

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE CURRENT ROK-U.S. RELATIONSHIP¹

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Over the past several years, the Republic of Korea and the United States have experienced a turbulent period in adjusting their alliance relations. Against such worries and concerns, both governments have ironed out differences and resolved thorny issues and problems.

Despite the two governments' commitment to the realization of a "comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial alliance," rather emotional clashes between the two societies and disputes over the issues related to the modernization of the alliance system have raised worries over the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance and led some people to argue that the alliance has no future. However, two sets of talks have produced some mutually satisfying results, such as the relocation of the Yongsan U.S. military base, realignment of the 2nd Infantry Division, and the Land Partnership Plan. In the first strategic dialogue, Minister Ban and Secretary Rice resolved the issue of strategic flexibility. At the 38th ROK-U.S. Annual Security Consultative Meeting, both governments accepted the results of a comprehensive security assessment (CSA), joint vision study on the ROK-U.S. alliance (JVS), and command relations structure (CRS). The transfer of war-time operational control (OPCON) was also resolved on February 23, 2007.

Despite domestic opposition, the ROK government (ROKG) has contributed to the campaign on terrorism, and the ROK has the third largest number of troops in Iraq. Further, anti-American sentiment in South Korea has eroded substantially over the years. The US government has drawn closer to the ROKG in dealing with the North Korean nuclear problems, expressed its appreciation of the ROKG's contribution, and emphasized the importance and contribution of the ROK-U.S. security alliance. Finally, with the conclusion of the KORUS Free Trade Agreement in April 2007, both countries are geared up to attain a "comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial alliance."

Despite these positive developments, some concerns over the ROK-U.S. security alliance remain. One of the main reasons for these concerns is that fundamental elements

¹ Views and ideas in this paper are purely those of the author.

of the alliance system are under challenge, and trust and confidence between the two countries have been weakened by some incidents and mismanagement of the process over the past several years.

○ National Interests

The bottom line is that both countries are determined to preserve and promote peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula by deterring North Korean aggression. Moreover, with its successful democratization and economic development, South Korea has come to share with the United States such values and ideals as democracy, freedom, and a market economy. South Korea is now in a position to make a substantive contribution to the attainment of such common values and ideals, not only on the Korean Peninsula but also at the global level. As a result, there are now more common areas, concerns and issues between the ROK and the U.S. than there were 50 years ago.

This new state of the ROK-U.S. alliance is well reflected in the concept of a “comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial alliance.” South Korea, along with the United States, is now ready to share the responsibility in realizing the common values and ideals. This means that the ROK-U.S. security alliance is entering, or has entered, into a transition process from a threat-based alliance to a value-based alliance with the expansion of the scope of national interests. Consequently, reciprocity and compatibility between the two countries have gradually and consistently increased over the past five decades.

○ Threat Perception

The most fundamental element in forming and maintaining an alliance could be the existence of common threat. While there are common national interests shared by the ROK and the U.S., the two countries appear to have a different threat perception from two separate dimensions: immediate-term and long-term.

While not underestimating the North Korean military threat, South Korea has become less threatened by the North. Several factors have contributed to this change in threat perception. First, despite some military-related deficiencies South Korea has vis-à-vis North Korea, South Korea believes that North Korea would not launch a full-scale attack on the South because the overall power balance favors South Korea, and North Korea cannot achieve its political goals through military means. Second, the pure enemy image of

North Korea has eroded due to the progress and development made in inter-Korean relations since June 2000, when President Kim and Chairman Kim held their summit meeting. The softened image of North Korea and the zeal for/expectation of peaceful co-existence and unification have led people to believe that North Korea does not intend to invade the South. Instead, from the ordinary citizen's point of view, what North Korea desperately wants is the survival of the regime, not unification by force. This leads to the third element: whether North Korea is changing or not. To South Korea, it is inevitable for North Korea to change and, in fact, North Korea has begun to change its policies in a meaningful way. As a result, the North Korean threat still exists but not to the level it used to be.

On the other hand, from the American perspective, North Korean has become one of the primary sources of threat in the post-Cold War era. Most notably, North Korea's asymmetrical threat, which has actually gone beyond the Korean Peninsula, is a serious challenge for the U.S. to cope with since it is no longer a peninsula-wise threat. Second, the U.S. image of North Korea is still negative as reflected in such words as "axis of evil" and "outpost of tyranny." North Korea's serious violation and abuse of human rights, involvement in illegal activities, constant cheating of the agreements, and abandoning fulfillment of the commitments to international norms and regulations have all contributed to further deterioration of North Korea's image. And, in almost every contact or negotiation with North Korea, the United States has found itself deeply frustrated and distrustful of North Korea. Neither confidence nor trust in North Korea can be found from almost every angle. Third, to the U.S. standard, North Korea appears not to be changing. All measures and decisions taken by North Korea are tactical rather than strategic. North Korea has not changed its aggressive militant policies. And there is no sign of political change—regime transformation. Regime survival means the continuation of the present political system into the future, which might be unacceptable.

Beyond North Korea, there is a slight difference between Seoul and Washington in their assessments and estimates of China. Whether China will become a threat or not will greatly depend upon how we handle China from now on. But it appears that Seoul is relatively benign toward China, whereas the Washington sees more concerns.

