

OVERVIEW OF ROK-U.S. RELATIONS IN 2006: A TIME OF TRANSITION

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I. INTRODUCTION

For over five decades, the ROK-U.S. relationship served the mutual interests of the ROK and the U.S. The United States' commitment to the security of ROK and its military presence in Korea deterred North Korean aggression and reduced the defense burden on the ROK, thus providing the basis for the ROK's rapid economic development. The alliance stabilized Northeast Asia by constraining rivalry among regional powers. For its part, the ROK supported the United States' global strategy as an ally in both Vietnam and Iraq. Economic and cultural ties bolstered the ROK-U.S. relationship and promoted mutual prosperity. The ROK became the United States' seventh-largest trading partner overall and the fourth-largest importer of American agricultural products.

In recent years, however, the ROK-U.S. alliance was being severely tested. The U.S. began to reassess the ROK's strategic value in a post-modern world context and made structural adjustments to the alliance. The ROK, in response to both domestic and external changes, was seeking a more equal relationship with the U.S. Differences between the ROK and the U.S., especially over the approach toward North Korea, highlighted the conflicting strategic interests of the two partners, differences that led to questions about the rationale for the alliance.

II. RESPONDING TO NEW SECURITY ENVIRONMENTS

Since the Korean War, South Korea and the U.S. shared similar strategic goals. During the Cold War, the overarching aim was to prevent communist aggression at the global, regional, and peninsular levels. With the end of the Cold War, however, and especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, changing security environments at various levels resulted in strategic discord between the ROK and the U.S.

At the global level, U.S. strategy changed fundamentally. The goal of U.S. foreign policy shifted from deterring communism to combating terrorism and preventing the rise of regional hegemons. America's allies, whose role used to be to defend themselves from communist attack, were now called upon to participate in global and regional military operations against terrorism. Under the new U.S. concept of "strategic flexibility," American allies were pressed to assume further responsibility for their own defense. Many South Koreans feared a lessening of the United States' commitment to the defense of the ROK or even eventual abandonment.

At the regional level, the change in the balance of power in East Asia in recent years increased uncertainty about the regional security environment. Cold War confrontation disappeared in Northeast Asia and, with it, the structure of competing alliance groups: the U.S., the ROK, and Japan, in one camp, and the USSR, the PRC, and North Korea, in the other. Instead, the rise of China and Japan's pursuit of a more "normal" foreign and security policy endangered the balance of power in East Asia. The United States appeared to vacillate between a policy of engaging and containing the PRC. As a U.S. ally, the ROK feared becoming ensnared in U.S. intervention in conflict between China and Taiwan.

At the peninsular level, the ROK's policy toward North Korea shifted from Cold War confrontation to engagement. The June 2002 summit meeting in Pyongyang between President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il led to socio-cultural exchanges and economic cooperation between the two Koreas, and South Koreans' attitude toward North Korea experienced dramatic change. Increased contact reinforced South Koreans' image of North Korea as a "brother in trouble." This new South Korean nationalistic view of North Korea resulted in discord with Washington over policy priorities and to different approaches to resolving the North Korean nuclear problem.

III. DISCORDANT PERSPECTIVES

1. THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

On October 9, North Korea announced that it had conducted a nuclear weapon test earlier in the day. The U.S. immediately called for a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) meeting to coordinate an international response. A few days later, the UN passed Resolution 1718 condemning the test and imposing sanctions on North Korea. The U.S. reiterated its security commitment to South Korea and Japan, and it continued to press North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. The North Korean action came despite a strong UN warning shortly before the test and the passage of an earlier UN resolution condemning the July 5 North Korean missile tests.

Although the South Korean government vowed to support the UNSC resolution and called on Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks, it did not suspend cooperation with North Korea on the Gaesong Industrial Park and the Mt. Geumgang tourism project. The ROK also continued to refrain from participation in the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), which was widely regarded as targeted especially at North Korean proliferation activities. Many American observers had anticipated that a North Korean nuclear test would prompt the South Korean government to take a much tougher approach toward North Korea.

