenges of the twenty-first century. Indeed, the timing could not be better, with America increasingly focused on regional contingencies off-peninsula and the ROK demonstrating the will and the capability to assume new roles and responsibilities both on- and off-peninsula. So, what appears to be the problem?

Assessing the North Korean threat

In recent years, American threat perceptions, both globally and locally, have not been shared by its South Korean partner. After September 11, the United States elevated the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in both its declaratory policy and operational priorities. In contrast, for many countries in East Asia, including South Korea, economic development and internal stability were deemed far more urgent. For these countries, terrorist threats derived salience primarily from their ability to disrupt trade patterns, commercial relationships and economic growth, not from any intrinsic risks to national security.

Moreover, the GWOT did not provide the same cohesion or “glue” for many of America’s allies and security partners as the threat posed by the Soviet Union and its satellites during the Cold War. As John Ikenberry has observed,
the end of the Cold War . . . eliminated a common threat that tied the United States to a global array of allies and it . . . has meant that the United States does not need these allies in the same way as in the past. But it also means that other states do not need the United States as much, either.10

During the Cold War, the United States and its alliance partners banded together to contain and defeat communism. A shared fear of the Soviet threat was the “glue” at the core of the transatlantic relationship and America’s alliances around the world. For South Korea, the Bush administration’s GWOT was an inadequate substitute, because the concept was never shared fully by Seoul and because of the administration’s deteriorating credibility over the insurgency in Iraq. For the past few years there has been far less common purpose.

North Korea traditionally provided the sense of shared purpose to the U.S.–ROK alliance. In recent years, however, North Korea became the source of at least as much friction as glue between the White House and the Blue House. The Bush administration entered office viewing North Korea as a fundamentally illegitimate regime, a significant military threat and a world-class human rights violator. Even before the shock of September 11, senior U.S. policymakers clearly favored regime-change as the optimal way to deal with Pyongyang. This ran directly contrary to the policy approaches of both the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, which had literally invested billions of won in engaging the North directly (whether labeled “sunshine” or “peace and prosperity”) in the hopes of improving ties. Officials in Washington derisively (and sometimes openly) referred to South Korea’s policy as appeasement, especially after the Roh administration’s reluctance to label North Korea the “main enemy” in its annual Ministry of Defense White Papers and its refusal to censure North Korea before the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The Bush administration policy also presumed a fundamental—and unilateral—reordering of the partnership from a defensive alliance, based on deterring North Korea from launching military aggression, to an offensive alliance, based on pressuring and isolating (and ideally toppling) the Kim Jong II regime, and on using the Korean peninsula to project power throughout East Asia, especially to counter a rising China.11 It is doubtful that any South Korean government, no matter how conservative, could explicitly support forcible regime change in the North or blatantly balance against Beijing.

The Obama administration is likely to take a different, more diplomatic approach to North Korea. Candidate Obama famously stated that he would be willing to meet face-to-face with Kim Jong II during his first year in office, with no preconditions. Even if President Obama retreats from such a bold step (and he has already indicated he would), his administration is publicly committed to a more vigorous diplomatic outreach to the North, including the possibility of a high-level delegation visiting Pyongyang during its first year in office. The United States is certain to continue the Six-Party Talks process, although it has designated Ambassador Stephen Bosworth as Special Emissary for North Korea and Ambassador Sung Kim as the lead U.S. official at the Talks, thereby dividing the roles previously served by the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.
Because there is now a widely accepted diplomatic framework for addressing, or at least attempting to address, North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs, North Korea may prove far less contentious in future alliance relations. During its second term the Bush administration, haltingly at first but then with greater conviction, energized the diplomatic track. Differences over North Korea policy in the past few years have been mostly tactical, not strategic, and have been channeled into the diplomatic framework of the Six-Party Talks. Even Lee Myung-bak’s criticism of his predecessor’s “peace and prosperity” approach was based more on its unilateral nature than opposition to engagement per se. Lee’s main objection was that this approach appeared unconditional (even unprincipled) and demanded insufficient reciprocity from the North. Although there will undoubtedly be disagreements over North Korea strategy between the Lee and Obama administrations, it is unlikely that they will rise to the same level of acrimony that characterized U.S.–Korean relations during President Bush’s first term.

