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THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE IN AN EVOLVING ASIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

For over five decades, the U.S.-ROK alliance has remained a fixture in the overall security framework of East Asia. The Mutual Defense Treaty signed between South Korea and the United States in October 1953 firmly rooted the alliance in a rationale based on a narrow military objective of joint defense against a common external threat: North Korea. Since the end of the Cold War however, the rationale for the military alliance has slowly been undermined by the changing dynamics of a post-Cold War international system and the diverging threat perceptions of both parties. Under the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration, the rise in anti-American sentiment among the South Korean public posed challenges for the alliance. Furthermore, questioning the salience of the alliance became an active and growing discourse on both sides of the Pacific.

Hand-wringing over the future course of the alliance continues, but the discourse among academic and policy circles is less dire than what most alliance doomsayers would have predicted. Despite significant United States Forces Korea (USFK) realignment and troop reduction, the Lee Myung-bak and Obama administrations, in the Joint Vision statement of 2009, renewed their commitment to adapt the alliance to the changes of a 21st-century security environment while outlining their intent to expand the military alliance into a wide range of cooperative efforts on global issues. For the foreseeable future, indications are that the U.S.-ROK alliance will weather the challenges ahead. Rough patches notwithstanding, a number of institutional barriers prevent any alliance from dissolving. The U.S.-ROK alliance is no exception. But the alliance will face many new challenges in the context of an evolving Asia.

This paper seeks to touch upon the recent history of events concerning the U.S.-ROK alliance. More importantly, it will look further at the dynamic changes occurring in Asia and what implications these changes may have not only for the

conventional framework of the alliance, but for the long-term strategic posturing of U.S.-Asia policy.

II. RECENT HISTORY OF THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

Realignment and Reduction

The U.S.-ROK alliance has been undergoing significant shifts since announcing its intention to withdraw 12,500 USFK personnel over a five-year period starting in 2004. The 2007 decision to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) to Seoul and the simultaneous disbandment of ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC) continues on track according to Defense Department officials, despite its controversial nature. Though some members of Korea's conservative wing oppose the transfer, preferring to rely on the U.S. security commitments in return for Seoul's expanding contribution to the U.S. international agenda, the transition has continued to move steadily forward.

Between 2004 and 2008, the United States cut 12,500 personnel from USFK, capping the current numbers remaining in South Korea at 28,500. The Second Infantry Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) was deployed to Iraq, and then subsequently relocated to Fort Carson, Colorado. In June of this year, the *Korea Times* reported that the USFK cut the number of its combat aircraft by 25 percent over the past four years. General Walter Sharp, commander of the USFK, also elaborated in February 2009 on the transformation of the Eighth United States Army (EUSA) headquarters in Seoul. It is currently preparing to reorganize EUSA headquarters into an operational command post after 2012, when South Korean commanders take over wartime operational control of its armed forces from the U.S. military. This will be an important change given the symbolic status of the army command on the peninsula. In accordance with the 2004 Yongsan Relocation Plan (YRP), plans to relocate the Yongsan Garrison in Seoul and infantry units north of Seoul to Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, about 70 kilometers south of Seoul, is scheduled to be complete by 2015. The United States has also closed 36 installations encompassing 16,700 acres and returned 30 installations to South Korea. Further, in accordance with the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the United States transferred all buildings, capital assets, and improvements located on these installations. Nearly 60 camps and facilities totaling over 38,000 acres still remain to be closed and returned.

In the 41st Annual Security Consultative Meeting on October 22, 2009, Secretary

of Defense Robert Gates offered assurances that the United States will use "the full range of military capabilities, including the nuclear umbrella," to ensure South Korea's security. In the press conference following the meeting, Gates also expressed his confidence in the timely transfer of OPCON as planned by April 2012. Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, cautioned that South Korea still required improved capabilities, such as long-range artillery, before a fully operational command independent of the United States could be established, but he noted that "they are a very capable fighting force and they are capable of doing this." The Joint Communiqué did not indicate any delays or disputes concerning the current scheduled timeline of OPCON transfer. However, the transfer is subject to continued evaluations, leaving open the possibility for future delays should South Korea fail to meet the operational requirements.

