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## The U.S.–Korea Alliance on the Rocks: Shaken, Not Stirred

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The question I was asked to address is whether the U.S.–ROK alliance is at risk. The short answer is “yes,” but the reasons why and the ensuing prescriptions are far from simple. Thus, for the sake of efficiency and clarity, I will begin with my conclusion and then provide an explanation: The maintenance of a strong U.S.–ROK alliance is absolutely in the short-, mid-, and long-term strategic interests of the United States.

Every few years, usually in response to public disagreements between Washington and Seoul, vocal critics will call for an end to the U.S.–Korea alliance and American disengagement from the Korean peninsula. While such views are not new in the half century of the alliance, they have increasingly gained credence in recent months, with headlines on both sides of the Pacific predicting the imminent end of the formal relationship.

The American supporters of ending the alliance make an argument akin to the following: We should withdraw all U.S. forces from the peninsula and abrogate the U.S.–ROK Mutual Defense Treaty due to rampant anti-Americanism in South Korea, a growing tendency by the government in Seoul to appease Pyongyang, and the Korean penchant for blaming the United States for blocking unification. By ending the alliance, they argue, we would be able to walk away from North Korea because the problems that the Pyongyang regime poses—nuclear and missile proliferation, conventional military provocations and threats, illicit activities, and even human rights abuses—are too difficult and challenging for the United States to handle.<sup>1</sup>

### Talking Points

- While the U.S.–ROK alliance is at risk today, the maintenance of a strong alliance in the future is absolutely in the national interests of both countries because of the critical role it plays in contributing to regional peace and stability.
- The alliance also serves as a bedrock for America’s commitment to the Asia–Pacific region.
- Maintenance of the alliance will not be an easy task given the immense challenges that confront the relationship.
- Both countries must work together to achieve a new and common vision for the alliance that can overcome differing views of North Korea. This includes a willingness to accommodate rapidly changing environments in both countries.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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On the Korean side, those who cry “Yankee, go home!” are increasingly confident in their national sovereign abilities, find the hosting of U.S. troops intrusive, fear that U.S. policies toward North Korea will cause instability or even a war, and are overall resentful of Korean dependence on the United States.

Our response to these arguments should not be to end the alliance, but precisely the opposite: We should strengthen our bilateral relationship with South Korea by confronting these issues directly and forthrightly. Legitimate differences about the function, purpose, and utility of the alliance have arisen due to dramatic shifts in the domestic, regional, and global environment. But just as the alliance is not the cause of tensions in the bilateral relationship, we should also not allow it to become the victim. Rather, both governments must endeavor to reassess the current configuration and create a new alliance that meets the needs of both allies. If we do not invest energy in renewing the alliance, it will end sooner rather than later. And this would have devastating consequences for America’s future, not just in Asia but around the globe.

America has experienced the bitter consequences of choosing isolation from the troubled world after World War I, and as a nation, we have chosen not to repeat that mistake. After the attacks on Pearl Harbor, and more than a half century later, after September 11, 2001, we could have again chosen the path of isolation, but we did not. Instead, we made the difficult choice to engage the world and troubled regions with even greater vigor. We must meet the current and future challenges in East Asia with similar fortitude and energy.

### The Alliance: The Past

Any discussion about the future of the alliance must begin with a proper understanding of its past. There is no doubt that the Korean peninsula has presented one of the most challenging issues confronting every major power in the East Asia region in the 20th century, including the United States. It continues to do so in the 21st century despite being eclipsed by other pressing issues in the Middle East and the global war on terrorism.

Yet, what makes Korea both so profoundly challenging and interesting is that, ironically, it has been more often than not overlooked, underestimated, and even completely ignored until too late. Korea was at the fulcrum of all the major wars engulfing East Asia in the 20th century, beginning with its first “modern” war, the Sino–Japanese War (1894), in which influence over the Korean peninsula was the prize between one great declining power (China) and an “upstart” emerging one (Japan); the Russo–Japanese War (1904), in which Japan gained world stature by being the first Asian country to defeat a great Western imperial power; World War II, in which Korea was the foothold for Japanese ambitions to control mainland Asia. Then came the Korean War, the first real “hot” war of the Cold War era, and even the Vietnam War, in which the United States arguably became entrenched because it had failed to thwart the spread of Communism on the Korean peninsula.

In each of the first four cases, Great Powers fought over the Korean peninsula not due to the *intrinsic* value of Korea—its people, its culture, or its heritage—but rather for its *strategic* value. In large part due to its geographic fate, Korea has always been a pawn for Great Power games. Yet today, there is no doubt that Korea (at least the southern half) has managed to forge a new place for itself in Asia and, indeed, the world. Today, South Korea is the tenth-largest economy in the world, and perhaps East Asia’s most vibrant democracy. The North has tragically chosen the opposite path to become a desperate, failed industrial state, led by a cruel dictator and closed off from the world.

