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A FUTURE OF U.S.-KOREA ALLIANCE: TOWARD A MATURE ALLIED PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE IN NORTHEAST ASIA AND BEYOND

Kun Young Park

Professor

The Catholic University of Korea

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I. Introduction

Since its inception in 1953, the U.S.-Korea alliance has been a great success in terms of preventing a war on Korean peninsula and promoting economic development and democracy in Korea. The alliance has effectively served U.S. strategic, political, and economic interests as well. But, it is also true that the bilateral relations have recently experienced turbulence due in part to the inability of the two allies to update the alliance reflecting ample security and other changes including the end of the Cold War that have highlighted the significance of newer notions of security, a shift in the balance of power on Korean peninsula, a democratized and more autonomous Korea, a new America that has become more attentive to terrorist and asymmetric threats since 9/11, and the rise of China.

The gap between the reality and the existing alliance framework demands a serious discussion on the part of the U.S. and Korea of the readjustment of the alliance that would better serve both nations' interests. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a series of policy recommendations that would help make the U.S.-Korea alliance lead peace in Northeast Asia and beyond.

II. Policy Recommendations

Policy recommendation 1: Stabilize and strengthen “political” relations between the U.S. and Korea.

In order to lead global and regional peace, it seems necessary for the two allies to stabilize and strengthen their political relations. One of the core elements comprising the political relations is anti-American sentiment in Korea, and the essence of such sentiment is related to Seoul's perception that the U.S. historically has been callous to or has shown too little respect for Korea's interests. One example is the 1980 Kwangju incident, in which the Korean military junta ordered soldiers to fire on demonstrators protesting the military government's implementation of martial law. The U.S. was considered an accomplice in the massacre because it failed to act precisely when South Korean citizens needed it most. This failure by the Americans to use their influence for democratic and humane principles cut deep into the “Korean psyche.” Ordinary people opposing the military dictatorship, not just leftist radicals, began to seriously doubt the American commitment to the ideals of freedom, democracy, and human rights as the U.S. maintained a close relationship with authoritarian rulers while staying away from angry Korean citizens.

Another example of U.S. callousness toward Korean interests is U.S. policy during the 1994 North Korea nuclear crisis. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry said in 2003, the “crisis was the only time in my tenure as Secretary of Defense that we came close to a major war. We were willing to risk war because we believed that a nuclear weapon production program in North Korea posed an unacceptable security risk.” South Koreans felt that North Korea was very much responsible and

understand that the U.S. eventually settled on diplomacy, but the fact that the U.S. was risking their lives without properly consulting them was shocking and outrageous to them. This incident is one of the reasons that many Koreans are beginning to feel that the U.S., not North Korea, is the main threat to their security.

As indicated above, the essence of anti-American sentiment in Korea is the U.S.'s lack of respect for Korea and its interest. But, what is more important to understand is that the U.S.'s callousness has generated greater resentment among the Korean people when it was contrasted by its greater respect for Japan and its interest, or when it has promoted the Japanese interest at the expense of Korea's. One historical example of poor treatment by Washington is the Taft-Katsura Agreement of July 29, 1904, by which the U.S. effectively nullified the Chemulpo Treaty, the "first treaty" between Korea and the U.S., and gave Japan a free hand on the peninsula. After securing U.S. consent, Japan moved fast and made Korea a protectorate. Unaware of the secret agreement, King Kojong sent Homer Hulbert, an American advisor to the Korean court, to Washington to seek U.S. aid under the Chemulpo Treaty. President Roosevelt refused to see Hulbert. This historical event remains very clear in Koreans' thinking, and has been one of the key subjects in Korean national history textbooks. It has recently received renewed attention as the Bush administration's "Make-Japan-England-in-the-Far-East" policy is perceived in Korea as emboldening Tokyo to play a very assertive role in the region.

A more contemporary example is the U.S.'s silence over Japan's insult to Korea and the U.S.-Korea alliance. In early 2005, Korea's public was in an uproar when it learned that a Japanese vice foreign minister told a group of Korean MPs that Japan was reluctant to share American intelligence about North Korea with the South, because the U.S. did not trust South Korea. His remark was considered to have a menacing intention to drive a wedge between the U.S. and Korea. Many Koreans expected to hear from the U.S. that what Mr. Yachi said was not true and that his remark would not contribute to the betterment of the U.S.-Korea relations, not to mention Korea-Japan relations. But, Koreans were disappointed at and were perplexed over the U.S.'s silence, to say the least.