The transformation falls in line with Lee's vision for a more independent and flexible military command capable of responding to new threats on a global scale. On Armed Forces Day just three weeks prior to the consultative meeting with Gates, Lee asserted that transforming the force was crucial to "carry out roles commensurate with [Korea's] growing stature as a global Korea." He has thus far resisted the pressure to rethink or postpone the transfer of operational control made by conservatives who see the transformation and realignment of USFK as an indication of weakening alliance and security guarantees.

The Salience of the Alliance

Similar to the discourse surrounding the U.S.-Japan alliance, the end of the Cold War and the feeling within South Korea that its strength was superior to that of North Korea prompted debate regarding the necessity of an alliance established and perpetuated based on a Cold War framework. In South Korea, nationalism and anti-Americanism fueled the feeling that the existing alliance framework violated the sovereignty of a now stronger and more capable Korea. Divergence between the United States and more open policies towards North Korea under Kim Dae-jung and Roh further underscored the differences in threat perception that undergirded the alliance. Roh's call for a "self-reliant" defense also promoted a renewed look at the alliance structure.

In the United States, those who advocated a hard-line position on North Korea, such as Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute, ardently argued for the United States to dissolve the alliance. In the 2005 issue of the *National Interest*, in an article titled, "Ending the U.S.-ROK Alliance," Bandow characterized the alliance as

an "alliance in search of a purpose" and made a case that the security of South Korea no longer remained vital to the United States. Daniel Kennelly, former managing editor of the *American Interest,* argued in a 2005 *American Enterprise* piece "Time for an Amicable Divorce with South Korea," that "our troop presence in South Korea no longer deters the North. It deters us." He questioned the salience of the alliance while positing the detrimental effect on the flexibility of U.S. military options towards North Korea. Others argued that the alliance was a relic of the Cold War. A larger group of scholars and policymakers continued to see the alliance as a pivotal component of security in East Asia, but feared that new steps had to be taken in order to reinvigorate the alliance and safeguard its future.

In a presentation to the 1st ROK-U.S. West Coast Strategic forum held in Seoul in December 2006, Daniel Sneider, associate director for research at the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, called for a need to "re-imagine" the alliance and look to NATO as an example of how alliances created under a Cold War framework could remain viable in the 21st century. The common solution proposed by alliance advocates was the expansion of alliance capabilities beyond the military. Scott Snyder of the Asia Foundation aptly points out viewing alliances as zero-sum arrangements incapable of evolving beyond Cold War security needs is a mentality entrenched in Cold War thinking. Utilizing the strong relationship built on the history of mutual interests and shared values, Snyder sees much possibility for expanded cooperation between the United States and South Korea on global issues such as climate change, pandemics, counterterrorism, and energy security to bolster alliance ties.

A World without the U.S.-ROK Alliance?

In September 2007, the National Bureau of Asian Research held a conference titled, "A World without the U.S.-ROK Alliance?" In discussing alternative futures, conference participants came to several shared conclusions—many of which underscore the implausibility of either the United States or South Korea terminating the alliance in the near future. Replacing the full range of military capabilities gained through the alliance would be very difficult and costly for South Korea. Such costs could pose substantial barriers to South Korea's growth and integration, which would be to the detriment of the United States as well. Furthermore, the contribution of USFK to the defense of South Korea covers a wide range of fields where South Korea falls short on its own. These include: reconnaissance and intelligence satellites, strike capabilities, early warning

analysis, and special operations capabilities. It is estimated that South Korea would need to increase its defense budget tenfold in order to fill all the holes that USFK is responsible for under the current bilateral security arrangement. Such budgetary and capability consequences underscore the bottom line of the alliance for South Korea. Not only are these hurdles to long-term attenuation of the alliance, but they may also be an important point of debate and political liability for Lee, whose conservative base opposes OPCON transfer.