This coalescing of perspectives is especially noteworthy when juxtaposed against other trends on the peninsula. Ironically, the United States has reduced its military presence at precisely the time when North Korea has become more lethal and versatile in the dangers it presents. Pyongyang resumed the testing of longer-range ballistic missiles in July 2006, followed by the detonation of a nuclear device in October of the same year. Even though the DPRK’s conventional capabilities have been degraded significantly over the past decade or more, they could still inflict considerable damage on Seoul in the first few days of a war. The then-Commander of the Combined Forces Command, General B.B. Bell, testified in March 2008 that “North Korea still has the capacity to inflict major destruction and significant military and civilian casualties in South Korea, with little or no warning.” North Korea also provided technical assistance to Syria with the construction of an unsafeguarded nuclear reactor in al Khibar, Syria. Yet during this period, the United States withdrew two combat brigades and decided to reduce permanently its forces from approximately 38,000 to 28,500 troops (after an initial target of 25,000 was subsequently overturned), transfer wartime operational control to the ROK by April 2012, and disestablish the Combined Forces Command.

How can these moves be explained? At the very least, they reflected the Pentagon’s belief that war was not imminent on the peninsula and that U.S. forces were needed elsewhere. Washington and Seoul remained confident that both conventional and nuclear deterrence toward North Korea, which had worked for over 50 years, would continue to work in the future. North Korea’s forces, while formidable on paper, had been declining for years due to a lack of training, equipment and spare parts. The increased interactions between North and South during the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations revealed to the outside world the systemic weakness and frailty of the Pyongyang regime. North Korea’s perennial inability to feed its own people had much the same impact; the country was as much to be pitied as feared. In June 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates confirmed that “I don’t think anyone considers the Republic of Korea today a combat zone.” Even more revealing, the Pentagon recommended that all U.S. military personnel assigned to Korea be eligible for family-accompanied tours. This policy change also reflected a belief that the United States would still leave major air assets on the peninsula and could quickly reinforce the Korean peninsula.
should a conflict erupt. It also reflected the recognition that the ROK was an impressive fighting force, and the expectation that upgrades to command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I) would increasingly enable the South to take the lead in its own defense.

For South Korea, these moves were not inconsistent with its own new national narrative of greater independence and self-reliance articulated by the Roh administration, and encouraged by its domestic political base of the so-called “386” generation and younger members of the electorate. The ROK’s assertiveness in pressing for wartime operational control was motivated by Roh Moo-hyun’s appeal to nationalist pride (and domestic support), and was of a piece with his earlier exploitation of sensitive Korean emotions at America’s expense during his presidential campaign.

The security threat posed by North Korea did not seem to overly worry the ROK, either. Although concern was expressed in some, more conservative quarters over the timing of the handover of operational wartime control, preferring a more cautious (i.e., delayed) transfer, little anxiety was expressed about the underlying decision that Seoul should exercise greater control over its military affairs on the Korean peninsula. (Interestingly, even among academic analysts and commentators, there was no revisiting of the nuclear debate and discussion that characterized an earlier upheaval in U.S.–ROK relations, namely, when President Nixon announced the Guam Doctrine as the United States withdrew from Vietnam and called for greater military self-reliance by its Asian allies.) In September 2005, Seoul announced “Defense Reform 2020,” which was intended to create a modern military force capable of playing a leading role in the defense of the country. Defense spending would be increased by an average of 6.2 percent annually; ground forces would be reduced by approximately 45 percent by 2020, with high-tech weapons systems acting as a force multiplier in their stead.

By the start of the twenty-first century, therefore, the United States had increasingly conceptualized the alliance in regional or even global terms, whereas the ROK military, despite some impressive blue-water naval assets, was still wedded to the mission of peninsular defense. Ideally, the United States would like the ROK to join with U.S. forces in addressing these regional contingencies, in addition to fulfilling its primary missions to deter and, if necessary, defeat North Korea. It is these offshore missions, not North Korea, where threat assessments will likely diverge and where alliance disagreements will arise in the future.

