

The ROK–U.S. Alliance: Where Is It Headed?

by Kim Dong Shin

Key Points

For half a century, the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States has focused on the threat posed by North Korea. But today, as South Korea moves toward reconciliation with the North on the basis of a strong and credible deterrence, a new approach is required to guide the future of the alliance.

South Korea and the United States need a strategic plan that defines shared objectives and the means for achieving them. This plan would identify possible problems that could occur en route to these objectives and suggest how to avert them, plus what the two countries would need to do if the problems were to happen anyway.

A strategic plan would help guide the current discussions on the future of the alliance. It would give direction to the alliance and provide both Korean and American audiences with a clearer vision of why we maintain an alliance and what we gain from it.

Such a plan might have helped avert the current nuclear weapons crisis with North Korea; now, it is needed to resolve the crisis. It should identify a mutually agreeable approach to propose to North Korea as part of multilateral discussions, an approach agreed to by the other regional players.

Developing such a plan will not be easy because Seoul and Washington do not view some critical issues in the same manner. But the effort to describe and explain these differences may resolve some of them and prepare the way for adjusting the U.S. military presence in Korea and creating a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

The National Security Strategy of the United States of America (September 2002) provides an important framework from which to examine the current crisis on the Korean Peninsula and other challenges in Northeast Asia. With its focus on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), this strategy is concerned with North Korea as much as, if not more than, any other state. In particular, North Korea poses a unique set of challenges in regard to WMD. North Korea stands in sharp contrast to the Republic of Korea (ROK) on issues such as human rights, democracy, and market economies. The National Security Strategy suggests that the United States should revitalize its alliance with South Korea, while encouraging North Korea to transform its political and economic system. Yet South Korea and the United States are currently having some difficulties in developing a consensus on how to approach Pyongyang, and appear to have no clear plan to operationalize the strategy to deal with North Korea.

At issue are increasing ROK pride coupled with economic and other successes, the North Korean nuclear weapons development program, and the U.S.-led war on global terrorism. As South Korea and the United States are marking the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty, internal and external confusion lingers and a crisis looms, caused by Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and the political repercussions of Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. In Europe, due to varying national interests, some countries opposed military action by America and Britain against Iraq. While South Korea and Japan supported coalition forces in Iraq, there are concerns in both countries over future preventive military actions by the United

States. But the focus of the security debate in Northeast Asia continues to be Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development. Sensitive differences in American and South Korean assessments of and predictions about these clandestine nuclear programs, coupled with concern about the dangers of war, have led to broad debate on the series of North Korean actions and even some claims that the United States is responsible for this crisis.

Nationalist anti-American sentiments seen among some South Korean media and citizens, and reactive anti-Korean sentiments in the United States that are often exaggerated by some American media reports, have led to an eruption of demands for reductions and relocations of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, further straining the time-honored alliance of the two nations. Differences appear to persist in their assessments of the current situation and expectations for the future, including on whether they can accommodate the unraveling situations and have confidence in their own capabilities to resolve them.

South Korea and the United States need to overcome the current crisis originating from North Korean nuclear weapons development and search for a more mature and advanced relationship. As we prepare for another 50 years of alliance, anti-American and anti-Korean sentiments caused by biased perceptions and a lack of mutual understanding should not be allowed to drive our foreign policies and damage the alliance. Differing assessments and predictions about North Korean nuclear weapons and U.S. forces in Korea could become too divisive and aggravated. Before then, our two nations should revitalize the alliance and

strengthen security cooperation by resolving problems and pursuing closer consultation far in advance. We should develop a strategic plan that defines shared objectives—such as strengthening and better balancing the alliance, or achieving peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula—and identify feasible paths toward these objectives. Such a plan would also define possible crises that could occur en route to these objectives and suggest how to avert them and what we would need to do if they were to happen nevertheless. While reality may diverge from such a strategic plan, periodic adjustments would bring us back on track, just as with other operational plans.

Triangular Relations

North Korea, South Korea, and the United States find themselves in different situations. South Korea is facing a shift in political power in which younger generations with a more liberal outlook have become mainstream. They demand breakthroughs in their relations with the United States as well as North Korea in order to put an end to a South-North stand-off and to expedite a peace regime on the peninsula. Meanwhile, the United States is leading a global war against terrorism, having focused its mind and might on dismantling Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and de-throning Saddam Hussein.

But the United States is also demanding that the rogue state of North Korea abandon its secret nuclear programs. The Bush administration wants to see North Korean progress in five areas:

- nuclear weapons
- other WMD, including chemical and biological weapons
- missiles
- conventional forces
- human rights.

The comprehensive approach, or package deal, to resolve the North Korean problem is still on the table waiting for Pyongyang to understand that U.S. intentions are benign and that benefits will be forthcoming.

