

Forging a Common Approach on Strength: Challenges and Opportunities for the Lee Myung-bak Presidency and the ROK-U.S. Alliance

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, the Marine Corps University, or the United States Government

Lee Myung-bak's landslide victory during December of 2007 was a surprise to almost no one. Lee was well ahead in the polls for several months before Koreans actually went to the polls, and his popularity was seen by many as a rejection of the policies of President Roh Moo-hyun. In fact this rejection of the policies on the left by the majority of South Koreans may have first become glaringly apparent immediately after the local elections occurred in 2006—as most left of center candidates (mostly members of the “Uri” party at the time) went down in resounding defeat.¹ Indeed, South Koreans have now “voted with their feet” to change government policies such as abstaining from UN votes criticizing North Korean human rights abuses, tax-funded “economic projects” with the North that have resulted in no reciprocity, and an undisguised rift with Washington over the threat posed by a belligerent and non-compliant North Korea.² Experts in both the United States and in South Korea predict changes in the relationship between these two long-standing allies. But the area where perhaps the most change is expected is in the ROK-U.S. military alliance and the implications for South

Korea's foreign policy that this will have—not the least of which will be a differing view of North Korean security issues and how to deal with them.³

The goal of this paper will be to address how the political changes that have occurred in South Korea will affect important issues of security and stability on the Korean Peninsula—particularly as these issues relate to the ROK-U.S. military alliance and the cascading effects that it has on other aspects of the Korea-U.S. bilateral relationship. In order to do so, I will examine and analyze changes, adjustments and policy shifts that the Lee government will possibly make—or is likely to make—and how these initiatives will serve to strengthen the coordination and cooperation between Washington and Seoul.

Because the South Korean military has been in the beginning stages of a transformation that truly began during 2005, it will be important to discuss possible changes or adjustments that will be made to ROK military development, up to and including cooperation and integration with United States systems and forces (key issues include but are not limited to missile defense and the Proliferation Security Initiative). The issues of wartime operational control (OPCON), as well as base relocation and burden sharing are also directly tied in to ongoing development of ROK forces. And perhaps equally as important will be the immediate issue of repairing the five years of fragmentation that has existed in the alliance since almost the very beginning of the Roh presidency. Lee has a decidedly different view of the military threat posed by North Korea and how to address it. Thus, possible changes that will be made in dealing with challenges faced by North Korea's military forces (to include the nuclear threat) should be considered, to include working with neighbors in the region, and of course the all important and ongoing challenge of the Northern Limit Line.

ROK Military Development, Cooperation, and Integration with the United States

Certainly one of the most important security issues when it comes to the ROK-U.S. military alliance is the transformation of ROK military forces

with a goal for complete modernization (estimated to cost 164 trillion *won*) by 2020 and with enough independent capability to operate under separate wartime command from United States forces by 2012.⁴ These developments are important, expensive, and probably will greatly benefit the ROK-U.S. alliance and the security of the Peninsula in the long run. Nevertheless, under the Roh administration there were many issues involved with the transformation of the ROK military that are likely to have a negative impact on the readiness and capabilities of forces that serve as a deterrent against what is currently the fifth largest armed forces in the world (North Korea). These North Korean forces are equipped with a nuclear capability, ballistic missiles, an asymmetric capability that has evolved since the mid-1990s, and large, forward deployed conventional units that are poised to exploit vulnerabilities opened up by asymmetric forces in the early stages of any conflict.⁵ As the Lee Myung-bak administration transitions into power, in my view they will need to focus on two key issues that the Roh administration seems to have moved away from in its efforts to build an “independent capability”: 1) the North Korean threat as it is and not as many would wish it to be; and 2) a renewed pursuit of interoperability with U.S. forces that will still be extremely important even as this independent capability eventually comes to fruition.