Undoubtedly, the United States played a pivotal role in creating the opportunity for South Korea to achieve its current status. Without American intervention in June 1950, North Korean forces would have easily overwhelmed the South. But America’s interest in Korea was late (some believe too late). It was January 1950 when Secretary of State Dean Acheson famously excluded Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter, which served to embolden North Korean ambitions to invade the South.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Proponents of this view include Richard Halloran (see his “Time for U.S. To Disengage Itself From Korea,” *Korea Herald*, February 18, 2005). See also Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

For South Korea, the alliance was born out of desperate necessity after the Korean War; for without American commitment, the precarious Armistice agreement would surely not have lasted long. For the United States, the alliance was a product of the regional and global context of the Cold War and its geo-strategic rationale of containment and deterrence. The bilateral Mutual Defense Treaty was a pointed effort at reversing Acheson's miscalculation by declaring to the region and the world that the United States was going to be involved and present in Asia.

Over the decades, the U.S.–ROK relationship has far exceeded expectations, proving to be one of the best in America's history and often touted as an exemplary model for other alliances. It has successfully served not only to deter North Korean aggression but also as one of the pillars of U.S. security strategy in East Asia: to promote stability and prosperity in the region. The alliance has also been the basis for direct and indirect U.S. economic assistance to South Korea, which has reduced its security expenditures and facilitated continuous and rapid economic growth. Furthermore, creating a stable security environment has allowed foreign investors and trade partners to have greater confidence in the economic future of Korea.

South Korea has contributed its share to the alliance. The ROK has been a staunch American ally in numerous military operations throughout the decades, including contributing more to the U.S. war effort in Vietnam than any other American ally: 50,000 South Korean troops fought and more than 4,400 sacrificed their lives in the jungles of Vietnam to pay back the debt they owed to America.

More recently, the ROK contributed to Operation Desert Storm during the first Gulf War, peace-keeping operations in Somalia, Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and the current war in Iraq. South Korea's force presence in Iraq of 3,600 has been the highest contribution of any coalition partner after Great Britain.

Despite the remarkable success of the U.S.–ROK alliance—or perhaps because of it—we often forget

that this half-century relationship has weathered serious periods of tension in the past.

For example, the Nixon Doctrine, declared on July 25, 1969, laid out a new direction for the U.S. role in Asia as that of supporter, and placed the primary responsibility for defense on the countries directly involved. As a result, in early 1971 Washington withdrew the Seventh Infantry Division from South Korea, reducing the American military presence from 62,000 troops to 42,000. Combined with President Nixon's efforts at rapprochement with China and the withdrawal of American forces in Vietnam, South Korea was shaken by fears of abandonment and insecurity.

In response to these changes, the South Korean leadership shifted its strategy away from a primary focus on economic development toward giving equal weight to creating a self-reliant national defense structure including restructuring the military, improving the armed forces, fostering a viable domestic defense industry, and acquiring modern weapons. In 1974, the Korean government launched its first Force Improvement Plan, and by the 1980s, the "Koreanization" of Korean defense was well underway, resulting in positive changes for the role of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).

Another crisis in the alliance erupted in 1977, when President Carter announced that he would unilaterally withdraw the Second Infantry Division from Korea. As a result, the two governments began serious talks to combine the operational command system in order to effectively enhance the defense capability of Korea. While the withdrawal would eventually be scrapped, the plans led to the establishment of the U.S.–ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 1978, in which the responsibility of defending South Korea was ceded from the United Nations Command (UNC).

More recently, tensions in the alliance once again came to the fore with the U.S. decision to redeploy 3,600 members of the Second Infantry Division to Iraq as part of an overall plan to draw down 12,500 of the USFK by the end of 2006. Along with the

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2. Dean Acheson, "Crisis in China: An Examination of U.S. Policy," in speech before the National Press Club, Washington, D.C. January 12, 1950.

efforts currently underway to dismantle the CFC, these troop reductions and redeployment of existing troops away from the demilitarized zone were met with suspicions that these decisions were retaliation or punishment against the South Korean government for encouraging rampant anti-Americanism and for its sharp criticism of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

I do not believe these accusations to be true, but of greater relevance is that these questions of American motives reveal the extent to which strategic dissonance has pervaded the alliance. While this condition qualifies as a bona fide crisis in the alliance, it does not necessitate a termination of the formal relationship. It does, however, require a careful examination of the sources of diverging strategic priorities.

