

RE-IMAGINING THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

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The alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States has been facing new pressures in recent months. Leaders in Washington and Seoul are visibly out of synch in their response to the escalatory actions of North Korea, beginning with the July 4 missile tests and leading to the October 9 nuclear explosion. South Korean leaders seem more concerned with the danger that Washington may instigate conflict than they are with North Korea's profoundly provocative acts. American officials increasingly see Seoul as irrelevant to any possible solution to the problem. Officials on both sides valiantly try to find areas of agreement and to paper over differences. But if attempts to restart the six-party talks on North Korea falter again, it is likely this divide will resurface.

There is a tendency on both sides of the Pacific to overdraw a portrait of an alliance on the verge of collapse. Crises in the U.S.-ROK alliance are hardly new. As I have written elsewhere, there never was a "golden age" in our alliance that was free from tension. Korean discomfort with an alliance founded on dependency and American unease with Korean nationalism have been a constant since the early days of this relationship. Clashes over how to respond to North Korea have been a staple of the alliance since its earliest days.

Korean-American relations today are much deeper than at the inception of this alliance. Our interests are intertwined on many fronts, not least as major players in the global economic and trading system. We share fundamental values as democratic societies, built on the rule of law and the free flow of ideas. There is a large, and growing, contact between our two peoples, from trade and tourism to immigration.

The current situation is worrisome however because it threatens the security system that lies at the foundation of the alliance. Though our interests are now far broader, the U.S.-ROK alliance remains military in nature. The founding document of this alliance was the Mutual Defense Treaty signed on October 1, 1953, following the conclusion of the armistice pact to halt the Korean War. That treaty has been significantly modified only once—28 years ago in response to American plans to withdraw its ground forces from Korea—to create the Korea-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC).

The two militaries have a vital legacy of decades of combined command, training and war planning. American military forces in significant numbers have remained in place to help defend South Korea from potential aggression from the North. South Korean troops have deployed abroad numerous times in support of American foreign policy goals, including currently in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This foundation of security is not only essential to this alliance but is the very definition of the nature of alliances in general, as distinct from other forms of cooperation and partnership in international relations.

“Alliances are binding, durable security commitments between two or more nations,” Dr. Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, a Stanford scholar and former Clinton administration senior defense official, wrote recently. “The critical ingredients of a meaningful alliance are the shared recognition of common threats and a pledge to take action to counter them. To forge agreement, an alliance requires ongoing policy consultations that continually set expectations for allied behavior.”

Alliances can survive a redefinition of the common threat that faces them but not the absence of a threat. Nor can alliances endure if there is not a clear sense of the mutual obligations the partners have to each other, from mutual defense to joint actions against a perceived danger. “At a minimum,” Sherwood-Randall says, “allies are expected to take into consideration the perspectives and interests of their partners as they make foreign and defense policy choices.”

By this definition, the U.S.-ROK alliance is in need of a profound re-examination. The ‘shared recognition’ of a common threat from North Korea that was at the core of the alliance is badly tattered. As a consequence, there is no real agreement on what actions are needed to counter that threat.

There is a troubling lack of will on both sides to engage in policy consultations that involve an understanding of the interests and views of both sides, much less setting clear expectations for allied behavior. Major decisions such as the phasing out of the CFC have been made without adequate discussion.

Americans and Koreans need, in effect, to re-imagine our alliance. We should do so with the understanding that there is still substantial popular support for this alliance, despite conventional wisdom to the contrary. The problems of alliance support may lie more in policy-making elites in both countries than in the general public. That suggests that a concerted effort to reinvigorate the alliance will find public backing.

The results of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2006 multinational survey of public opinion show ongoing strong support for the American military presence in South Korea. Some 62 percent of Koreans believe U.S. troop levels are either about right or too few; some 52 percent of Americans share that view. A slightly larger percentage of Americans—42 percent compared to 36 percent of Koreans—think there are too many U.S. troops. Along the same vein, 65 percent of Americans and 84 percent of Koreans favor the U.S. providing military forces, together with other countries, in a United Nations-sponsored effort to turn back a North Korean attack.

The crack in the alliance comes over the perception of threat from North Korea. While some 79 percent of Koreans feel at least “a bit” threatened by the possibility of North Korea becoming a nuclear power, only 30 percent say they are “very” threatened. Fewer Koreans feel the peninsula will be a source of conflict than the number of Americans. More significantly, nuclear proliferation is viewed as a critical threat by 69 percent of Americans,

compared to only half of Koreans (interestingly, Chinese are even less concerned about this danger).