While the North Korean military conventional capability as seen in its artillery, armor, mechanized, and infantry forces has declined because of a dip in field training that has existed since the early 1990s when subsidies from the Soviet Union ceased (largely because the resources needed to maintain these high levels of training—particularly fuel—have been in short supply), the Pyongyang regime has quite cleverly adjusted.⁶ Since the mid-1990s the North Koreans have increased the capabilities of their missile forces in sophistication, numbers, and command and control.⁷ In addition, since the late 1990s, and continuing into the new millennium, the North Koreans have greatly increased the number of long-range artillery systems deployed along the DMZ.⁸ There are probably close to 900 of these systems now deployed along the DMZ today, with up to 300 of these systems capable of targeting the Seoul metropolitan area.⁹ These artillery systems are considered a threat

not only because of the fact that they are forward deployed and thus could attack Seoul with little or no warning, but also because some or all of these systems are likely to be equipped with chemical weapons.¹⁰ U.S. Department of Defense estimates reportedly assess that up to 250,000 people would die in an artillery barrage from these systems.¹¹ Finally, North Korea continues to maintain a highly trained cadre of 80,000-100,000 Special Operations Forces—the world’s largest, and a force capable of attacking key nodes within the South Korean landmass, as well as creating havoc and disrupting command and control behind allied lines in any conflict.¹²

The first problem with transformation of the ROK military under the Roh administration has been the refusal to acquire missile defense systems capable of defending South Korea from the more than 600 SCUD missile systems that are in North Korea’s inventory—now augmented by the more accurate DPRK version of the Russian SS-21 (the KN-02).¹³ Under the Roh administration, South Korea has projected a purchase of 48 second-hand PAC-2 Patriot missile systems from Germany.¹⁴ But these systems will be sadly lacking in providing missile defense against the missile systems discussed above that North Korea has aimed at key nodes in every region of South Korea.¹⁵ As it stands right now, the only system on the Korean Peninsula that is truly capable of addressing the threat of a large-scale North Korean missile attack is the PAC-3 Patriot system. Washington has deployed 64 of these systems to South Korea, all of which are manned, maintained and operated by U.S. Army personnel.¹⁶

One has only to look at recent developments in the Japanese missile defense systems for an example of the direction that the South Korean military needs to take. In December of 2007, the Japanese successfully tested the naval SM-3 interceptor missile. In addition, the Japanese are building a two-tier missile defense system in close cooperation with the United States. The SM-3 system will be launched to intercept missiles at high altitudes (from Japanese Aegis-Class ships), supported by the PAC-3 system that will intercept incoming missiles at lower altitudes. The South Korean military has neither system—despite the fact that the ROK landmass is under greater threat

from North Korean missiles than Japan (North Korean missiles are also the primary threat that Japan must prepare for). Seoul has reportedly scheduled a purchase of PAC-3 missiles sometime after 2012, but there is no purchase scheduled currently for a system like the SM-3 for their own Aegis-Class ships (known as the King Sejong-Class destroyers). To make matters worse, South Korea to date (unlike Japan) has not agreed to join the U.S. missile defense system—a carry over from the Kim Dae-jung administration.¹⁷

The reasons for the South Korean government's failure to immediately begin purchasing a modern, capable missile defense system (and integrating it with the U.S. system) with the ability to realistically defend against North Korean attack are decidedly not because United States officials have advised the Roh administration not to do so. In fact, General B.B. Bell, the current commander of United States Forces Korea recently stated, "The Republic of Korea must purchase and field its own TMD system, capable of full integration with the U.S. system. The regional missile threat from North Korea requires an active ROK missile defense capability to protect its critical command capabilities and personnel."¹⁸ Reportedly aides to Lee Myung-bak have stated that the incoming government may reconsider the Roh government's stance on Missile Defense.¹⁹ In my view this is extremely important. Building a credible, modern, and fully integrated missile defense system will be vital to the security of South Korea and an important deterrent against attack from the North.

When it comes to the second pillar of the North Korean asymmetric threat—long-range artillery deployed along the DMZ—the biggest issue that the South Korean government has inadequately addressed under the Roh administration has been the acquisition of a robust, joint, integrated C4I (command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence) system. This is particularly important now. Until recently, the ground-based mission of providing counter-fire against North Korean long-range artillery deployed along the DMZ largely belonged to the 2nd U.S. Infantry Division, which operated 30 multiple rocket launcher systems and 30 M109A6 Paladin self-propelled howitzers.