While the shortfalls outlined by the conference point to the probable difficulties the transfer of operational controls will face, fears that the transfer and subsequent disbandment of the CFC could undermine alliance ties should be allayed by the intrinsic operational dependency of the South Korea military. Lee Jong-sup of the American Policy Division in the ROK Ministry of Defense estimates that South Korea procures 70 to 80 percent of its weapons from the United States in order to ensure interoperability within the alliance. South Korea is also the fifth-largest consumer of U.S. defense goods according to the Direct Commercial Sales Export Authorizations for Fiscal Year 2007. The OPCON transfer may lessen the need for interoperability, but any significant changes in weapons procurement will be gradual as equipment, budgetary, operational, and institutional norms have been entrenched in the half-century-long alliance structure. Simply put, while challenges lay ahead, strategic and institutional identities and perceptions created through the history of the alliance pose large hurdles to actually challenge the core of the alliance.

III. LONG-TERM CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS: ASIA AND THE ALLIANCE

Dynamic Changes in Northeast Asia

The challenges to American hegemony and the accelerated transformation of international politics precipitated by the 2008 financial crisis leave the possibility for fundamental shifts in the economic and security architectures that affect the current U.S.-ROK alliance. While the impact of the crisis still remains to be judged, the crisis has indeed created the potential for significant shifts in the regional and international order. In particular, the case of the trilateral relationship between China, Japan, and South Korea is an indication of how such crises can trigger pragmatic efforts for cooperation and deepened regional ties. As David Kang, director of the Korean Studies Institute at the University of Southern California, noted in a 2008 article entitled, *South Korea's Not-So-*

Sharp Right Turn, the region has changed more in the past decade than it did during the entire Cold War.

The development of the China-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship has been driven heavily by crises and a growing number of shared interests. The 1997-98 Asian financial crisis served as the primary catalyst not only for greater regional economic cooperation, but for the nascent foundation of a trilateral institutional architecture as well. The crisis demonstrated the vulnerability of Asia's small open economies to sudden financial shock and moreover exposed the wider region to the ensuing financial contagion. In the aftermath of the crisis, the region-centered drive to prevent such a recurrence spurred talks of an Asian Monetary Fund and a Northeast Asian Development Bank in Japan and South Korea, respectively, while nebulous ideas for pan-Asian economic integration reemerged concretely in the form of ASEAN+3 (APT) and various currency and bond initiatives.

In reference to the crisis nearly a decade ago, Henry Kissinger observed that although mutual suspicions and levels of development varied too greatly to permit the Asian equivalent of a European Union, Asian countries unwilling to accept such vulnerabilities would in the face of "another significant crisis in Asia or in the industrial democracies" accelerate efforts to gain greater control over their economic and political destinies. Indeed, as Kissinger predicted, the 2008 global financial crisis led to a spate of coordinated efforts between China, Japan, and South Korea, most notably the first independent trilateral summit meeting in 2008 in which the three parties agreed to expand bilateral swap arrangements and establish a regularized Tripartite Governors' Meeting among the three central banks. Such visible and historically significant trilateral cooperation initiatives, though prompted by crisis, have been advanced through a decade-long development of multilayered frameworks formed through APT, Track II mechanisms, and issue-specific areas.

Historical animosity and great power politics impeded political cooperation and economic integration. However, since the late 1990s, Northeast Asia has exhibited a growing interest in political and economic cooperation. On the heel of the Asian financial crisis, the informal breakfast meeting on the sidelines of the APT summit in 1999 marked the first meeting among the heads of China, Japan, and South Korea in modern times. Since then, the meetings have been held every year and have served as the forum for the development of formal institutional mechanisms and closer trilateral cooperation. In 2003, based on the shared initiative presented in the first APT summit, the three leaders issued

the Joint Declaration on the Promotion of Tripartite Cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea. The declaration established the Three-Party Committee, made up of the three foreign ministers and tasked to jointly study, plan, and coordinate trilateral cooperation in 14 areas such as trade, energy, environmental protection, and infectious disease.