Diverging regional threat assessments
As the Obama administration assumes office, it inherits a defense concept for East Asia that is fast moving away from outdated Cold-War-based postures and missions to “an offshore-dominant role,” premised on maximum American flexibility and freedom of action. It will no doubt continue to view North Korea as a threat, less for any real prospect of Pyongyang launching a second Korean War than for its proliferation capabilities, based on its proven ability to export its nuclear technology and expertise and its potential ability to export fissile materials. The ROK has so far opted not to participate in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), due to sensitivity over Pyongyang’s possible reaction (and despite U.S. efforts to characterize its focus more broadly than just North Korea). This has been an irritant, but not
a major source of disagreement between Washington and Seoul, perhaps because of Seoul’s informal and discreet assistance on PSI-related activities. The Lee Myung-bak government will revisit whether to formally join PSI as part of its willingness to be more outspoken about the North’s nuclear ambitions.

Alliance management with respect to China will prove more complex. Given China’s rapidly developing economic and military power, and its consequent political influence, it is simply not possible to conduct a sensible dialogue on regional security in general, or peninsular security in particular, without factoring in Chinese interests and Chinese views. Beijing has a large claim to participate in determining permanent Korean security arrangements because of its signature on the 1953 Armistice Agreement and because of its geographical proximity. That does not mean China has a role in each and every aspect of the multi-party permanent peace mechanism that will hopefully be developed to replace the 1953 Armistice. But having entered the war in 1950 to protect Chinese national security, it would be unrealistic to expect Beijing to sit by while others decide the shape of future arrangements. Moreover, China’s increasingly central role in the economies of both Koreas and the region as a whole, means that Chinese interests will inevitably need to be weighed in any regional trade and investment agreements. For Seoul and Washington, this reality constitutes something of an imperative to move ahead to ratify and implement the June 30, 2007 Korea–U.S. (KORUS) Free Trade Agreement.

Although emotionally powerful in Korea, tussling over the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo will very likely be of far less consequence in Sino-Korean relations than the maritime and territorial disputes in the East China Sea between the PRC and Japan. Although the conflicting historical claims between the ROK and Japan over Dokdo/Takeshima may not lead to physical clashes, they can inflame domestic public opinion and hence disrupt diplomatic relations.

There is no question that South Koreans understand the importance of ties with Beijing for their future well-being and that they will seek to keep relations on a positive course, especially in the trade area. It is also clear that China has played a positive role in the Six-Party Talks, one consistent with South Korean (and American) interests. However, a test may come if the denuclearization process gets bogged down.17 At that time, China may decide there is no incentive in pushing North Korea to denuclearize, decide instead to accept the nuclear status quo, reposition itself to gain greater influence with Pyongyang and await patiently the demise of the regime. How Seoul would position itself vis-à-vis China in such circumstances is uncertain, as would be the impact on the alliance with the United States of any significant shift in North–South relations.

In the meantime, the continued development of PRC military power, which includes improvements to its nuclear, missile, deep-water, anti-satellite, asymmetrical, and information warfare capabilities,18 create new realities of great importance across the Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, given the depth of strategic suspicion between the United States and China, as well as between Japan and China, assessments of PLA modernization extend beyond consideration of their implications for a cross-Strait confrontation. The build-up of American naval and air capabilities in the Pacific, and Japan’s recent military upgrades, are only partially in response to growing concerns about Taiwan, per se.

An underlying factor affecting these issues is the mutual strategic wariness that exists between the United States and China, despite the determination on both sides
to improve relations and diminish disagreements. Americans worry that China seeks to become the regional hegemon at U.S. expense, and the Chinese worry that the United States is not prepared to accept the PRC playing a more active role in support of its legitimate national interests. It is not self-evident how these suspicions will be alleviated, but it will be crucial to the long-term maintenance of peace and stability throughout the region that they are addressed rather than simply allowed to fester.19

How these suspicions will be alleviated, or even whether they can be alleviated, in ways that would strengthen the U.S.–ROK alliance remains an open question. America’s reorientation of its forces on the Korean peninsula and the ROK’s military transformation were driven more by domestic political concerns than by jointly shared security imperatives. As a result, larger questions about the future of the alliance went begging. With both partners transitioning to new force structures, these measures portended an alliance that is drifting apart, not a maturing alliance that is becoming a more equal and cohesive partnership. Questions remain unanswered, or even unasked, about whether the two partners agree on the strategic environment in the region and the respective roles both should play.

