

The U.S.-ROK Alliance: Something's Got to Give?

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Introduction

As we all know, the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK) celebrated its fiftieth birthday last year. For most of that lifespan, it has stood as one of the most successful relationships forged out of the cold war. From the American perspective, the relationship has played a key role in preserving a forward-based, strategic presence in Northeast Asia and, as a crucial frontline vis-a-vis the U.S.-Japan alliance. But it has also provided a protective security wing, under which, because of the hard work of the Korean people, South Korea has developed into an emerging democracy and one of the world's largest economies.

Given recent events, most experts have wondered whether the alliance will survive until 2013, its 60th birthday. These events already are well known, although not well understood. They include a perception and policy gap between Washington and Seoul over how to handle North Korea (and the future of that country), the rise of Korean nationalism and anti-American sentiment, China's growing role on the Korean peninsula, Japan's uncertain future and American preoccupation with the new security threat posed by international terrorism. Whether these developments represent long-term trends or just blips on the radar screen remains unclear. But the answer to this question has direct and dramatic implications for the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

Beyond the evolving domestic and regional environment, discussions of the future often ignore the fact that there are a broad range of models for a "security relationship" (if not an alliance) that might have relevance in the U.S.-South Korean context. Many experts on Northeast Asia tend to focus on the continuation of the alliance or its end. In fact, these other models are not hard to identify if one examines the plethora of close security relations between the United States and a host of other countries in Asia and the Middle East. Indeed, eventually they may be more relevant--and serve the interests of both the United States and South Korea--in 2013 than the current formal U.S.-ROK alliance relationship.

This paper will attempt to clarify the range of future possibilities for the U.S.-ROK security relationship. It will do so through examining possible domestic and regional

trends that could alter the regional security environment, and U.S.-ROK interests, in 2013. The paper will then briefly look at the alternative models for a future security relationship between the United States and South Korea, based in part on relationships with other countries in Asia and the Middle East.

A Changing Domestic and Regional Environment

Discussions about the future of U.S.-ROK security relations tend towards the extremes, either that the current alliance structure with the requisite American military presence, perhaps reduced, should continue, or be terminated. Both of these views are based on different readings of recent developments that seem to undermine the future of the alliance. On the one hand, some would argue that these developments can be managed properly by Washington and Seoul and thus the alliance, in a somewhat similar form to today, can be perpetuated. Others see these developments as trends that are essentially unmanageable and therefore the beginning of the end of the alliance. A more objective view would be that it is unclear whether these developments represent trends or blips on the radar screen.

A quick survey of some of key events that may shape the environment for the bilateral relationship in 2013 reveals a wide range of uncertainty.

-The future of North Korea: At one extreme, the six-party talks may result in a diplomatic breakthrough, putting the participants on a path to the complete, verifiable disarmament of the North's nuclear program. Subsequent diplomatic arrangements could produce detente between the two Koreas (perhaps even conventional arms reductions) and a benign security environment on the peninsula. At the other extreme, a failed six-party talks and the steady accretion by Pyongyang of nuclear material and weapons would, at the very least, perpetuate continued tensions and block normalization. A third alternative that hovers in the background is the possible collapse of North Korea followed by the creation of a united Korea.

-Domestic political developments in the United States and South Korea: While the rise of Korean nationalism and anti-American sentiment is undeniable, disagreement remains over whether this is a strong trend or just a momentary flare-up. Indeed, polling data seems to indicate that anti-American sentiments remain in flux, suggesting that they might be managed. On the other hand, sentiment could continue to grow and have a severe negative impact on the future of the alliance. In the U.S., while support for the alliance remains strong (in spite

of statements by neoconservatives), there are also poor levels of awareness about Korea and soft attitudes about the future of the alliance. This state of affairs could be sharply affected by future developments, easily moving dramatically in either a positive or negative direction.