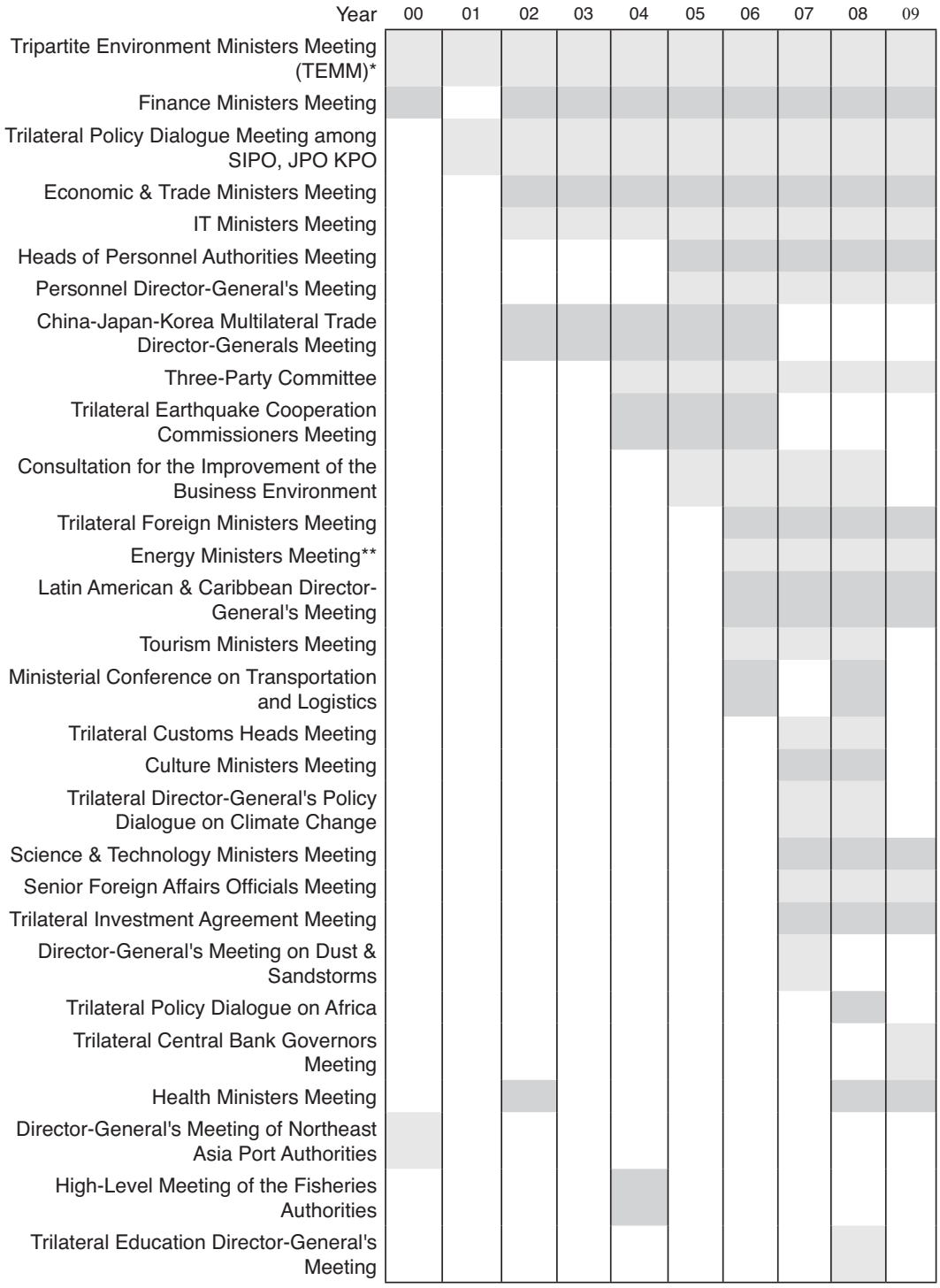
Despite political tension and bouts of anti-Japanese demonstrations in both China and South Korea, beyond the sensationalist narrative of rising regional nationalism and escalation of conflict stemming from bitter memories of disputed history lay the steady government interactions across wide-ranging issues. Issue-specific ministerial and director-general meetings regarding finance and the environment have been held regularly since 2000, and have expanded to issues such as Africa policy, trade, IT, transportation, and earthquake cooperation in spite of periods of deteriorating higher-level relations in 2001 and 2005. As the figure below illustrates, trilateral exchanges have not only expanded to encompass wide-ranging issues, but have also increased in frequency and regularity.