During 2005, as part of the ongoing shift of defense responsibilities on the Korean Peninsula between South Korean and U.S. forces, the responsibilities for this mission shifted to the South Korean army.²⁰ Integration of these newly assigned units into a modern C4I system is extremely important—otherwise they are just guns that cannot react to or rapidly target North Korea’s systems and protect allied forces. Artillery used in a counter-battery mode must have a quick reaction time in order to grasp the location of North Korean artillery units with radar and destroy them in case the systems have just been fired or are about to be fired.²¹ This issue becomes exacerbated when one considers the important issue of integrating counter-battery artillery fire with allied airpower. Without a modern C4I system—and a system that is fully capable of being integrated with U.S. forces—the South Korean artillery forces’ capability to target the deadly North Korean long-range artillery systems is greatly degraded.

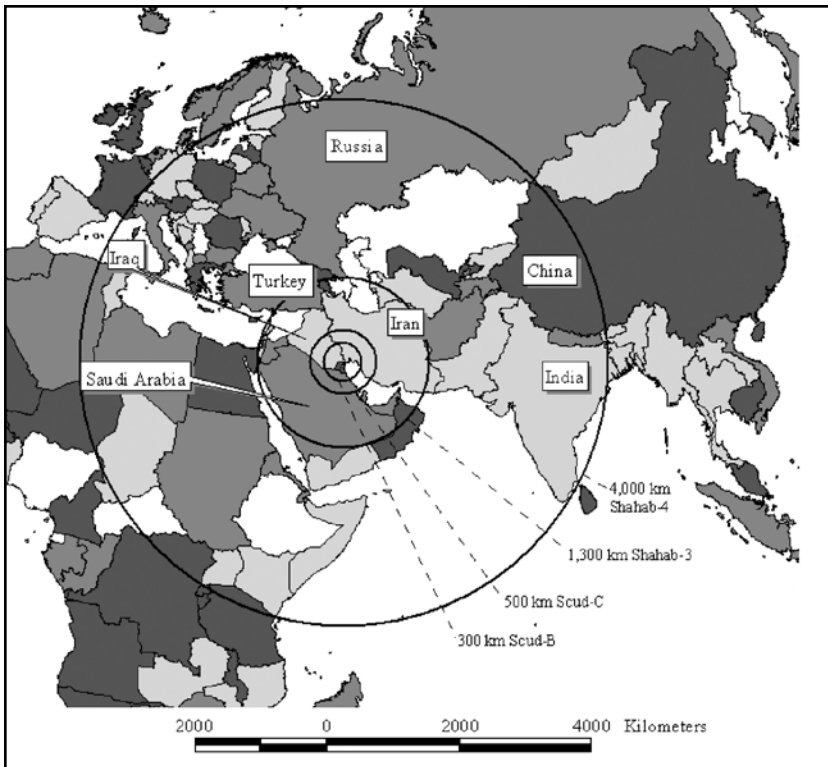
During Lee Myung-bak’s election campaign, he pledged to turn the South Korean military into an efficient, high-tech force by establishing a network centric capability.²² This will be extremely important in coming years. Thus far, initiatives aimed at establishing robust C4I networks in the ROK military, such as the test-bed “advanced digital network” in the Fifth Army Corps during 2006, have not been joint and they have not been systems capable of being integrated with United States forces on-Peninsula.²³ Another system, “Koreasat 5” (also dubbed “Mugunghwa 5”), which serves as a combined civil and military communications satellite and has also been proven to be purely experimental to date, is not integrated into a national system (which does not exist), and is unlikely to meet even the basic needs of either an independent or integrated C4I system.²⁴ In fact, to date South Korea continues to depend on the United States for strategic information. Indeed, ROK forces are also heavily dependent on U.S. systems for tactical battlefield information.²⁵ It will be important for Lee’s defense team to develop plans to significantly upgrade systems and sensors that will give the South Korean military enhanced independent capabilities, and the ability to fully integrate with U.S. systems and systems that would deploy to the Peninsula in war or time of crises.

