



The US-ROK Alliance: Transactional or Transformational?

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Despite widespread public support in both the United States and South Korea for the US-ROK alliance, its value and centrality to each countries' respective security goals is under reexamination. Gaps in perception of the North Korean nuclear threat, contentious negotiations on burden-sharing, and strained relationships with each other's economic and security partners are eroding trust between the two sides. To discuss these and related issues, the NCAFP convened its first-ever US-ROK Strategic Dialogue via Track II video conference on July 21, 2020. The participants were asked to address two central questions:

- What are the top priorities for communication and resolution within the US-ROK alliance?
- What are the top priorities for the US-ROK alliance in maintaining regional peace and stability?

The following report outlines general policy recommendations and specific points of focus, based on the discussion.

Policy Recommendations

- The US and ROK should work on a joint vision for the alliance with an inter-agency plan to make progress toward common goals, by widening the scope of the US-ROK working group led by the State Department and the Foreign Ministry. Though it is important to focus on priorities in Northeast Asia, it is equally important to leverage the alliance relationship to address global threats and challenges, and to embed the alliance in multilateral structures.
- The Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiations must close as soon as possible. The two sides should move back to the five-year negotiation timetable or, even better, set up a ten-year system that includes regular adjustments for inflation.
- The US and the ROK should work together to address China's coercive behavior within defined parameters. The U.S. needs to respect the ROK's economic relationship with China and or China's relevance in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

- The ROK should also consider how it can contribute to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy and how its own New Southern Policy can overlap or complement US regional strategic goals. Likewise, it should recognize the importance of stable Japan-ROK relations to the US regional alliance structure.
- No matter the election results, the US and ROK should be prepared for the DPRK to probe the incoming US administration early next year. Responding to a DPRK provocation with more sanctions would not alter the DPRK's strategic calculus on the value of its nuclear program.
- The US can play a constructive role to mitigate ROK-Japan tensions by investing in a trilateral coordination mechanism, similar to the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) that was active in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Discussion Summary

Participants quickly agreed on the laundry list of current challenges to the alliance: differing perceptions of the North Korea threat and how to promote peace and stability; the stalled Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiations to revise burden-sharing arrangements; how to approach coercive Chinese behavior; and whether or how to reconcile the ROK's relationship with Japan. The gaps on these issues were largely seen as driven by domestic politics and by the personalities and preferences of the top leaders; and the overall relationship seen as more fragile due to the added stress of the global pandemic, economic and health crises. One participant noted that the alliance is also missing advocacy from the Track II community, who cannot meet during the pandemic for the in-person, in-depth discussions that complement Track I negotiations by pointing to acceptable compromises.

What is most needed is a joint vision for the alliance that addresses the future of the Korean Peninsula. Most of the alliance relationship at present is focused on this relatively contentious in which the allies are negotiating with each other from a zero-sum mindset that is eroding trust or, in the words of some participants, "poisoning" the alliance. For example, several participants noted that the US-ROK Working Group, set up to coordinate engagement with North Korea, is viewed with suspicion by ROK officials and scholars as a block on inter-Korean projects. As one American participant said, the ROK seems to be questioning whether the alliance is a necessary condition for North-South rapprochement, or an impediment.

The SMA negotiations were seen as a self-inflicted wound that will continue to fester as long as it remains open. Several participants felt that it was a huge mistake to move to an annual negotiation format and proposed returning to a five-year format or even setting up a ten-year structure that included regular, reasonable adjustments for inflation.

A big picture joint vision could focus both sides on the benefits of the alliance and its potential to solve common problems, rather than the costs. A joint vision idea or statement, however, is most worthwhile when it contains an implementation process on which the two sides can follow. A Korean participant suggested that such a project could begin with the US-ROK Working Group set up to coordinate on DPRK negotiations. Participants were receptive to a joint vision based on common democratic values but were concerned that sweeping values statements are insufficient to resolve fissures in the relationship.

President Trump's position on the value of the alliance makes the statements and actions undertaken by Congress to protect troop levels or provide other checks and balances particularly important to the ROK. It was noted that the alliance system, and the US-ROK relationship, receive a high degree of bipartisan, bicameral support from Congress. One American participant suggested that we should establish and invigorate an alliance caucus and interparliamentary exchanges to either defend against further erosion of and/or rebuild and modernize these partnerships.

Discussion on how to approach North Korea highlighted a partisan split on the issue in the ROK, and a leadership/establishment split on the issue in the US. In the ROK, conservative opposition to the Moon administration's engagement with North Korea seems unlikely to unseat the Progressive Party in the next election cycle, according to one participant. In the US, President Trump seemed more flexible than members of his staff and the foreign policy establishment to transform the relationship with North Korea through high-level summits and a focus on the DPRK's potential after rejoining the international community.