What missions will a more autonomous ROK military assume? Is there agreement on the future role of U.S. forces on the peninsula? What balance should the ROK strike between peninsular and regional capabilities? What are the implications of a redefined command relationship for war planning and contingencies, both on- and off-peninsula? Is there agreement on the future role of combined U.S. and ROK forces in regional operations?20 Will Seoul assent to more expansive security or humanitarian missions that address sources of transnational instability in the region, ranging from piracy and smuggling to narcotics trafficking and WMD proliferation? In what numbers, for what purposes, and for what duration will new missions be undertaken? Will they be pursued independently, in joint operations with the United States or as part of a multilateral response?

In the longer term, does the ROK envision the development of a regional security architecture or arrangement that it would join? Is it anticipated that South Korea and Japan will eventually overcome the burdens of history and forge a bilateral security alliance (or perhaps even a trilateral one with the United States as the third partner)? Does South Korea see itself eventually integrating into a broader regional arrangement for collective security that excludes the United States? Does South Korea aspire to play a regional “balancing” role, first outlined by President Roh Moo-hyun in March 2005, assuming it can determine what it is balancing against? How do the answers to these questions affect South Korea’s relations with China and with Japan? Will they provide additional glue to the alliance with the United States or hasten its end? These questions go to the heart of the future of the alliance, yet the answers, along with operational guidelines and protocols, are still works in progress. Although there have been discussions on the “future of the alliance,” these have focused on U.S. base realignment and other details, not the future security environment in the region and its larger strategic implications.

In short, the two parties have yet to confront the full implications of the military and defense decisions of the past few years, often undertaken unilaterally and attuned more to domestic audiences than to strategic realities. As with all sensitive discussions, the governments may fear leaks to the media, especially in the ROK. Also, South Korea has been focused on the transfer of wartime control by 2012 and
the implementation of Defense Reform 2020. Washington has been fighting two wars in the Greater Middle East. It could be that the two sides do not yet know the answers to these questions. Most likely, the absence of a net assessment by both governments reflects a combination of all the above factors, along with a reluctance to provide answers the other may not wish to hear. This is not to say that the alliance is doomed or even fatally handicapped. However, it does mean that the current sense of strategic drift, where each partner goes about its business without a sense of common purpose, is unsustainable for the future health of the alliance.

The encouraging news is that there may be time to remedy this problem. The ROK’s economic downturn in late 2008 placed severe budgetary pressure on its ambitious defense reform agenda, leading the Ministry of National Defense to announce that it intended to “significantly delay” its time-line for troop cuts and procuring high-tech weapons. Further, tensions across the Taiwan Strait have measurably diminished following the election of Ma Ying-jeou as Taiwan’s president. Ma’s far more prudent approach to Taiwan’s political status and careful cultivation of relations with the mainland contrast markedly with those of his predecessor, Chen Shui-bian.

Washington and Seoul therefore need to use this opportunity to discuss far more candidly alliance relations in the longer term. Two scenarios should receive special attention. For South Korea, two specific fears could increasingly characterize alliance relations: abandonment and entrapment. While these issues are intrinsic to most alliance relationships, they could become more acute in the years to come.

*Abandonment anxieties*

Changing military postures and missions, combined with strategic uncertainty about the future security environment in Northeast Asia, will very likely increase South Korea’s fear of American abandonment. Should North Korea retain its nuclear weapons and continue its development of long-range ballistic missiles, the United States and South Korea will increasingly be faced with questions about the continued viability of extended deterrence and the credibility of U.S. security commitments.

During the Cold War, U.S. support for South Korea vis-à-vis the North was part of the larger calculus of U.S.-Soviet competition. Military aggression by a local actor had to be resisted lest it result in gains at the other superpower’s expense or escalate to the global level, thereby embroiling the two superpowers in a potential nuclear conflict. Nonetheless, Seoul seriously questioned America’s commitment to its defense during the early 1970s as the United States exited from Vietnam and the larger East Asian environment was changing largely to Seoul’s disadvantage. President Park Chung Hee decided to undertake a crash nuclear weapons program under the tight control of the Blue House. Washington soon learned of the program and brought sufficient pressure to bear to end it.