For its part, North Korea remains a closed society that repeatedly imposes a “march of affliction” on its populace in the face of what it perceives as imminent American military attacks. North Korea also appears to have a lingering fear about the widening gap in national power with the South, causing Pyongyang to feel increasingly vulnerable and desperate. While North Korea craves to be empowered, its economic and political difficulties leave it with few options—other than nuclear weapons—to achieve empowerment.

Anti-American sentiments have tapered off in South Korea, though this generally has not

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been recognized in the United States. (Meanwhile, anti-Korean feeling apparently is on the rise in America.) These anti-American sentiments, epitomized by the so-called candlelight vigils and demonstrations, were ignited and sustained by a tragic accident involving two South Korean schoolgirls, the acquittals of two U.S. soldiers involved, and what many South Koreans perceived as insincere and belated American apologies. The street demonstrations peaked around the presidential election in December 2002 and have since decreased. Although some street demonstrations continue in South Korea, they are noticeably subdued and staged largely in the name of pacifist, antiwar causes. A number of pro-American demonstrations also have occurred.

According to a Korean public opinion survey conducted in February 2003, only 7 percent of the respondents favored an immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, while 43.1 percent supported gradual reductions, and 47 percent desired their continued presence. Thus, although support for reductions

has increased over the years, nearly 90 percent of South Koreans favor some level of U.S. military presence on the peninsula. The same respondents expressed their views on the candlelight demonstrations: 74.5 percent sought revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and only 12.7 percent sought to express anti-American sentiments. Many South Korean voices have called for a “more equal” alliance with the United States to reflect Korea’s significant economic and political advancements. Koreans are looking for equality in terms of both the SOFA and operational control of forces. On the other hand, South Korean demonstrations and other actions have caused a sense of betrayal and indignation in the United States, and Congressional debates have begun over possible reductions of American troops in Korea.

Against this background, the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis poses a huge challenge for the alliance. There are basically two conflicting views in South Korea today regarding the North’s continuation of a nuclear weapons program. One view is that Pyongyang is not capable of developing nuclear weapons and is simply bluffing, seeking direct talks with Washington to help overcome its perennial economic crisis and energy shortage. The other view is that while Pyongyang may want some negotiations with Washington, it will never abandon its nuclear weapons programs, even if doing so would eventually secure a U.S. guarantee of regime survival. Prescriptions on how to deal with the nuclear problem differ accordingly.

Seoul-Washington Tensions

Similarly, Seoul and Washington show a slight difference in their assessments of Pyongyang’s nuclear development, its linkage with international terrorist organizations, and the role each expects the North to play. These differences might have arisen from differing national interests, threat perceptions, and strategies, and from problems in information sharing. The dominant analysis in Washington, for instance, is that Pyongyang has moved from seeking negotiations to seeking real possession of nuclear weapons. Some in Washington have even expressed readiness to use military options to resolve the nuclear problem, if necessary, as a last resort. But President George W. Bush has repeatedly emphasized that Washington remains in agreement with the

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government of President Roh Moo-hyun on the principle of peaceful resolution.

Nevertheless, the United States decided to dispatch additional forces to fill the vacuum created around the peninsula as some U.S. forces in the region moved toward the Persian Gulf and Iraq. North Korea has responded strongly to these measures. From a North Korean perspective, the deployment of bombers, a carrier, and F-117s into the peninsula region appears to be exactly the military package the United States might send to carry out a surgical strike against its nuclear facilities. North Korea has claimed a right to take preemptive action against U.S. targets, which creates concern that an escalatory spiral could lead to another war on the Korean Peninsula.

Reacting to highly visible anti-U.S. demonstrations in South Korea, many Americans—including journalists, scholars, and Members of Congress—have begun to voice displeasure. Some even demanded a possible reduction and relocation of American troops stationed in South Korea. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stated that he is ready to discuss issues of restructuring and relocating U.S. forces in Korea with the ROK government in his drive for a worldwide readjustment of American forces. But security analysts are concerned about the profound impact on the deterrence posture that could result from rapid reductions of American forces and the relocation of U.S. ground forces south of Seoul. Of particular concern is the possible impact on the so-called tripwire effect of having significant U.S. forces on the route of any possible North Korean invasion.

South Korea and the United States see the necessity to develop their alliance further, with highest priority on managing the current crisis on the peninsula through a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear weapons problem. The two nations also emphasize trilateral policy cooperation and coordination among Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo and search for a multilateral approach to resolving this problem. At the 34th Security Consultative Meeting held in Washington in December 2002, South Korea and the United States agreed to conduct a joint study on the future of their alliance and signed terms of reference for the Future ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative that will enable formal discussions on procedures for strengthening their alliance over the next 10 years.