To be sure, the development of such trilateral meetings is far from any indication that Northeast Asia is on the track to economic and political integration in the near to long-term future. However, the impact of the financial crises and the skepticism regarding American economic hegemony they bred, combined with the growing economic interdependence among China, Japan, and South Korea, all point to the potential for the reconfiguration of these regional powers into a smaller, albeit more formidable, Northeast Asian bloc working in close cooperation. Given their realized and potential economic and military capacity as well as their amassed foreign reserves, a China-Japan-ROK trilateral relationship based on greater consultation and trust could become a "new international actor" with the ability to challenge the current international order.

Trade and Asian Regionalism

Despite some skepticism about China's increasing power, Sino-Korean economic ties are growing deeper. Korean Embassy officials spoke of a time stretching back to 1965 when South Korea's largest trade partner unquestionably remained the United States. Just six years ago in 2003, China surpassed the United States as South Korea's number-one trade partner. Currently, the United States is fourth. Free trade agreements among ASEAN and other countries in the region are evoking ambitious concepts of institutionalized Asian communities. To be sure, the developments in Asia are nascent, and widely disparate political,

Figure 1. China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation, 2000-2009



Source: Trilateral Cooperation Cyber Secretariat, http://211.47.188.122/

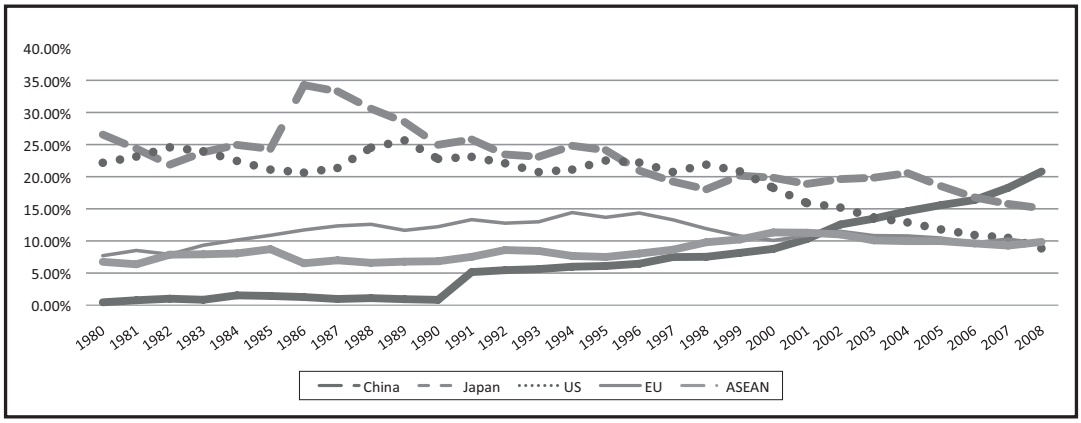
* Meeting regularly since 1999.

** There is no independent trilateral ministerial level consultation meeting. Instead, the dialogue is part of the Five-Party Ministeral Round Table Meeting on Energy with the US and India.

*** There are also Director-General's Meetings for Science and Technology, IT, and Public Safety.

economic, and cultural backgrounds impose barriers to integration that are not easy to overcome. It is not uncommon for the recent flourish of Asian regionalism to be met with skepticism. In an October 28 editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*, Razeen Sally, director of the European Centre for International Political Economy in Brussels, deemed the recent buzz in Asia as "Asian hype." However, the annual dialogues are slowly but surely building an institutional history. While security architectures are far from discussion, the economic ties are creating a momentum towards greater integration. The evolving Asian order is built on the gradual emergence of a regional security community and growing multilateral architecture based on a series of increasingly shared norms about interstate relations and security.

