



The U.S.–ROK Alliance: Future Strategic Role

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The U.S.–Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance is seriously troubled today. Important questions have been raised both in Washington and in Seoul as to the alliance’s viability and future applicability. It is not an overstatement to argue that a failure by both sides to adjust to the new strategic (not to mention domestic political) realities could put the alliance at peril in the near future regardless of its long-term strategic rationale. However, a greater appreciation of the future strategic role of the alliance in assuring peace and stability in the peninsula and greater North-east Asia could help inform the current debate and provide a greater incentive for both sides to work through the current challenges associated with maintaining alliances in two vibrant democracies in a fast-changing world.

A look at the alliance’s future strategic role must start with a discussion of each nation’s strategic objectives and vision for the future. Obviously, if those visions do not coincide, it will be impossible to find a common strategic role for the alliance. The following remarks are focused on the long term: the peninsula 10 to 20 years from today. For the sake of argument, it is assumed that the threat currently posed by Pyongyang has dissipated or disappeared from the peninsula. This assumption is based on the perception that there is little value in discussing various scenarios involving collapse or transition; many others have done so, and no doubt many more will undertake this task. At some undetermined point over the next decade or two, either the North will reach accommodation with the South and true peaceful coexistence will occur (the federation or confederation scenarios), or, preferably, the North will no longer exist as a result of chaos, conflict,

or (it is to be hoped, peaceful) collapse, most likely triggered by some event or series of circumstances as unpredictable today as the events surrounding the Berlin Wall’s collapse were a decade before that magnificent event occurred.

If this does not occur, if the Kim dynasty prevails in the North or an equally despotic regime takes its place, then the future strategic role of the U.S.–ROK alliance will become simple to define; it will be the same as it is today and will continue to be in the near term: that is, to deter possible aggression by the North while providing the secure environment under which Seoul’s open, free society can continue to prosper. Performing this role will require a common appreciation of the current and future threat posed by North Korea. As long as North Korea continues to exist as a separate entity possessing a separate military (regardless of its nuclear status), so too will the strategic rationale for a close U.S.–ROK alliance to minimize that threat. As ROK capabilities expand or the North’s capabilities diminish (or grow) in relative or absolute terms, the alliance can and should be maintained with force levels commensurate with the threat. Command arrangements also should reflect growing ROK capabilities and the ROK’s willingness to take on a greater, more self-sufficient and self-sustaining role in its own defense. But the rationale for the alliance will remain. It is a valuable insurance policy. The premiums that both sides pay to keep this insurance policy intact far outweigh the possible consequences were the policy to lapse.

Even if genuine rapprochement were to be achieved between North and South—and the situation today does not nearly approach such a con-

dition—the alliance still would serve a useful role as a “hedge” against a future reversal or reversion in the North to the confrontational policies of today. As a result, Washington and Seoul must continue to make it clear to Pyongyang that the continued presence of U.S. troops in the ROK is not a bargaining chip but an essential stabilizing force that makes South–North dialogue and broader multilateral (six-party) or eventual bilateral (U.S.–DPRK) dialogue possible. In short, until reunification is achieved, the status and fate of U.S. forces based in the ROK should be for Seoul and Washington alone to determine; as far as Pyongyang is concerned, the U.S. presence must be seen as nonnegotiable. Nor should U.S. force readjustments be offered as an incentive for the North to cooperate on nuclear or other matters. Such an offer would only open the door for more nuclear blackmail.

To carry this argument to its logical conclusion, once true reunification occurs, it will be up to Washington and to the new unified Korean government to decide the desirability and nature of any new bilateral security arrangement or force posture. The aspirations and concerns of a unified Korea’s neighbors should be taken into account, but neither their approval nor their direct role in the debate would be expected or appropriate.

Future Visions: Do They Coincide with One Another?

Regardless of what actually happens, it is the common vision of the United States and the Republic of Korea that one day there will be a single Korean state inhabiting the entire peninsula and living securely in an area that encompasses the currently recognized boundaries of the North and South under the political and economic systems and way of life that exist today in the South. Such an outcome is in the national security interests of both Washington and Seoul and in the best interests of the Korean people, North and South. Again, the only thing required here is to accept

that this is a common American and (South) Korean vision. It is, or it should be, a vision acceptable to and consistent with the national security interests of Korea’s neighbors as well.