Toward a Strategic Plan

South Korea and the United States need to devise a more concrete strategic plan that can guide the alliance through the coming years. This plan should identify alliance objectives and means for achieving them. The U.S. National Security Strategy would serve as one basis for formulating these objectives and strategies; South Korea also needs to develop its own national security strategy to serve as a counterpart reference. From these two strategies, a combined strategic plan should flow naturally. The plan should identify possible stumbling blocks in the coming months and years and suggest both how these might be avoided and how to cope with them should they occur.

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Resolve the Nuclear Problem. First, South Korea and the United States need to resolve the existing North Korean nuclear weapons problem promptly and with priority. As a first step in formulating a strategic plan, our governments should work together to:

- determine a mutually agreeable option to propose to North Korea as part of multilateral discussions. Prepare this option in the next month.
- present this option to the other regional players (especially Japan and China) and work with them to develop a multilateral position on resolving the crisis.
- make it clear to North Korea that the security of its government, its access to economic support, and its potential movement toward a peace regime are contingent on accepting the multilateral proposal.
- work together to address issues in areas where North Korea disagrees or wants other actions and resolve these issues.

Build a Peace Regime. We can expect that one objective of this combined strategy would be “Building a Peace Regime on the Korean Peninsula,” which is one of the 10 major policy goals of the new ROK government. The combined strategic plan should lay out an approach to accomplish this objective,

including efforts by South Korea and the United States to:

- push forward a South-North peace declaration or a peace treaty only in conjunction with real tangible progress in arms control. To this end, Seoul should consider proposing to Pyongyang a joint study to define a future roadmap for their relations.
- conduct South-North arms control in conjunction with reductions of U.S. forces.
- demand openly and strongly that Pyongyang accept confidence-building measures, abandon its nuclear and other WMD programs, and implement arms control, while encouraging it to shape an environment for reform and openness as well as change in its perceptions about America.
- assist South Korea in perceiving the alliance and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) as conducive to building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.

Meet Basic Preconditions. Before moving ahead with adjusting the ROK-U.S. alliance and/or reducing and relocating the USFK as part of rebalancing the relations in general, the following preconditions should be met:

- ROK armed forces should improve their military planning capabilities in hardware and software. They have limited experience in making an independent war plan of their own and lack independent deterrent capabilities against North Korea and other regional threats, particularly in intelligence-gathering capability.
- Verifiable arms control should be implemented between the Koreans. Otherwise, anti-American sentiments in South Korea might give a wrong signal to Pyongyang that Washington is willingly withdrawing its forces from South Korea, which in turn will lead Pyongyang to make a miscalculation about the security situation on the peninsula.
- A package deal should be pursued between Washington and Pyongyang in which the North's nuclear and other WMD programs, missiles, and conventional forces are exchanged for U.S. force reductions and relocations.
- Closer prior consultation and full understanding should come before adjusting the alliance and the USFK. Any important decision lacking mutual understanding and laden with emotion should be avoided.
- Consensus should be formed between the American and Korean governments and their populations. Concrete action plans should be prepared in advance.

Implement the Alliance Policy Initiative. On the implementation of the Future ROK-U.S. Alliance Policy Initiative, South Korea and the United States should:

- resolve some prominent issues that affect the daily lives of South Koreans, such as SOFA, with full consultation, but also make sure that we do not

endanger more substantial and vital issues, such as the overall ROK–U.S. alliance.

- lead the joint study and gradually allow other governmental agencies, the National Assembly and the U.S. Congress, and government-funded research institutes to join them (Track 1).

- complement Track 1 by fostering discussions among the academia, media, and civilian organizations (Track 2).

- work to build a consensus between the two nations and foster mutual support.

Prepare for Change in Operational Control. The ROK government should prepare to receive wartime operational control by:

- preparing now for a transfer of all the delegated authorities currently exercised by the Commander, Combined Forces Command, Korea, as a major step leading to a transfer of wartime operational control.

- considering an option in which a ROK general officer exercises temporary operational control during joint exercises, in conjunction with USFK reductions and relocations.

- increasing the ROK defense budget from 2.7 percent of gross domestic product to 3 percent (at a minimum) to facilitate force improvement programs.

Shape a Stable Environment for the U.S. Military Presence. In parallel with shaping a more mature alliance that better befits a changing security environment in Northeast Asia, the ROK government should:

- make an objective assessment of the contributions that the ROK–U.S. alliance and the American military presence have made for the past 5 decades in terms of ROK economic growth and democratization and give generous support to the formation of an advanced alliance for the 21st century.

- shape a favorable and stable environment for U.S. forces to station in South Korea by providing diplomatic, financial, and social assistance to improve their overall quality of life.

Conclusion

The year 2003 marks the 50th anniversary of the ROK–U.S. alliance. The alliance has played an important role in promoting regional stability and world peace. But like any relationship, it needs work and guidance now to mature to a new level. The measures suggested above would be concrete steps in the right direction. Done properly, these efforts can strengthen the ROK–U.S. alliance so that it will support the security needs of both of our countries for another 50 years.

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