-Possible shifting American priorities in the Post 9/11 Era: September 11 brought into sharp focus the threat posed by terrorist groups and the danger that they may secure weapons of mass destruction. The pursuit of this priority as practiced by the George W. Bush Administration has undermined traditional alliances and heightened concerns about American unilateralism. In the future, the United States may put more resources into dealing with potential terrorist breeding grounds (such as Southeast Asia), greater emphasis on partners who can provide assistance in fulfilling that mission, and often act unilaterally in the name of national security. Or the pendulum might swing back, as Washington tries to strike more of a balance between its new priority and traditional interests and as it recognizes that unilateralism--perceived or real--can be counterproductive.

-U.S.-Chinese relations: Relations took a dramatic turn for the better in the aftermath of 9/11. Washington now views Beijing as an ally in its war against terrorism and, in the regional context, as a key partner in solving the North Korean nuclear crisis. Moreover, Beijing seems to have adopted a long-term policy emphasizing its "peaceful rising" to calm concerns in the United States and other countries that it may present a threat because of its growing economic and military strength. This warming of relations could continue if bilateral cooperation proves successful, economic ties grow, the two countries successfully navigate the dangerous waters of dealing with the Taiwan problem and are able to collaborate on a peaceful solution of the North Korean problem. Or relations could revert to the previous pattern of blowing hot and cold, aggravated by emerging differences over how to deal with North Korea and continued tensions over Taiwan.

-Chinese-Korean relations: Beijing's political, economic and cultural ties with Seoul have dramatically expanded. Moreover, so has its role in promoting inter-Korean reconciliation, as evidenced by the recent six-party talks. While culture, economics and geographic propinquity could pull the Korean peninsula away from the United States and towards its Asian neighbor, there remain important factors that may limit the relationship and, indeed, could have a negative impact. For example, in spite of rapidly developing economic ties, Beijing's growing competitiveness could have an increasingly negative impact on Seoul's export

industries. Second, there may be natural limits on how closely a liberal democracy like South Korea can tie itself to non-democracies such as China. Finally, China has shown territorial ambitions towards Korea in the past although it is unclear whether that might surface again in the future.

-Japan's future: Uncertainties abound; Tokyo's economy has suffered from a prolonged economic slump--with potential implications for its political influence in the region--and its population is steadily aging, only aggravating these concerns. U.S.-Japan relations seem close yet could undergo stress in the future if Washington presses Tokyo to address its economic problems. The rise of Japanese nationalism is another danger if Tokyo fails to regain a sense of confidence and frustration mounts. Key remaining questions include; 1) what are the implications of a Japan more assertive in international affairs but more frustrated at home; 2) how will Japan deploy its advanced military capabilities (such as helicopter carriers, missile defenses and air refueling tankers); and, 3) how committed will Japan be to its alliance with the United States should its ability to contribute substantially to the alliance decline?

Thinking about Alternative Models

Faced with this myriad of uncertainties, any reasonable analyst would have to conclude that predicting the future of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia in 2013 is a tricky business. At best, a broad range of possibilities might apply. For example, a straight line scenario would posit a continued North Korean threat, the maintenance of close U.S. relations with South Korea while Washington also pursues the war on terrorism, a calm U.S.-Chinese relationship (with nagging concerns that it might take a turn for the worse), manageable Korean nationalism, and a more "normal" Japan which still has close ties with Washington. At one extreme would be a benign security environment in which the North Korean threat disappears (either through detente or reunification) and friendly relations between the U.S. and China are solidified with Japan also on board. At the other extreme might be a more threatening North Korea--maybe armed with nuclear weapons--a U.S.-Chinese relationship plagued by renewed differences, a rocky Chinese-Korean relationship and an assertive Japan creating concerns among its neighbors.

While predicting the future of Northeast Asia in 2013 is difficult, one thing is clear. There are scenarios under which the current alliance between the United States and South Korea may no longer be necessary. Something akin to the status quo may still be needed in the straight-line scenario mentioned above. In a more unstable security environment--perhaps characterized by a nuclear North Korea--it might be in the interests of the United

States and South Korea to buttress the current bilateral relationship. But in a more benign security environment, there may no longer be a need to maintain a formal alliance, and certainly not the current level of military integration and interaction.