As a general rule, no American politicians, either Democrats or Republicans, are famous for their ability to think long term, much less plan or act in accordance with visions of the future. Ironically, one of the driving rationales behind the current U.S. force restructuring or Future of the Alliance (FOTA) talks is to create a force posture that will be sustainable into the future based on the shared understanding that the current footprint is too intrusive and thus not sustainable. The problem today is not so much what is being done or why but how it is being accomplished.

Most serious American strategists support a continued active political, economic, and security role for the United States in Asia one to two decades from now simply because it is in America’s national security interest to remain actively engaged as part of an overlapping series of security arrangements and mechanisms in the current alliance relationship aimed at promoting a peaceful, stable security environment. Few believe that current force levels could or should be sustained absent a dramatic change in the threat environment in East Asia post-Korean reunification or reconciliation. But the network of alliances that has served U.S. interests so well for the past half-century and that has provided the bases that make a continued force presence or even power projection from remote bases possible will remain useful even if “lily pads” and operational or logistical “hubs” replace larger facilities as the future bases of choice.

The U.S.–Australia alliance can serve as a useful model for what America’s Northeast Asia alliance relationships might look like once the threat from North Korea has receded. Few doubt the solidity of the U.S.–Australian alliance given the number of times Americans and Aussies have fought shoulder to shoulder in the century just passed. Yet on a day-to-day basis there are few American military forces based on Australian soil

beyond those operating joint intelligence facilities. The U.S.–Australia model demonstrates convincingly that alliance relationships do not necessarily or always require large forward detachments of American troops to be credible. The nature of the threat and one's ability to respond to this threat dictate the number of forces on the ground needed to sustain or lend credibility to an alliance. Common value and a common vision provide the real foundation.

The U.S.–Japan defense alliance will maintain an important role in a stable East Asia of the future, as will enhanced cooperation among the United States, Japan, and an eventually reunified Korea in what may become a “virtual alliance.” Although a formal trilateral alliance appears unnecessary and could even prove counterproductive, the United States, Japan, and the Republic of Korea should work to develop such a virtual alliance through the continuation of the U.S.–Korea security relationship after reunification, the continued revitalization of the U.S.–Japan alliance, and the strengthening of bilateral security cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul. From a U.S. perspective (and, one would hope, from a Korean perspective as well), an openly antagonistic relationship between Seoul and Tokyo or, worse, a reunified Korea that saw Japan as its primary adversary would be extremely destabilizing. (As would a U.S.–Korea–Japan alliance aimed at China.) Washington's “best case” vision for a peaceful, prosperous Asia is one in which the “end of history” has occurred (at least as far as Korea and Japan are concerned), and both are working closely with the United States to promote a stable, secure Asia. This does not require transforming the current separate bilateral alliances into a trilateral one, but it does mandate the continuation of today's alliances and the strengthening of the “weakest link.”

The most contentious aspect of America's future vision of Asia or the future it envisions for the U.S.–Korea alliance centers on China. Here it is a lot easier to agree on the kind of China the United States would like to see than it is to agree on the China that is likely to be. Even the most

avid members of the “contain China” crowd (the infamous “blue team” in Washington) would acknowledge that the preferred outcome would be a peaceful, prosperous, stable China that is more tolerant both of its neighbors and of the aspirations of its own people—a China that has reached a peaceful accommodation with Taiwan that is acceptable to the people on both sides of the Strait. Although some fear that China's current commitment to a “peaceful rise” will change once it has risen, most would agree that it would be easier to deal with (i.e., contain) a powerful, antagonistic China than to deal with the consequences of a failed China. One need only recall the political and economic consequences of South Vietnam's collapse to imagine the impact that a tenfold (or hundredfold) increase in Chinese boat people would have on East Asia and beyond.

Embracing the peaceful rise of China and wrapping it in a web of multilateral economic, political, and security relationships are in Washington's long-term interest. That would be the best way of assuring or at least of increasing the prospects of a peaceful risen China. In addition, a strong U.S. alliance network aimed not specifically at China but at promoting regional stability and enhanced capabilities to respond to crises wherever trouble may occur would help to channel or guide China's rise in the most beneficial direction.