Figure 2. Percentage of Total Imports to South Korea, 1980-2008



South Korea's Choice

The discussion about an evolving Asia, and China's rise in particular, inevitably posits a dichotomous framework for South Korea's political and security options in the context of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Victor Cha presents two notional paths, "Anchored Korea" and "Korea Adrift," for South Korea's strategic choice. In the first, Korea is allied with the United States, supporting liberal democratic and free-market principles, while in the second choice, alliance relations are deteriorating as Korea pursues China as a new patron, regionally aligning with China while isolating Japan. Deepening ties with China and the rest of Asia are not mutually exclusive of a robust alliance with the United States. Indeed, the current developments challenge Cha's notional paths and the very definition of an "Anchored" Korea and a Korea "Adrift".

Korean Embassy officials recounted the crossroads at which South Korea stood under the Roh administration. Turning to China and strengthening the Sino-Korean relationship at the expense of a U.S.-ROK relationship was a dominant stream of discussion in reviewing the long-term strategy for South Korea's external relations. The big strategic decision came with the realization that as South Korea faced new, interconnected, and global challenges, the most effective partner in addressing such issues, and thus South Korea's national interests, was the United States. The concerted effort to negotiate the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was motivated in large part after this strategic decision to further cement South Korean ties with the United States.

Lee referred to Seoul's hosting of the G20 summit next year as an example of the country's ever-upgraded global status. "The hosting of the G20 summit reflects that South Korea now stands in the center of the global stage beyond the Asian region." In a 2009 speech in commemoration of the 61st anniversary of the founding of the South Korean armed forces, Lee called for building of a "highly efficient and multifunctional" military to support his administration's "Global Korea" policy. The Lee Myung-bak administration's report issued by the presidential transition committee outlined the overall themes in the area of national security and foreign policy. The report identified the new government's intent to construct a "Global Korea" with efforts to advance international cooperation, trade policy, and the creation of a new peace structure on the Korean Peninsula. Recommendations put emphasis on broadening the horizon of Korea's forging policy in line with the trend of globalization. In effect, this report reflects the Lee administration's determination to reach out to the world as a middle economic power and build mutually beneficial relations with countries throughout the world. The ambitious effort to raise Korea's global status also requires actions that are commensurate with a "global" power. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) rate of official development assistance (ODA) is often cited as a reliable barometer—a measure that the ROK intends to meet. This is in contrast to Roh, whose emphasis was on "self-reliance" in foreign policy and national security focused on freeing Korea from the traditional Cold War alliance structure. Playing a "balancing role to help ensure peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia" and improving relations with North Korea and China was seen as the means to pursue this "self-reliant" diplomacy.

Certainly, the regional approach for South Korea has a historical and natural rationale. Regionalism guarantees South Korea a seat at the table, which is crucial as the region finds increasing convergence of functional, political, and

economic issues. Moreover, the regional approach is a valuable tool for policy coordination on North Korea, and in many ways vital to securing the economic and geopolitical interests.

Yet, South Korea's "globalist impulse," as Scott Snyder puts it, cannot allow it to simply follow a one-track regional path. Its leadership of the G20 in 2010, determination to increase ODA, and plans to expand its peacekeeping forces are components of a concerted effort to upgrade South Korea's global visibility and role. Lee seeks to restore the U.S.-ROK relationship as a priority because the alliance with the United States falls squarely within this strategic vision. The U.S. alliance and many of its shared interests, values, and goals provide a launching point or foundation for these globalist ambitions.