In the absence of the Cold War context, there is far less need for the United States to come to the aid of its allies, especially when faced with a nuclear-armed adversary. As Stephen Peter Rosen has written: “Hostile regional nuclear powers are … in a good position to deter U.S. military intervention against them, and so may be in a better position to threaten the allies of the United States that do not have nuclear weapons.” A nuclear-armed North Korea will thus increasingly strain alliance ties should doubts in Seoul grow about the U.S. security commitment. These doubts over
the “decoupling” of U.S. and ROK national security interests will grow if Pyongyang increases (or even maintains) its nuclear weapons stockpile and enhances its long-range ballistic missile capabilities.\textsuperscript{24} If faced with the possibility of a North Korean attack on a U.S. city, would Washington automatically come to South Korea’s defense? Or more precisely, would South Korea believe that Washington would automatically come to South Korea’s defense?

During the Cold War, similar questions arose over American credibility and the U.S. commitment to the defense of Europe. Despite deep historical ties, binding legal agreements, the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons, and the presence of hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops, these issues were a constant theme in the transatlantic debate. Even so, West Europeans were unsure whether the United States would risk Boston for Bonn. The ties that bind Washington to Seoul are less tightly woven. With the reduction of U.S. forces in Korea and the reconceptualization of the U.S. mission to an offshore balancing role, these ties are gradually loosening, which will make it even harder to persuade South Korea that the U.S. commitment is firm.\textsuperscript{25} Distilled to its essence, will the United States be willing to risk Seattle or San Francisco for Seoul?\textsuperscript{26}

Demonstrating U.S. credibility will become more challenging in the years ahead as the remaining totems of the American security commitment eventually disappear. U.S. nuclear weapons and large-scale troop deployments stationed on the Korean peninsula are already long-gone; these relics of the Cold War will soon be joined by the elimination of the U.S. operational command in wartime. Should doubts among ROK strategists emerge, re-establishing American credibility would not be easy. For both policy and budgetary reasons, it is inconceivable that an Obama administration would reintroduce nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula, even in the unlikely event that such a move would be tolerated by the South Korean public. It is also unlikely that an Obama administration would increase the number of American forces stationed on the peninsula; many observers believe that the United States may not want to station any American troops in a potential war zone under a divided command. It is also unlikely that the operational control (OPCON) transfer would be overturned, although it might be delayed.

Moreover, South Korea’s trust in American constancy and competence cannot have been allayed by Washington’s handling of diplomacy with North Korea during the George W. Bush administration. U.S. policy-goals were repeatedly stymied by strategic confusion over linking ends and means, an inability to execute policy and hold officials accountable, and a deep-rooted ambivalence over the advisability to negotiate with North Korea at all.\textsuperscript{27} Perhaps the least-noted and most astonishing aspect of the entire diplomatic process involving North Korea during the past few years has been the almost complete inability of the world’s strongest military, economic and diplomatic power—at a “unipolar moment,” no less—to shape the strategic environment in Northeast Asia to its liking. The United States proved thoroughly incapable of preventing an impoverished, dysfunctional country of only 23 million people from consistently endangering the peace and stability of the world’s most economically dynamic region.\textsuperscript{28} In the meantime, North Korea is estimated to have increased its stockpile of fissile material from enough for one or two bombs to enough for five to twelve bombs.\textsuperscript{29} The Obama administration will surely strive to do better, with both Pyongyang and Seoul.
With the enhancement of ROK military capabilities under Defense Reform 2020 (even if aspects of the program are delayed), there will be even less need for a more robust American military presence on the peninsula. As the ROK demonstrates over time that it can successfully deter the DPRK with a diminishing U.S. contribution, and with other demands on U.S. forces in other parts of the world, pressures to reduce further the U.S. footprint on the Korean peninsula will increase. Ironically, as Seoul becomes a more equal alliance partner in the years to come, the temptation for the United States to gradually abandon its commitments to the alliance will increase and abandonment fears may grow.