If that proves to be the case, the bilateral relationship does not necessarily have to end. Rather, it may be transformed into another type of security relationship. The United States has a broad range of such relationships ranging from formal alliances to what one author has called “dalliances,” each tailored to fit the prevailing domestic and regional environment. In general, these relationships consist of a number of components, the combination of which make the existence and the level of closeness of the relationship clear to all. These components include; 1) a mutual defense commitment in the form of legally binding documents or political statements by authoritative officials; 2) other bilateral agreements, for example in the form of memoranda of understanding providing a framework for defense cooperation; 3) the stationing of military forces on the territory of the partner; 4) joint planning for and control of military operations; 5) joint training and exercises; 6) the pre-positioning of military equipment as well as base access agreements; 7) port calls by naval vessels; and, 8) defense industrial cooperation, arms sales and military assistance. Typically--although not always--formal alliances include most if not all of these components while a “dalliance” might only consist of a few, for example, port visits.

What are the alternatives to the current U.S.-ROK alliance in the context of a changed regional and domestic political environment, assuming both countries want such a relationship to continue. A survey of U.S. ties with countries in Asia and the Middle East reveals a variety of potential models

Option 1. A Comprehensive Alliance: This option, based on the current U.S.-ROK alliance seems to be the objective for strong supporters of a security relationship. The new alliance would be designed to both protect Korea against other potentially aggressive powers and to serve some vaguely defined “regional stability” mission (assuming the threat from North Korea or even that country had disappeared). The two countries would also cooperate in a variety of other non-traditional security functions including peacekeeping, counter-terrorism and counter-drug smuggling. American ground forces would still be present in Korea (albeit much reduced to maybe 3,000 combat troops). The Combined Forces Command might evolve more into a structure for joint planning.

A variation on this model--which these advocates seem loathe to consider but might be relevant--would be to continue the legal tie without a formal U.S. troop presence. Some planners believe that the only requirement for the U.S. military on the peninsula in case

of detente or reunification with Pyongyang might be access to a major airfield. Rather, the bilateral relationship would rest on a web of other activities such as joint training and exercises, defense industrial cooperation, arms sales, and port visits.

Option 2. The U.S.-Israel Model. While the two countries have a long history of close relations--the product of a deep political and cultural affinity as well as a convergence of national interests--they have no formal mutual defense tie. Over the years, the idea of Israel joining NATO or establishing a bilateral treaty with the United States has surfaced periodically but has never been seriously considered, in part because of the likely negative impact on U.S. relations with the Arab world.

Nevertheless, America's commitment to Israel's survival has been clear for decades through both the statements of its leaders and its actions (such as material support provided during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War). Since 1971, Washington has provided Israel with an average assistance package of \$2 billion per year, two-thirds of which has been military assistance. More formal political commitments first began in 1981 through a memorandum of understanding establishing a framework for continued consultation and cooperation on the national security of both countries and to confront the Soviet threat. In 1983, a joint political-military committee was formed to implement its provisions followed in 1984 by the beginning of joint air and sea exercises. Also, the United States began constructing facilities to stockpile military equipment in Israel. A 1988 memorandum was signed for Israeli participation in American programs to develop anti-missile missiles. That same year, Israel was designated a major non-NATO ally, giving it preferential treatment in bidding for Department of Defense (DOD) contracts and lower prices on U.S. defense equipment. Tel Aviv has been a major recipient of major weapons systems and military technology for decades.

Option 3. U.S. security relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Sometimes called "informal" or "ambivalent" alliances," American security ties with these states also do not rest on legal commitments to mutual defense, but rather an extensive web of bilateral defense activities. These ties, however, are more politically fragile than those with Israel.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, this relationship has fluctuated due to the changing domestic political and regional security picture. Saudi Arabia has been in an "informal alliance" with the United States since the end of World War II when U.S. forces built the Dhahran Airfield which was once a dispersal base for Strategic Air Command nuclear bombers. That high-visibility presence ended in the early 1960's in response to the rise of Arab nationalism but the relationship continued during the next few decades with visits by American forces, the location of a U.S. military training mission in Saudi Arabia and

frequent purchases of major U.S. weapons systems. The Gulf War of 1990 signaled a new, closer phase in the informal alliance with the buildup of American forces on Saudi soil and the subsequent heavier reliance on a forward U.S. presence (facilities including the Prince Sultan Air Base with more than 100 U.S. aircraft, the pre-positioning of equipment and exercises) to support reinforcements in a crisis. In the latest phase, the U.S. has shifted once again, moving its aircraft and the bulk of roughly 4,500 troops to Qatar where there are unlikely to be host country constraints on the uses of those forces.