IV. RECONCEPTUALIZING ASIA POLICY

U.S. Role in Asia

The rising role of Asia in the international order and the growing ambitions for greater regional integration do not portend a diminished role for the United States. As Seongho Sheen of the Brookings Institution notes, the United States has the ironic role of facilitating Asian cooperation even though its political influence is becoming less relevant. Though the United States, more preoccupied with the war on terror after the September 11 attacks, has become less engaged with Asia, its role within the context of growing Asian regionalism and integration remains crucial.

The Outdated Model of the Hub and Spoke

Victor Cha's analysis of South Korea's strategic choices with regard to the U.S. alliance and regional considerations points to the need for U.S. policymakers to refresh and revamp their conceptualization of Asia. Currently, Asian security arrangements run along bilateral lines from regional capitals to Washington. For decades, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, this "hub and spokes" model was conventional wisdom informing policymakers and shaping their view of the region.

In the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT), the institutional organization has adapted to meet the demands of a changing Asian

landscape. As trade has grown with China and the 1997 Asian financial crisis underscored the importance of greater regional cooperation, the Asian Bureau has grown larger in an institution where the management of the U.S. alliance dominated. Within the Asia bureau, offices such as the China division have expanded, while new divisions such as Northeast Asia Cooperation have been added. In effect, South Korea's evolving concept and attitudes towards the region have been augmented by institutional changes that allow for more flexible and regional policy approaches.

The United States, on the other hand, has no policy or apparatus that is oriented towards regionalization. Instead, the United States is driven more by its own global interests, with regionalism seen as a means to achieve these goals. The U.S. interaction with Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is an example of how U.S. global interests such as counterterrorism are presented in a regional setting to garner support. Regional institutions (or as Snyder refers to it, the U.S. "hanger" from which the interest du jour is hung) are not seen in a broader regional policy context apart from their utility to promote a U.S. global agenda. This is slowly changing, however, under the Obama administration.

During the president's first tour of Asia in November, he articulated U.S. policy towards Asia in a speech delivered in Tokyo. The speech indicated Washington's intention to refocus its efforts on improving ties with Asian countries. At the end of the 28-minute speech, Obama stated, "As America's first Pacific president, I promise you that this Pacific nation will strengthen and sustain our leadership in this vitally important part of the world." His stance was based on the notion that the collaboration between Asian countries is necessary to properly address such global issues as nuclear nonproliferation, as well as U.S. domestic concerns, including the combat situation in Afghanistan and the recovery of the U.S. economy.

As though to emphasize the importance of Southeast Asia, an ASEAN-U.S. summit was held on the sidelines of APEC. Combining ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and China is, perhaps, a tacit recognition of the geographical region of East Asia as the arena for global economics and politics in Obama's diplomacy. His stated preference for multilateralism was explained by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at last July's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) where she stated her intention to strive for a "multi-partner," not a "multipolar" world.

V. CONCLUSION

Since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the recognition that Asia, and Northeast Asia in particular, holds strategic regional interests that require closer cooperation among nations, despite contentious histories, has translated into gradual cooperative efforts to build a nascent institutional structure to address a multitude of functional issues. While the ties between China, Japan, South Korea, and indeed the whole of Asia remain tenuous, the growing trade and economic interdependence throughout the region have buttressed these efforts. The rapid rise of China has also contributed to the spurt of greater regional integration. The pronouncements of Japan's new Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama's "East Asian Community," though fraught with vagueness, are in part a sign and recognition of the significant transformation currently underway in Asia. The U.S.-ROK alliance stands at the cusp of an evolving Asia. Though Lee's renewed emphasis on the U.S.-ROK relationship secures the short- to mid-term status of the alliance, neither the United States nor South Korea can ignore the potential implications of this changing regional architecture. The United States will have to accommodate greater discussion of the potential structure of an East Asian regional architecture within governmental policy arenas while also recognizing that maintaining a U.S. presence in Asia will require far more effort and attention than before. For the U.S.-ROK alliance and for South Korea, the strategic decision is not a zero-sum dichotomy between Asia and the United States. However, the alliance is under-institutionalized in areas outside of the military. The military alliance provides a prime foundation for cooperation beyond security. Adapting to the emerging regional changes will require a more flexible alliance.

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