Entrapment fears

South Korea will also suffer, paradoxically, from a fear of entrapment by the United States, with the ROK fearful of getting pulled into crises and perhaps even conflicts that have traditionally been well outside of Seoul’s traditional military purview. During the first term of the George W. Bush administration, the United States took an openly belligerent line toward North Korea, suggesting strongly that its preferred policy was to replace the regime in Pyongyang. President Bush confessed that he “loathed” Kim Jong Il, identified North Korea as a charter member of the “axis of evil,” announced the redeployment of two U.S. brigades north of Seoul to positions south of the Han River, released the 2002 National Security Strategy that highlighted military preemption, and undertook the invasion of Iraq without the imprimatur of the United Nations—all were seen as indicators that the United States might initiate a conflict on the Korean peninsula that would inevitably entangle South Korea, whatever its wishes.

Future fears of entrapment seem most likely to involve the possibilities of a confrontation between the United States and China, including on the Korean peninsula. In the event of the dissolution of the Pyongyang regime and the potential for misunderstandings, miscommunications, and miscalculations among all involved parties, the risks are far from trivial. The collapse of the North would most certainly result in a chaotic and confusing security environment. In an effort to provide humanitarian relief, stabilize the internal situation, and secure WMD assets, it is easy to imagine U.S. forces deploying northward, no doubt prompting Chinese memories of the last time American forces approached the Yalu River.

Beijing has a legitimate claim to participate in permanent Korean security arrangements because of its signature on the 1953 Armistice Agreement and because of its immediate proximity to the peninsula. And China has signaled, at times subtly, that it sees the Korean peninsula as part of its sphere of influence. For example, in recent years, China has inflamed Korean opinion by historical claims related to the ancient kingdom of Goguryeo, thereby raising concerns that it may have irredentist designs on the northern part of the Korean peninsula in the event of North Korea’s collapse. Yet it is doubtful whether there has been any Korean–American contingency planning for the collapse of the Pyongyang regime and almost certainly no tripartite discussions among Seoul, Washington, and Beijing.

Taiwan is a more plausible locale for a major U.S.–China confrontation. Although the election of Ma Ying-jeou in March 2008 has ushered in a warming of relations with the mainland, the Taiwan issue still has the greatest potential to aggravate relations between China and the United States. It is the most likely
flashpoint for a crisis or worse between Washington and Beijing. Moreover, quite apart from Taiwan there is substantial strategic suspicion between the United States and China, despite the determination on both sides to improve relations and tamp down disagreements. As of this writing, the Obama administration will very likely take a pragmatic approach to U.S.–China security cooperation, but the wild-card could be Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress with members who have previously protested China’s “artificially low” currency valuation and its human rights abuses.

The ROK has consciously sought to keep its distance from any prospective involvement in a major U.S.–China crisis, with particular concern focused on Taiwan. There is no question that Koreans understand the importance of maintaining good relations with China, which is now the ROK’s largest trading partner, the largest recipient of Korean direct investment and host to the greatest number of overseas Korean students. The Roh Moo-hyun administration sought to “opt out” of any U.S. involvement in a Taiwan contingency. In November 2005, U.S. and ROK officials began negotiations on this issue, culminating in a January 19, 2006 joint statement in which the ROK recognized “the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility.” In return, the United States asserted that it “respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.” It was subsequently reported that South Korea retained the right to veto the deployment of U.S. forces based in South Korea for operations off the peninsula.

Regardless of the intentions of the parties, it is unclear whether South Korea would be able to sit on the sidelines in the (currently unlikely) event that China were to use force against Taiwan and if the United States and Japan were then drawn into the conflict. There would be serious consequences for the ROK, regardless of whether Seoul permitted or forbade the use of Korean bases for military operations. In a Taiwan contingency, the United States would have two options, each of which would pose risks and vexing policy dilemmas for South Korea. If the United States violated its understandings with South Korea, Seoul would either be entrapped into participating in a conflict with China against its will or risk rupturing its alliance with the United States. Alternatively, if the United States intended to uphold its pledges to South Korea in a Taiwan or another off-peninsula contingency, and suspected that Seoul would not be a willing partner, then U.S. military planners would want to draw down U.S. troops and air-assets on the peninsula well in advance, so that they might be available for regional contingencies. Such a scenario would reinforce Seoul’s fears of abandonment. In sum, as long as the United States remains committed to opposing Chinese coercion of Taiwan, South Korea will be unable to escape its strategic dilemma: abandonment anxieties and entrapment fears.