The opinion poll was conducted before the nuclear test so it is difficult to judge the impact of that event. These survey results do clearly indicate however that while the security alliance still has support, there is an urgent need for deep discussion, at all levels, about the nature of the threat.

The crisis that faced the NATO alliance in the wake of the end of the Cold War has some instructive value for Koreans and Americans today. At the beginning of 1990, I was sent by my newspaper, the Christian Science Monitor, from Tokyo, where I had been covering Japan and Korea since the mid-1980s, to Moscow. The Berlin Wall had fallen a few months earlier and the prospect of the end of a half-century of Cold War in Europe was in the air. But I don't believe anyone—certainly not myself—anticipated the astounding pace or scale of change that took place within just two years.

Within less than a year, in October of 1990, West and East Germany were reunited. The once-mighty Soviet empire in Eastern Europe disintegrated almost overnight. By July of 1991, the Warsaw Pact had come to an end. Perhaps most astounding of all—not least to officials of the administration of George H.W. Bush—the Soviet Union fell abruptly apart in December 1991.

These tectonic events triggered a debate about the future of the NATO alliance that had provided security to Europe since it was founded in April of 1949. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev somewhat famously—and perhaps apocryphally—anticipated this debate. “We are going to do something terrible to you,” he is said to have told Ronald Reagan. “We are going to deprive you of an enemy.”

In those early days, the very continued existence of NATO was under active discussion. The Soviet leadership called for the creation of entirely new “pan-European” security structures that would replace both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Some in Europe favored the European Union as a new vehicle for both economic integration of the former Soviet empire into Europe, along with creating new European security forces that would supplant NATO's integrated command.

A more cautionary view argued for retaining NATO without change as a hedge against the revival of Russia as a military threat or the failure of democratic and market transformation in the former Soviet Union. American policymakers opted instead for the ambitious aim of expanding NATO membership to absorb, step by step, the former Soviet empire, including the newly freed western republics of the Soviet Union.

Along with expansion, the United States pushed NATO to redefine the “enemy.” Americans argued that new threats to stability and security from ethnic conflict—and international terrorism—compelled NATO to “go out of area or out of business.” NATO did so first in the Balkans, in Bosnia and Kosovo, though reluctantly. The alliance has moved even farther beyond Europe to Afghanistan, where NATO commands the international security forces. This draws upon the invaluable investment made in joint military command and operations that are the foundation of the alliance.

Certainly NATO's transformation is far from complete. As was evident at the most recent NATO summit in Riga, considerable differences of opinion remain between many European states and the United States over the mission of NATO. Europeans tend to still see NATO as an essentially defensive alliance, protecting the "euro-Atlantic" region against outside aggression, with an unspoken role as a hedge against uncertainties in Russia. They are resistant to continued American pressure for expansion—including a new U.S. proposal to move toward global partnership with countries such as Japan, South Korea and Australia.

But the reinvention of NATO after the Cold War provides some evidence that even when the nature of the threat has changed, security alliances can preserve a sense of common purpose.

A re-imagined U.S.-ROK alliance could draw from the NATO experience by including the following elements:

- HEDGE -- The alliance remains crucial as a 'hedge' against North Korean aggression, even if the dangers of an attack are considered significantly reduced. If North Korea retains its nuclear capability, that hedge will need to expand to include a shared doctrine of containment and deterrence, including making clear that the U.S. will retaliate against use of nuclear weapons, no matter where it takes place. Strategically the alliance is also a 'hedge' against Chinese ambitions to dominate East Asia and a guarantor of the existing balance of power;
- EXPANSION -- The alliance can reassert its vitality as the basis, along with the U.S.-Japan security alliance, of an expanded multilateral security structure for Northeast Asia;
- NEW MISSIONS -- The alliance should take on new missions, most importantly to participate in military and non-military counter-proliferation operations;
- OUT OF AREA -- A re-imagined alliance might formalize an "out of area" role, elevating the deployments of peacekeeping and other forces to Iraq and Afghanistan into more systematic joint global operations between the two militaries. In this regard, the participation of South Korea in a program of global partnership with NATO, most importantly in the area of joint training, merits serious discussion.

There is another alternative: South Korea and the United States can choose to bring their alliance to a close. If we cannot agree on the common threats that face us, this alliance cannot endure. What we should not do is to allow the alliance to drift from inattention into a deeper crisis that would only benefit our adversaries.

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