America's security relationship with Egypt has been extensive since 1978 Camp David accord given that country's role as a regional leader. U.S.-Egyptian military ties are a key link in the bilateral relationship that also sends a signal of moderation and deterrence to the Middle East. The web of defense ties includes over flight and transit rights (through the Suez Canal), the sharing of intelligence on regional developments, arms sales and training that have resulted in the thorough modernization of the Egyptian armed forces and the conduct of joint exercises. Operation Bright Star, hosted by Egypt, is the largest exercise conducted overseas by the United States. Yet, in spite of these close ties, the relationship has not flourished because it is clearly not a relationship between equals and because there remains some discomfort in Egypt with the American "embrace," due to continued problems in the region. According to a recent poll, only 6 percent of Egyptians have a favorable view of the United States.

Option 4. U.S. security relations with the Philippines and Thailand Both countries had extensive security relationships with the United States--mutual defense commitments as well as the presence of American forces--that shrunk over time but have recently been revived with the emergence of new regional threats, particularly the war on terrorism.

In the case of the Philippines, a mutual defense treaty was signed in 1954 but the large scale presence of American forces ended in 1992, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when a treaty of friendship, cooperation and security was rejected and American forces withdrew from their extensive bases. The relationship began to revive in 1999 with the signing of a Visiting Forces Agreement and the renewal of joint exercises amidst uncertainties including the creeping assertiveness of China in the South China Sea. That revival accelerated after September 11 as a new front in the war on terrorism was opened in Southeast Asia and in the Philippines given its ongoing fight with Muslim militant groups. American troops now conduct joint exercises and training focused on counter-terrorism and Washington provides assistance in helping the Philippines acquire new military equipment

In the case of Thailand, the end of the Vietnam War brought an end to the large-scale presence of American military forces. But Washington has continued to provide military equipment, essential supplies and military training programs in the United States and in Thailand through the presence of a small advisory group. In addition, the two countries have developed a vigorous joint exercise program, including all the services of each nation, averaging 20 exercises per year. Given the growing importance of Southeast Asia in the war on terrorism, this year's large-scale Cobra Gold exercise included an anti-terrorist component. There has also been speculation that the United States has approached Thailand about the possibility of pre-positioning military equipment in that country for regional operations.

Option 5. The United States-Singapore Model. Singapore does not have a formal mutual defense tie with the United States although the two recently began discussing a "Framework Agreement for the Promotion of a Strategic Partnership on Defense and Security." It would expand cooperation in specific fields such as counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation, joint military exercises and training and defense technology.

But Singapore has managed to discreetly create close security relations through weaving a web of cooperation that fits in nicely with its interest in maintaining an U.S. military presence in the region to counterbalance China. Singapore hosts the U.S. Seventh Fleet Logistic Command (including 200 American personnel and dependents), has constructed a new pier at Changi that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers, allows the US Air Force to use its Paya Lebar airfield for short-term rotations, purchases major weapons systems from the United States, carries out regular joint air force, naval and army training exercises, and hosts about one hundred American ship visits per year for maintenance, repairs, supplies and crew rest and recreation

Conclusion

Given great uncertainties about the state of domestic support for the bilateral security relationship as well as the regional environment in 2013, any number of possible U.S.-ROK ties other than that alliance might both be possible and serve the interests of Washington and Seoul. Rather than focus on whether the current alliance can be maintained or is in danger of collapse, analysts should try to think more systematically about the future of the security relationship. That means not only considering the range of scenarios for 2013 but also rigorous study of other forms of security relationships that fall short of the current U.S.-ROK model. Current examples include a wide range of other American ties with countries as diverse as Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines,

Thailand and Singapore. It may be that aspects of all of these relationships could have some utility in this study of the future of U.S.-ROK ties.