Concluding observations

For the past 50 years, the U.S.–ROK alliance has been an essential component of each country’s security—and, as such, it has been one of the leading sources of peace and stability in East Asia. The alliance has been vital to America’s regional and global leadership position. It has also served South Korea well as it made historic transitions to democracy and a modern economy. The alliance has been more than a
security pact; it has been an institutionalized expression of a political and economic friendship—two countries as partners and participants in a larger international order built on shared interests, values, and aspirations. 33

It is easy to imagine that the alliance will continue to survive for another five decades. The U.S.–ROK alliance is still vital to both countries, both in its value as a security pact and as a vehicle for regional and global cooperation. Yet the partnership is changing in important ways, and the domestic, regional, and international environment in which it operates is changing fundamentally as well. The current drift in strategic planning is likely to become less and less tenable in future years, placing greater pressure on the alliance. The looming deadline of April 2012 for the transfer of wartime operational control will increasingly drive policymakers to address the consequences of budgetary decisions and the reallocation of roles and missions, both on and off the Korean peninsula. At the same time, U.S. attention will be focused primarily on other regions, while the ROK will be focused far more locally. The ability to paper over a lack of common purpose and shared vision may be useful as a temporary placeholder, but it will not provide an adequate foundation for the future viability of the alliance.

In assessing why alliances flourish and sometimes fail, Stephen M. Walt has observed that “there is nothing sacred about an existing alliance, no matter how successful or long-lived it has been.” 34 Alliances are undermined or collapse because of changing threat perceptions, declining credibility (as measured in both material capabilities and perceptions of political will), demographic and social trends in domestic politics, or ideological divisions. 35 If the U.S.–ROK alliance is to be revived and brought into the twenty-first century, this can only be achieved if both partners are willing to reengage in candid discussions concerning their shared interests, values, and aspirations. In short, they need to imagine that things will not go on in the same way as before; and they need to imagine a change, together.

Notes
3. CIA Director Michael Hayden has asserted that “Today virtually every major terrorist threat that my agency is aware of has threads back to the tribal areas [along the Afghan-Pakistan border].” Michael Hayden, “State of al Qaeda Today,” Speech before The

4. Ikenberry, Moon, and Reiss, The Search for a Common Strategic Vision.

5. The United States has been the world’s largest donor in real dollar terms, and recent programs to eradicate HIV/AIDS in Africa and the Millennium Challenge Corporation that promotes governmental best practices, have been very successful. These programs will be cut, along with other forms of foreign and developmental assistance. China is likely to move into the void in Africa and perhaps Latin America as well. Beijing’s support for dictators, tolerance of corruption and uncertain commitment to social and environmental responsibility will be a poor substitute for Western aid.


7. Ikenberry, Moon, and Reiss, The Search for a Common Strategic Vision.

8. On this general topic, see Byung-Kook Kim, “The Politics of National Identity: The Rebirth of Ideology and Drifting Foreign Policy in South Korea,” in Korea: The East Asian Pivot, ed. Jonathan D. Pollack (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2004), 79–120. This is not to say that periodic public eruptions of nationalism (as with U.S. beef imports), do not erode goodwill and act as a drag on alliance relations, especially when combined with the absence of any coherent public diplomacy campaign by the ROK in the United States.

9. When asked in 2008 which country was the ROK’s main enemy, 34 percent of cadets at the Korean Military Academy identified the United States and 33 percent identified North Korea. See Ashley Rowland and Hwang Hae-rym, “S. Korean cadets’ views shaped by a skewed education,” Stars and Stripes, April 18, 2008.


12. Reflecting this emphasis, the ROK government has formally announced that its North Korea policy will be called “the policy of mutual benefits and common prosperity.”


17. At the end of 2008, the Six-Party Talks had ended, sine die, with disagreement over North Korea’s responsibilities and obligations under a verification scheme.


26. For a discussion of extended deterrence on the Korean peninsula, see Marc Dean Millot, Roger Molander, and Peter A. Wilson, “‘The Day After . . .’ Nuclear Proliferation in the Post-Cold War World” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1993), 73–110.


33. Ikenberry, Moon, and Reiss, The Search for a Common Strategic Vision.


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