The third pillar of the North Korean asymmetric threat addressed earlier in this paper is the Special Operations Forces capability that Pyongyang brings to bear with its large, well-trained, and highly motivated cadre of troops who fall into this category. Much like combating the long-range artillery threat from North Korea, C4I will play a vital role in the ROK-U.S. counter-SOF mission. As Brigadier General Simeon Trombitas, the commander of Special Operations Command Korea has stated, “Constructing a bilateral C4I sharing capability with a common architecture is critical for interaction with our ROK counterparts to increase the synergy between our forces and enhance command and control.”²⁶ The other important aspect of improving South Korea’s ability to counter the North Korean SOF threat relates to the airlift of Seoul’s own elite special-forces and airborne brigades. There are seven special-forces brigades for airborne operations (para-dropping and air resupply) in the army. In addition, the army has five independent brigades (two infantry and three counter-infiltration), along with other airborne assets. This is a very large, well trained force in its own right, but it is also a force that needs to be airlifted during a conflict. This is a capability in which the ROK Air Force (ROKAF) transport fleet is severely lacking. The ROKAF currently only has 25 aircraft to conduct this mission—10 C-130Hs and 15 Spanish-designed, twin-engine CN-235Ms.²⁷ Thus, in order to truly bring the counter-SOF capability of ROK forces up to modern, independent, and integration capable standards, the Lee administration will have to make important investments in both C4I and airpower initiatives that his predecessor was unwilling to commence.

There are many other issues and challenges relating to South Korea’s military development, cooperation, and integration with the United States military. While I am unable to discuss all of them in this paper, certainly one that is likely to be addressed by the Lee Myung-bak administration in its first year is the Proliferation Security Initiative. The reason that this is important is because of the threat that North Korea poses to volatile regions outside of Northeast Asia through its proliferation—particularly of ballistic missiles. One of the most recent examples of this would be the reported sale of the North Korean version of the Russian SS-N-6 missile (sometimes referred to as the

“Taepo Dong X” or “Musudan” by analysts) to Iran. North Korea reportedly delivered 18 of these systems to Iran during 2005.²⁸ Iran reportedly successfully conducted a test-launch of this system based on the SS-N-6 missile in January of 2006 (the missile is reported to have a range of 4,000 kilometers).²⁹ In fact, as shown on the map below (each of the missile systems shown on the map was acquired from North Korea) Iran now has the capability, thanks to North Korea, to threaten not only its neighbors, but NATO forces in Europe with its ballistic missiles.³⁰ North Korea and Iran have had a long history of cooperation and proliferation of many types of weapons systems.

Ranges of Iran's Missiles



Source: “Missile Survey: Ballistic and Cruise Missiles of Foreign Countries.” Congressional Research Service Report, RL 30427, March 5, 2007, p. 24. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL30427.pdf>

Under the Roh administration, South Korea has been extremely hesitant to actively join in the activities of PSI, and the main reason appears to be a fear that joining PSI as an active member would hurt efforts at reconciliation with the North.³¹ A good example of this can be seen if one examines Seoul's reaction to PSI immediately following North Korea's underground nuclear test in October of 2006, when South Korea refused to join in a U.S.-led initiative to inspect cargo ships suspected of carrying WMD in and out of North Korea.³² According to press reports, Lee Myung-bak's aides have said that he may reconsider Seoul's stance on PSI once he assumes the presidency—especially if North Korean nuclear provocations intensify.³³ If this occurs it will also be an initiative long overdue—and most welcome in Washington.

Wartime Operational Control: Issues and Challenges

The issue of wartime OPCON is one that has been extremely sensitive to most conservatives since the year 2012 (as the date for a change in wartime OPCON) was pushed for during the early years of the Roh administration and continuing with the eventual signing of the agreement by Secretary Gates and Minister Kim in 2007, finalizing the date of de-establishing Combined Forces Command as April 17, 2012.³⁴ Throughout the process, and after the signing of the final agreement, most retired generals and retired senior military officials in South Korea were openly critical of the change in wartime OPCON, largely because they felt—and continue to believe—that the date is premature.³⁵ Despite the outcry from many conservatives and many military experts in both South Korea and the United States, the wheels of transition continue to roll. In December of 2007 the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff launched a task force to prepare for the transfer of wartime OPCON. The group is led by Army Brigadier General Park Chan-joo who will oversee six groups: strategy, operations, operational plans, information, personnel affairs/logistics, and policy planning. Reportedly a separate team will oversee the tasks of independent operation and C4I.³⁶

United States officials—including the ambassador to Korea in December of 2007—have stated that postponing the date for separate warfighting commands

and ultimately the end of Combined Forces Command (CFC) is not in the cards.³⁷ In my view, while complete ROK independent wartime command may be a noble goal to push for in the long run, the initiatives required in order for the South Korean forces to effectively carry out this goal will simply not be completed by 2012. In fact, like many issues, the position taken by the Lee government may be based on the behavior of its neighbor to the North. According to sources close to Lee, he may be considering proposing that the United States postpone the planned transition of wartime command by two to three years unless North Korea discards its nuclear weapons programs.³⁸