The gap between the two countries' reaction to the North Korean nuclear test was due mainly to divergent assessments of the challenges posed by North Korea. The U.S. saw the North Korean nuclear issue through global and regional lenses. Globally, the U.S. worried that North Korea, an established exporter of ballistic missiles, might transfer nuclear weapons or material to states or groups hostile to the U.S. The U.S. was also concerned that North Korea's successful "breakout" as nuclear weapons state might encourage other states to develop their own nuclear weapons, thus undermining the international nuclear non-proliferation regime.

From a regional perspective, the U.S. feared that the North Korean nuclear test might stimulate a regional arms race. If Japan decided in response to develop nuclear weapons, South Korea, with strong memories of imperial Japan's colonial rule, might follow suit. Taiwan might also be tempted. While Japan did not appear likely to move soon to develop nuclear weapons, the North Korean nuclear test did lead to calls in Japan for a debate about changing Japan's non-nuclear policy. It also increased Japanese concerns about the credibility of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella."

South Korea had a significantly different perspective on North Korea. With the end of the Cold War, and especially after the South-North summit of June 2000, South Korea's threat perception of North Korea declined dramatically. The increasing gap in national power between the South and North Korea caused by the economic collapse of the North heightened the sense of confidence among the South Korean public about the ROK's deterrence capability. With this confidence, the Kim Dae-jung administration initiated the "sunshine" engagement policy to induce gradual change in North Korea. Thus, the ROK came to deal with North Korea not primarily as a regional and an international problem, as did the U.S., but as an "intra-national" issue.

2. TRANSFER OF WARTIME OPERATIONAL CONTROL

In June 2002, the accidental killing of two South Korean schoolgirls struck by a U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) vehicle stirred public anger toward the U.S. military presence in Korea. The ensuing acquittal of the U.S. soldiers by a U.S. court-martial intensified demands for revision of the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and some progressives called for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. During the 2002 presidential election campaign, which was underway at the time, ruling party candidate Roh Moo-hyun appealed to Korean voters by promising to insist on a more equal relationship with the U.S.

As part of his presidential campaign, Roh said that South Korea needed to act more autonomously, and he called for the return of ROK wartime operational control (OPCON) over its own forces. (The ROK transferred OPCON of its forces to the U.S. during the Korean War.) Later, as president, Roh called reclaiming OPCON "the core of a self-reliant national defense," adding that South Koreans who believed their military wasn't yet up to the task lacked "self-respect."

The Roh administration's call for wartime OPCON provoked strong opposition in 2006 from South Korean conservatives, who feared that the ROK's national security might be put in jeopardy. The main opposition Grand National Party and conservative opinion leaders called for an immediate halt to negotiations between the U.S. and the ROK for the transfer of OPCON and they demanded that the existing combined U.S.-ROK command structure be maintained. About a dozen veterans' associations published a joint statement opposing the Roh administration's plan, and seventeen former defense ministers also expressed their concern.

Yonsei University Professor Moon Jung-in summarized the reasons for South Korean conservatives' opposition to the transfer of OPCON. First, the ROK government's position was an improper unilateral action domestically that compromised national security in the name of national pride and self-reliance. Second, the transfer would lead to the dissolution of the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command, the reduction and withdrawal of American forces from Korea, and ultimately the dismantling of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Third, the timing of the transfer was hasty and rigid. Fourth, the South Korean military was not ready to exercise wartime OPCON. Fifth, the transfer might result in the U.S. not dispatching as many U.S. military personnel to South Korea in the event of war.

Despite the strong domestic opposition, the Roh Moo-hyun government did not waver and continued negotiations with the U.S. for the transfer of wartime OPCON. On October 20, the defense ministers of the two countries formally agreed that the transfer should occur sometime between 2009 and 2012. In fact, it was the U.S. side that called for the transfer to occur sooner rather than later.