For true stability to occur in East Asia, the four major powers—the United States, Japan, China, and Russia—must maintain cordial, cooperative relations both with one another and, of equal importance, with Korea. This simple fact is underscored in the Bush administration's National Security Strategy, as it was in the Clinton administration's versions of this document. Past Korean leaders recognized this simple fact and the role that the continuation of the U.S.–ROK alliance will play in permitting simultaneous good relations with all four powers. The sense of security provided by the alliance, in which Washington plays the role of “outside balancer,” permits Seoul to maintain good relations with all of its powerful neighbors at the same time. The absence

of the alliance would create a vacuum that the ROK would have to fill itself either by considerable (including possible nuclear) military expansion or by linking itself to one of the other nearby giants. Whichever one Korea chose—and China would be the most likely but not the only conceivable choice—the other would feel threatened and would likely respond in ways that could be even more destabilizing. For this reason, the continuation of the U.S.–ROK alliance provides Seoul with the best opportunity to maintain good relations with all four of its neighbors.

Although one could argue that this future vision does not challenge China's national security interest because it channels but does not seek to prevent or delay China's peaceful rise, it is doubtful that such a scenario would be China's first choice of potential outcomes. No doubt China would prefer an East Asia 20 years hence in which it, rather than Washington, was the "balancer" and in which Seoul looked first to Beijing rather than to Washington (or to Tokyo or Moscow or itself) as the primary guarantor of stability in the peninsula. The question that only Seoul can answer is, "What does Korea prefer?"

From a U.S. perspective, it would be particularly unsettling if a future (unified) Korea looked to China as its primary security partner—especially if both countries considered Japan as the primary future threat or enemy. It is an unfortunate fact that one of the few things that the people of North and South Korea have in common today is an historical sense of distrust of their Japanese neighbors, a distrust shared and all too frequently played on by the Chinese. If future South–North or Korea–China ties are built on this factor, however, with Japan emerging as the common contemporary concern and the threat tomorrow, Korea will have put itself on a collision course with the United States, whose national security strategy rests on the foundation of close U.S.–Japan relations and greater Japanese participation in regional security affairs.

There appears to be a certain fascination with China on the peninsula and a tendency to give the country a free ride on sensitive issues even

while refusing to ignore any slight, real or imagined, that comes from the United States or Japan. It is not difficult to imagine, for example, what the response in Seoul would be if Washington or Tokyo tried to prevent Seoul from inviting a recognized international religious leader to Korea. Yet China has successfully pressured Seoul for years not to invite the Dalai Lama to visit. Similarly, Beijing continues to argue against direct air links between Seoul and Taipei and plays hardball on a number of other issues. Only the most recent controversy over the ancient kingdom of Koguryo has gotten the attention of the Korean people and perhaps lessened China's ability to project a Teflon image.

Again, from an admittedly biased U.S. perspective, the continued alliance relationship with Washington even after reunification or reconciliation would provide Seoul with its best chance of being an independent, self-sustaining actor among the proverbial whales that surround the peninsula. President Ron Moo-hyun, like Kim Dae-jung and others before him, professes to agree with this assertion, but on a day-to-day basis he does little to make this case to the Korean public, which in a democracy will ultimately decide the future viability of the alliance. Likewise, U.S. leaders have been remiss in making the case for a future security relationship, doing nothing to discourage a sense of anti-Korean sentiment, although modest, from festering in the United States. The failure to encourage support for the alliance serves neither country's long-term national security interests.

Conclusion

Both the U.S.–ROK alliance and the broader U.S.–East Asia bilateral alliance structure that served well the cause of regional peace and stability during the cold war can help to promote future peace and stability if properly maintained and focused on regional stability rather than on deterrence or containment once the North Korean threat subsides.

Of course, deterrence remains the order of the day on the peninsula as long as North Korea remains a separate entity with a separate military. But the United States and the Republic of Korea, in close cooperation with Japan, should begin now to develop the rationale and lay the groundwork for future U.S.–Korea security cooperation after reunification. Although a formal trilateral alliance appears unnecessary and could even prove counterproductive, the United States, Japan, and South Korea should work toward the development of a virtual alliance to be achieved through the continuation of a U.S.–Korea security relationship after reunification, the continued revitalization of the U.S.–Japan alliance, and the strengthening of bilateral security cooperation between Tokyo and Seoul. This arrangement should not

be aimed at China and should not be seen as trying to prevent that country's peaceful rise but should help channel China's emergence in a way that remains nonthreatening to the Korean Peninsula and to Korea's neighbors and the broader international community.

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