As indicated above, officials in the Bush administration appear unwilling to delay the transfer—an initiative that was pushed for very strongly under Donald Rumsfeld’s tenure in the Pentagon and one that many who remain there continue to advocate. Heritage Foundation Senior Research Fellow Bruce Klingner wrote an interesting and useful suggestion for possible compromise during December of 2007 when he stated, “Although it would be counterproductive for President Lee to formally reverse the OPCON decision, the negative effects could be mitigated by careful bilateral planning in coming years. The U.S. could announce that the planned 2012 transfer date is contingent on both a sufficient reduction in the North Korean threat and satisfactory progress in improving South Korean military capabilities, and that it is open to discussion as to the feasibility of transfer by the currently agreed upon date.”³⁹ Thus, while the issue of wartime OPCON remains important to the security of South Korea, in coming years perhaps the best way to broach it would be to base any delays on both the capabilities of the ROK military and the continued presence of the North Korean threat. In my view, while the issue of wartime OPCON is important to many in Lee’s base, and locking the date in at 2012 is equally as important to some in the Pentagon, a common view of the threat and pragmatic realities regarding the timetable needed to raise the capabilities of the ROK military may eventually push the date back from 2012. Certainly Lee’s stated goal of reinvigorating military cooperation with the United States will help to make this process more transparent and less frustrating for both sides than it has been since 2003.⁴⁰

Improving the Alliance: Repairing Five Years of Fragmentation

President-elect Lee Myung-bak has pledged to seek a future-oriented military alliance with the United States, and has also said that he will strengthen the alliance based on his overarching principle of pragmatism. He has also been openly critical of what he (and many other conservatives) considers unnecessary feuding with the United States by the Roh Moo-hyun administration.⁴¹ Lee has been quoted as saying, “The incumbent government has tried to change the pillar of the Korea-U.S. alliance without any blueprint and thereby weakened relations between the two allies.”⁴² In fact, in a speech he gave during February of 2007 that has now become widely known as the “MB Doctrine,” Lee called to improve the relations with Washington by “...revamping and strengthening the Korean-American alliance based on shared values and mutually reinforcing interests. The alliance remains in crisis not by accident, but by the deliberate policies and choices made by this government.”⁴³

There are two immediate issues that the Lee administration can look to soon after coming to office in February of 2008: burden sharing and base relocation. Regarding the first issue (burden sharing), one of the major points of contention that has challenged the alliance during the Roh administration has been the issue of non-personnel stationing costs (NPSC) for U.S. troops currently stationed in South Korea. Seoul’s 2007 contribution to the Special Measures Agreement which covers the cost only represents 41 percent of the budget. The current Commander of USFK, General Bell, has stated that this falls far short of an even cost sharing agreement which would include a 50 percent contribution by both allies.⁴⁴ These costs are not trivial, and they are typically used to pay for such things as labor costs for South Korean employees of USFK, the purchase of logistics and supplies, and the construction of military facilities. In an era when United States interests are stretched to the limit all over the world, continued failure to pay what most analysts consider to be Seoul’s fair share of the costs of maintaining a U.S. troop presence could lead to important and costly cuts in what the U.S. forces will be able to accomplish in force and military base maintenance.⁴⁵ Earlier in this paper

I compared South Korea's policy on missile defense with that of Japan. It is once again useful to do so when one looks to burden sharing, as the share of what South Korea pays for NPSC as compared to the Japanese government is significantly lower.⁴⁶ It would likely be beneficial for both allies if the Lee administration addresses this issue early on in 2008.

The second issue of some importance that can be addressed early on is that of base relocation. The timeline for consolidation of U.S. forces from many smaller bases and from major bases such as Yongsan and Camp Casey to a major "hub" location at Camp Humphries has been pushed back to 2012 under the Roh administration.⁴⁷ This is understandable, but perhaps the most important thing here is perspective. There have been protests at Camp Humphries from farmers and many left-wing groups against the U.S. presence. Roh's government has been noticeably silent on this. By speaking out about the strategic importance of the consolidation of U.S. bases on Peninsula and the continued strength of the alliance through a smaller footprint of American forces, Lee's new government can make valuable and popular public relations gains—both with conservatives and moderates in his own country and in the United States where concerns of "anti-Americanism" in South Korea have been on the rise since Roh's election campaign of late 2002 that called for more distance from Washington.