Participants were unsure how a change in US leadership after the November 2020 election would affect US policy on North Korea. Some speculated that a change in leadership would portend a return to a maximum pressure campaign, but others were doubtful that the US could successfully lead such an effort given other more urgent priorities. If President Trump is reelected, it is still unclear if or when the DPRK will be ready to re engage after the failed Hanoi summit. There is also a possibility that a DPRK provocation will unexpectedly or rapidly sour the relationship between President Trump and Kim Jong Un, returning the Korean Peninsula to 'fire and fury' rhetoric.

Despite the uncertainties on the US side, participants agreed that the DPRK will have a plan to address either administration and will not wait until it is convenient for the US to make their position known. The DPRK did learn in the Trump-Kim engagement process that the US president cannot, by himself, transform the nature of the relationship. How it will adjust its negotiating strategy to this information remains an open question. Meanwhile, the US and the ROK have to recognize that the failures of engagement will raise the cost of denuclearization, as the DPRK continues to build its nuclear arsenal and weapons systems. Most, if not all, participants felt that maintaining and strengthening extended deterrence was a prerequisite to a successful North Korea strategy.

The effects of COVID-19 on the DPRK are largely unknown. An American participant thought that North Korea must be feeling economic pressure from the closure of the DPRK/China border; a Korean participant noted, however, that the prices of staple goods in North Korea appear to be steady, although the most important factor for social stability is whether Kim Jong Un can continue to satisfy Pyongyang elites with luxuries beyond the basics.

So, if North Korea is doing well enough without the international system; if the sanctions regime is producing diminishing returns; if North Korea continues to develop its nuclear weapons technology and systems; if the expert community largely agrees that the DPRK is not willing to give up its nuclear program and cannot fathom when it would be ready to do so; what is the future of the denuclearization process? One participant suggested that the US and the ROK need to work together on their own definition of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, instead of accepting North Korea's definition, which includes the end of the US-ROK alliance and the broad removal of the US threat (presumably to include any and all strategic assets in the region).

A related question is what leverage the US and ROK and any other partners in the region can bring to bear on the DPRK. Changes in force posture—rotations of strategic assets, including a return of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea—are one way to strengthen deterrence against the DPRK's capabilities. China would likewise see these changes as provocative, particularly in the context of the worsening Sino-US relationship and other US moves to station strategic assets in the region after pulling out of the INF treaty.

The ROK does not want to be trapped in the rubble of a crumbling US-China relationship, even as it shares some of the US' concerns about China's coercive behavior after the THAAD deployment backlash in 2016. Korean participants argued that the ROK's economic dependence on China pushed it toward a preference for multilateral statements, agreements and negotiations on how to manage China's rise. One participant suggested that there should be a division of labor in addressing China's problematic behavior; coordination could make more effective the current pattern of each country addressing its concerns with China on an ad-hoc basis.

China's influence over North Korea and its intentions in shaping the future of the Korean Peninsula remain up for debate. Participants were confident that a unified Korean Peninsula allied to the United States would not be acceptable for China, but less confident that the US could offer reassurances on this concern. US engagement with North Korea had the effect of recatalyzing Sino-DPRK relations, but it seems clear that China is unwilling to exert pressure on North Korea to change its strategic calculus on the nuclear program unilaterally. One American participant suggested the US and ROK revisit the format of four-party talks—the US, ROK, China and DPRK—that were briefly pursued in the late 1990s and discussed more recently in the context of an end of war declaration. This would also resolve anxieties expressed in the discussion that the ROK is being left out of or marginalized in denuclearization negotiations.

Part of the discussion focused on how the US should address the poor trajectory of the ROK-Japan relationship. Participants were mixed and relatively pessimistic on whether an active US role to mediate or refocus history issues would be helpful at this juncture. What would be helpful is a return of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), active in the years leading up to the Six-Party Talks, or the Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministerial meetings active in the Obama administration. These trilateral formats yielded a lot of valuable bilateral work that balanced against the emotionally charged atmospherics of reconciliation on colonization and wartime issues.

On the whole, the challenge for policy makers who support the US-ROK alliance is how to transition the alliance from the current transactional bargaining between the allies into a transformative force for the region and the world that can deter threats while or perhaps by promoting common values and common interests.

**THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY (NCAFP)'s
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A U.S. - ROK STRATEGIC DIALOGUE

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