### **The Present: Purpose of the Alliance**

When faced with common external threats, countries form alliances in order to provide mutual security through a formally binding commitment that ensures military and political cooperation. The initial rationale for the U.S.–ROK alliance was no different, and was composed of three specific key elements: to meet direct threats to the peninsula, to provide a framework for cooperation to increase regional stability, and to provide a framework to contribute to global security.

What has profoundly changed, however, is that the two allies are no longer unified in their strategic perceptions of the primary threat to South Korea: the North. This divergence in threat perception has led to serious political and public developments that question and even threaten the very existence of the alliance.

Most Americans tend to attribute the strategic dissonance in the alliance to the dissipation of the “North Korean threat” altogether in South Korea. They cite the Sunshine Policy, the emergence of a younger generation with no first-hand experience of the Korean War, and a government in Seoul seemingly limitless in its willingness to accommodate the Pyongyang regime, including the omission of the official label “enemy” from its national

Defense White Paper and even the refusal to discuss human rights abuses.

But as many South Koreans (both young and old) are quick to point out, they *do* feel threatened by the North, only the threat has metamorphosed into a completely different kind of peril than that perceived by Americans. Today, the majority of South Koreans no longer view North Korea as an invincible, evil enemy intent on conquering the South. Rather, the greatest threat posed by the North is the instability of the regime which could lead to a collapse (whether through implosion or explosion), thereby devastating the South’s economic, political, and social systems. What explains South Korea’s sudden shift to fearing the North’s weakness rather than that regime’s strengths?

The Sunshine Policy and the ensuing historic summit between the two Korean leaders in June 2000 marks the proximate symbol of a profound shift on the Korean peninsula, but the true causes are more complex and lie in the previous decade. They include the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening of China in the early 1990s, as well as the devastating floods and famines of 1994–1995 that produced shocking pictures of starving, skeletal North Korean children.<sup>3</sup> These images “humanized” a traditional enemy and caused South Koreans to feel a connection to what they see as poor, starving, and weak brethren, who at best are victims of a bad regime and at worst are misguided, but certainly have neither the capability nor intent to truly harm their Southern relatives. Most importantly, they were viewed as *fellow Koreans*.

The significance of this psychological mind-shift cannot and should not be underestimated. After all, who can blame South Koreans both young and old? They are tired of being the last remaining victims of the Cold War, and they too want to reap the “peace dividend” that the rest of the world enjoyed. South Koreans now want the freedom to not fear that their very way of life is in constant danger, a life that is built on prosperity, material well-being, physical comfort, and freedom.

3. For further discussion, see Victor D. Cha, “Key Trends on the Korean Peninsula After September 11 and the June 2000 Summit,” testimony before the House Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, Committee on International Relations, U.S. House of Representatives, November 15, 2001.



The problem is that for the United States and many others in the region (including Japan and Australia), North Korea largely remains an unchanged Cold War threat based on its continued pursuit of a military-first policy despite mass starvation and a failed economy; its pursuit of nuclear weapons, missile proliferation, and illicit activities including counterfeiting; its record of state-sponsored terrorism; its continued hostile stance toward the South and other countries in the region; and even its continued brutality toward its own people through widespread human rights violations.

For the United States, the source of the threat lies in the *strength* of the North Korean regime, while for South Korea, the threat now lies in the regime's fundamental *weakness* and its potential for collapse. Given this vastly different assessment, the divergence in policy prescriptions is predictable. Seoul wants to mitigate the potential for greater instability by engaging the Pyongyang regime in the hope of coaxing it gradually toward positive regime transformation. Washington, in contrast, views engagement efforts as part of the problem if it contributes to augmenting the regime's existing strengths rather than seeking ways to further weaken it.

This chasm between the American and South Korean perceptions of the North Korean threat and how to address it is at the heart of rising tensions between the two allies. It is also an important contributing factor to anti-American sentiment in South Korea because the uncompromising U.S. stance toward North Korea is seen as the cause of instability on the peninsula and a primary barrier to inter-Korean reconciliation.

While nothing could be further from real U.S. interests and intentions—after all, peaceful reconciliation and unification of the two Koreas is the ultimate solution to preventing future conflict and instability on the peninsula—this is a dilemma that is embedded in larger strategic differences confronting the alliance today. For the United States, the ROK alliance has always been one critical piece of a broader regional and global perspective, while for South Korea the alliance serves more limited peninsular goals. These two objectives, while discrete, were not openly contradictory during most of the alliance's history because the Cold War

dynamic caused local and regional views to converge. In other words, the immediacy of the Communist threat along with a near convergence of the two allies' classifications of the sources of that threat—the strength of the North Korean regime—allowed disparities in security interests to be suppressed.