A New Era of Foreign Policy: Working with Allies and Neighbors in the Region

As Lee's transition team begins to take actions prior to assuming power in February, important announcements have occurred regarding what his foreign policy will be. One such announcement was that he would focus on summit diplomacy following his inauguration in February. Thus far, it appears that there will be plans to visit important neighbors and allies soon after taking office. Reportedly, Lee plans to visit the United States, China, Japan, and Russia soon after taking office.⁴⁸ This is not the only initiative that is likely to occur early in Lee's term. According to press reports quoting a senior GNP official, there are plans to review and perhaps integrate government ministries after

the President-elect takes office. One possible move to be discussed will be the integration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Ministry of Unification. The official said, “The majority of politicians believe that there is no need to have two separate diplomatic lines—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Ministry of Unification—since issues involving North Korea, such as the six-party talks, are key diplomatic matters.”⁴⁹

In addition to the important initiatives discussed above which may occur early in his term, Lee is likely to distance himself from his predecessor’s policy of remaining silent on human rights issues in North Korea—an initiative that is likely to garnish applause from Washington.⁵⁰ Of course one of the other key issues in the minds of many conservatives (particularly military experts) is that Lee needs to remain steady on the Northern Limit Line boundary with North Korea. While Roh Moo-hyun began negotiations on establishing a joint fishing zone along the de facto maritime boundary between the two Koreas near the end of his term, Lee has been quoted as saying, “Surely the NLL should be respected as it is until national unification.” Lee has also been quoted as saying that if there is a future summit, this time Kim Jong-il should come to Seoul. Prior to being elected he was quoted as saying, “According to the principle of reciprocity, chairman Kim should come to South Korea for the next inter-Korea summit. If I am elected, the next inter-Korea summit will be held somewhere in South Korea, if not in Seoul.”⁵¹ This sea change in foreign policy is likely to be distinct, welcome to allies, perhaps troubling to China, and likely to bring South Korea closer to the United States when it comes to dealing with security issues in Northeast Asia and elsewhere.

Conclusions: Four Pillars of ROK-U.S. Cooperation

Throughout this paper I have made observations regarding mistakes made during the Roh administration that have negatively impacted the alliance and offered suggestions and assessments that will hopefully be useful for the Lee Myung-bak administration as it takes power and brings the ROK-U.S. alliance—and especially the ROK-U.S. military alliance—into a new era of cooperation and transparency. In conclusion I would like to summarize

the key ways cooperation can occur and offer up final suggestions for the immediate and near future.

If one boils this down to basic aspects of cooperation that Lee Myung-bak can (and is likely to) initiate, it adds up to four basic pillars that will not only improve ROK-U.S. military cooperation, but enhance the readiness and capabilities of the ROK military.

The first pillar is *Closer Technological Cooperation*, which should involve bigger, more powerful, longer range combat, communications and intelligence systems. Government/business joint ventures must be initiated that will enable quality-focused programs designed to continually upgrade defense capabilities and surpass threat systems while mitigating vulnerabilities that would be likely to occur as CFC is dissolved. The second pillar is *Closer Intellectual Cooperation* that focuses on renewed and continued development of combined doctrine, combined training, and combined education. The third pillar is *Closer Ideological Cooperation* that will involve government-to-government compatibility in core values—democracy, human rights, and free market economies that can be accomplished through mutual commitments to security on the Peninsula, the region, and around the world. The final pillar is a *Fiscal Commitment to Support the Cooperation Pillars Listed Above* that can be accomplished by defense budget appropriations that enable realistic, threat-based acquisition of important systems and training of service members. This must be supported by increased defense bill approvals by the National Assembly to keep pace with defense and interoperability requirements.

The road ahead is a challenging one. The president-elect will be able to play an important role in mending fences and rejuvenating an alliance that has at best been in a difficult state of flux since 2003. But all evidence indicates that Lee Myung-bak and the members of his transition team have every intention of making this alliance one that will remain strong, ready, and capable of meeting the challenges of a post-9/11 world.⁵²

Chapter 5 Notes

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