○ General Policy Directions: North Korean Policy and Alliance Development

Such different threat perceptions are reflected in the policies toward North Korea and on the ROK-U.S. alliance development/adjustment.

While South Korea pursues a reconciliatory or engagement policy toward North Korea, which is believed to invite a gradual and peaceful transformation of North Korea, the United States appears to be tough on North Korea based upon the principle of quid-pro-quo, or reciprocity.

Over the past couple of years, the U.S. has become relatively flexible in dealing with North Korea, while remaining firm and tough in principle. On the one hand, the U.S. has emphasized a peaceful resolution of North Korean nuclear problems through diplomatic negotiation and also expressed “no hostile intent” toward North Korea. On the other hand, the U.S. has implied a desire for regime transformation.

Put in other words, the ROK pursues a kind of peaceful and stable status-quo, whereas the U.S. seeks a new order and structure on the Korean Peninsula. Ultimately two policies will merge. But various problems can be found in the coordination and implementation process. The key issue is to how to properly mix the carrot and the stick. It is neither possible nor desirable to rule out the one on behalf of the other.

Second, South Korea has approached North Korean problems from a peninsula-wise perspective: how to avoid or prevent a crisis or clash over the North Korean nuclear issue, while emphasizing no tolerance of North Korean nuclear weapons programs. And, while it underscored the importance of counter-proliferation, South Korea has urged the U.S. to take into account the specific situation on the Korean Peninsula. In the meantime, the United States has approached North Korean nuclear problems from counter-proliferation and counter-terrorism in general. Even though the final goal was same, the risk-avoidant approach of South Korea was met with risk-taking approach of the U.S.

The third element is related to alliance development and adjustment. As we know, both sides have agreed on a “comprehensive and dynamic alliance.” South Korea is juxtaposed between abandonment and entrapment. In other words, South Korea wants to retain a more balanced alliance, while it doesn’t want to be too deeply involved or dragged in any controversial issues. While it has argued for a comprehensive and dynamic alliance, for various reasons South Korea has been realizing or consolidating such an alliance in a substantive manner. The meaning and elements of a comprehensive and dynamic alliance are not clear in operational terms. And it seems that the geographical and functional expansion, or redefinition, of the ROK-U.S. alliance is not well received on the part of South Korea.

On the other hand, the U.S. has recognized South Korea's position and the necessity of adjustment. Based on the new strategic framework and paradigm, the U.S. seeks more proactive, responsive and flexible alliance with greater contributions from its allies. The U.S. is in the process of forming a network of alliances centered on the United States, and it views the ROK-U.S. alliance from that aspect. Thus the U.S. has asked for greater contributions from its responsibility-sharing partner, no exception. While it has constantly expressed appreciation for South Korea's contribution, the U.S. seems somewhat frustrated by South Korea's ambivalence over stretching out the scope and function of the alliance.

○ Conclusion: Much More Works To Do

Over the years, the ROK and the U.S. have resolved the issues, mostly related to the structure of the alliance system. Nowadays, based on close consultation and coordination, the ROK and the U.S. are pursuing a quite similar approach toward the North Korean nuclear problem. With the conclusion of KORUS FTA, they find themselves in a better position to realize comprehensive and mutually beneficial relations. However, to further consolidate the base for the future relations, there are other things for the ROK and the U.S. to do together. There are more challenges and opportunities in redefining and adjusting the ROK-U.S. relationship. The key question we have to ask ourselves is what positive elements we should to keep and expand, while reducing and managing the negative ones.

First, we should try to establish a common understanding of, or vision for, a desirable end state in Northeast Asia. It seems that we don't have a common understanding on this issue. Rather we have been preoccupied with immediate issues. But it is critical and necessary to have a direction for the future strategic architecture. This could provide a more enduring rationale for ROK-US relations far into the future. And it also helps to define ROK-US bi-lateral relations and the multilateral cooperation/other bi-lateral relations each country has.

Second, we need to identify challenges and concerns more clearly. This could be called 'a threat assessment.' It isn't necessary to be afraid of having differences. It is natural to see differences between the two countries. The issue is how to accept and manage the differences. But we shouldn't try to impose upon one another. Difference-management,

not elimination, is the direction we can follow.

Third, based upon the longer-term vision, we should define the roles and missions of ROK-U.S. relations in dealing with those challenges and concerns in a more detailed way. We have been too abstract and euphemistic in carrying out this task. We have been busy in finding good adjectives, or adverbs to describe the ROK-U.S. relations without clear and working definitions. Thus it is very necessary to have a more concrete and detailed definition of the ROK-U.S. relations with specified roles and missions. In a word, we should seriously discuss and agree on how to make the ROK-U.S. relations a comprehensive strategic partner based on action.

Finally, mutual respect is a very necessary element in executing the aforementioned tasks. Real dialogue and in-depth consultation are required in various fields and levels.. It is natural and inevitable to observe differences even between the allies. But the key is how to reduce, or minimize, those differences. In other words, a careful process management based on mutual respect and trust is very necessary to develop and strengthen a robust alliance relationship.