While the U.S. and the ROK agreed in principle on the transfer of wartime OPCON, it appeared that their motivations differed. For the Roh administration, the transfer of wartime OPCON symbolized the regaining of national sovereignty and was a matter of national pride, particularly for nationalistic, progressive younger voters. The U.S. position, however, was based on its global strategy. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. had worked to relocate and realign its bases overseas to allow its forces to respond to regional conflicts more rapidly and more flexibly. After 9/11, the U.S. also sought to conduct the war on terrorism more efficiently. The transfer of wartime OPCON to the ROK would enhance such “strategic flexibility” on the part of U.S. forces. From a South Korean perspective, the U.S. desire for the “strategic flexibility” to deploy its forces in Korea to other hotspots represented a reduction in the longstanding U.S. commitment to the ROK’s security.

3. OTHER STRUCTURAL CHANGE IN THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

Other U.S.-ROK alliance structures were undergoing major change. In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. invaded and occupied Afghanistan and Iraq and deployed U.S. forces to many other countries. In such an environment, the U.S. began to reduce U.S. forces in Korea and realign those that remained. The U.S. planned to cut its 37,500 uniformed personnel in Korea by about 1/3, to 25,000, within several years, and reposition its main forces, stationed for decades near the Demilitarized Zone, to areas south of Seoul. Some South Koreans interpreted the changes as representing a weakening of the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea, because U.S. forces would no longer play the role of a “tripwire” as they had when arrayed along the DMZ.

The transfer of wartime OPCON would also mean the abolition of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC), established in 1978 to reassure South Koreans of the U.S. commitment to their defense, and described by some as the most efficient war-fighting command in the world. The close security cooperation between the ROK and the U.S. through CFC, unique in the world, was extensive, including combined defense planning, intelligence integration and sharing, a sophisticated logistical interface, educational exchanges, and defense industry cooperation.

IV. TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE ALLIANCE

In spite of the recent difficulties and differences of perception between the U.S. and the ROK, they shared many values and interests. Globally, they cooperated to promote freedom, democratic institutions, and human rights, as demonstrated by their shared effort in Iraq and Afghanistan. The two countries also cooperated

in combating terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Regionally, the ROK and the U.S. shared the hope for peace and stability in Northeast Asia and made efforts to create a regional multinational mechanism for security cooperation through the Six-Party Talks. On the Korean Peninsula, South Korea and the U.S. shared the goal of denuclearizing North Korea.

Although security cooperation had been the most important pillar of the ROK-U.S. relationship, in the future the alliance needed to evolve to give greater weight to political, people-to-people, and economic cooperation, in the peninsular, regional, and global contexts. A comprehensive approach to alliance relations could enhance mutual understanding and cooperation in all areas, including the military.

In the security realm, the Six-Party Talks provided an opportunity to coordinate the perspectives of ROK and the U.S. toward North Korea. The formation of the Six-Party Talks could be interpreted as a variation of the ROK-U.S. alliance applied to the regional context to deal with the complicated North Korean nuclear issue. Despite their different priorities regarding the North Korean nuclear issue, South Korea and the U.S. both sought to implement the commitments contained in the Six-Party Joint Statement of September 19, 2005, which aimed to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear program and integrate the DPRK as a responsible member of the international community. Both the U.S. and the ROK hoped that the successful conclusion of the Six-Party Talks would lead to a permanent peace regime for the Korean Peninsula and the establishment of a security cooperation body for Northeast Asia.

The people-to-people links between South Korea and the U.S. represented a major, and increasingly important, new feature of the bilateral relationship. With nearly two million Korean-Americans living in the U.S., South Korea and the U.S. maintained a special relationship at a personal level. In addition, over 90,000 South Koreans students attended U.S. institutions of learning. Such deep, personal ties provided a strong foundation for the relationship and promised to improve mutual understanding. To encourage such ties, the two countries adopted in 2006 a roadmap for Korea’s early inclusion in the U.S. visa waiver program (VWP). If accomplished, South Koreans could tour the U.S. without visas.

The ROK-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was expected to broaden and deepen the alliance. The two countries began negotiations for the FTA in 2006 and planned to reach final agreement in the first half of 2007. Economic studies in both countries estimated that the FTA would generate an increase in GDP, growth in foreign investment, more jobs in the manufacturing and services sectors, and lower prices for consumers.