Today, changes on the peninsula, in the region, and around the globe are accelerating faster than our ability to manage them. Vigorous inter-Korean exchanges, China's dynamism and the revitalization of Japan, and the new and urgent threat of global terrorism have allowed the differing strategic priorities of the two allies to emerge and even conflict in the public arena. Moreover, these rapid changes raise profound questions about the utility of U.S. regional alliances in their existing configuration.

The current structure of the U.S.–ROK alliance presents a confounding dilemma for both allies: Extended deterrence provided by the United States allows for South Korea to pursue engagement with the North, but at the same time is considered a hindrance to what Seoul wants to achieve vis-à-vis the North. Moreover, Washington can no longer utilize the alliance to leverage Seoul to fully cooperate on policies toward the North. While Washington and Seoul share overall interests regarding North Korea—elimination of nuclear programs, reduction of the military threat, and improvement of human rights—their prioritization of achieving these goals are at odds; for the United States, WMD and proliferation clearly are the top priorities, while for South Korea, preventing military conflict and a collapse of the North are the overwhelming objectives.

Thus, the alliance is increasingly seen as a burden by both sides, and both are resentful of responding to “demands” from the other, moving the focus of the alliance from a military to a political one. South Korea's rapid democratization, in particular the boisterous expansion of its civil society, has exacerbated the politicization of alliance management issues such as environmental and labor impacts on local communities. While creating more tensions for the alliance in the short term, these developments should be assessed in the proper positive context, and do not necessarily signal the end of the alliance. Moreover, if properly

managed, the end result will be an alliance that is more mature and equitable. More importantly, much-needed credibility in the alliance will be restored, sending a strong message not just to North Korea but the rest of the region.

### **The Future: Long-Term Strategic Interests**

At the heart of our discussion about the state of the U.S. alliance with the ROK today must be a broader consideration of future U.S. grand strategy in Asia. Beyond the immediacy of the seemingly intractable North Korean “problem” of today lie more profound challenges for the United States, including the eventual unification of the Korean peninsula, the rise of China, and the resurgence of Japan.

It is clear that the U.S. goal for the mid- to long-term future is to play an active and positive role in maintaining stability in East Asia. The promotion of prosperity, freedom, and cooperation in the region are beyond a doubt integral to the American national interest. The best and perhaps only way for the United States to maintain its influence in the region is through its alliances with key partners.

While the primary goal of the U.S.–ROK alliance was and is to deter North Korea through the American commitment to the Armistice, its broader objective has always been to maintain regional stability. It has done so by contributing to the strength of the U.S.–Japan alliance, not only by dispersing the U.S. force presence beyond Japan, but also by alleviating the Japanese burden of managing instability on the Korean peninsula. The alliance has also mitigated hostilities between the ROK and Japan and served to counter China’s growing regional influence and dissuade any precipitous action on the peninsula.

But perhaps most important, maintenance of a U.S.–ROK alliance will continue to serve as a bedrock for America’s commitment in the region. An end to the alliance would undoubtedly jeopardize our credibility with all our allies and partners in the region, from Mongolia to Australia. And it will send the wrong message to China, whose ambitions are to create a regional multilateral structure of nominal equality but underlying Chinese dominance; the strength of America’s alliances with the ROK

and Japan is the single greatest factor thwarting Chinese regional hegemony. But sole U.S. reliance on Japan will be problematic given the level of mistrust for that country in the region.

Maintenance of a strong U.S.–ROK alliance will not be an easy task given the immense challenges that will inevitably confront the relationship. Strong domestic support in both countries will be critical in order to sustain any type of formal relationship but especially one involving U.S. military forces, which requires sacrifices of those at home and in the host country. This is not an impossible task if the leadership of both countries rise to the occasion.

As such, Washington should work even more closely with the current and future governments in Seoul to reach a deep understanding that continuation of the alliance serves the mutual strategic interests of both countries. This should then be communicated clearly and unequivocally not only to the American and South Korean publics, but to the regional audience as well.

Today, there is strategic mistrust in the region, and our alliances are contributing to, rather than alleviating, this dynamic. As a result, we find ourselves in perhaps the worst possible strategic configuration on the peninsula: The U.S.–ROK alliance increasingly is being held hostage to the North–South relationship, with North Korea ultimately gaining the most. Thus, the United States must work to create a new relationship with South Korea but also with the North.

Any relationship that has endured for over a half century inevitably experiences periods of turbulence and crisis. The U.S.–ROK alliance has weathered its share, but the immense value it has provided to both countries has made the investment mutually worthy. It certainly deserves careful consideration and preservation in the future.

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