The U.S.'s support for Japan at the expense of Korea, or its unbalanced attitude toward its allies in Northeast Asia will hurt political relations between the U.S. and Korea. And, therefore, it does not seem likely to serve the U.S.'s interest especially when the strategic importance of a re-unified Korea is considered. It seems possible (rather than probable) that a unified peninsula could "[align] itself with China, an emerging Asian superpower that the unified Korea would view as a counterbalance to former colonial master Japan." When a Congressional staffer said, "Korea is a ripe apple, swinging to fall on the lap of China," he was exaggerating the reality. But, it seems equally unreal if one would argue that the U.S. could continue to enjoy patron-client relations vis-à-vis Korea while sticking to its traditional policy toward its Northeast Asian allies. The U.S.'s better management of the relations between its allies in Northeast Asia will not only improve its political relations with Korea, but also serve its regional strategic interest.

The U.S. has used a tactic of “You don't want us there, we'll leave” when dealing with Korean anti-American demonstrations and it has worked quite well. This tactic may continue to work well as long as the current Korean perception of vulnerability remains unchanged. However, the problem with this tactic is that it would never change how Koreans feel about the U.S., their relations with Americans, and themselves. Furthermore, the U.S. needs to understand that a Korea it is dealing with is not a military dictatorship that desperately needed “external validation” by the U.S. due to its lack of political legitimacy. A democratic Korea has now become the 11th largest economy in the world, the 7th largest trading partner for the U.S., the 4th largest foreign holder of U.S. treasury securities. A younger generation that is more independent in its outlook and values has great influence on Korean politics.

Therefore, an effective way to fundamentally deal with anti-American sentiment in Korea is for the U.S. to gain a proper understanding of its sources and complexities and keep up with developments in a new and evolving Korea. A positive U.S. attitude toward the Korea's new self-confidence will enable Washington to design a more realistic Korea (and North Korea) policy and better promote its long-term strategic interests in Northeast Asia and beyond, together with a new, mature, and loyal Korea.

Policy recommendation 2: Remove ambiguities about the strategic flexibility of the USFK.

In charting the future of the alliance, perhaps the most crucial and controversial issue to be dealt with is the redefinition of the nature and the role of the USFK. The U.S. concept of “strategic flexibility” for USFK involves the possibility of the USFK—whose objective under the Mutual Defense Treaty has thus far been to deter a war on the peninsula—becoming an expeditionary force with the potential to intervene in regional military conflicts in which Korea fears it might be forced to be entangled as a U.S. ally. The U.S. and Korea began a series of discussions on this issue and they were able to reach an agreement on January 19, 2006. According to the joint statement, the two allies confirmed that “Korea, as an ally, fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces in Korea. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, the U.S. respects Korea position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of Korean people.”

Given that “the U.S.'s right to dispose its forces in and about the territory of Korea” is provided by the Mutual Defense Treaty and that it is “an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories” that brings into operation the *casus foederis* of the Treaty, a question arises as to whether this “political agreement”, as Korean government calls it, has any effective value in that it is in conflict with the Treaty, a higher-ordered bilateral agreement. Furthermore, the language describing the two nations' positions is so ambiguous as to allow each party to interpret it on its own terms. For example, Korea argues that the two clauses were included in the joint statement under “the assumption that the Korean peninsula would not be used as bases from which the USFK deploy to a theater of conflict in Northeast

Asia.” It is doubtful that the U.S. would agree with this interpretation. At least, the U.S. position on this is unclear at this point. Therefore, the two allies may have to further refine the agreement, and, if necessary, revise the Mutual Defense Treaty or create a new one. Assuming that Korea desires the continued presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula, and that the U.S. would continue to appreciate the strategic and other values of Korea as its ally in Northeast Asia, the following agreement would seem to be beneficial for both allies:

The United States and Korea acknowledge, on the one hand, that the role of the USFK should be broadened to include promotion of global security and meeting new common threats around the world, but, on the other, that this new strategic flexibility should not unnecessarily jeopardize the security of Korea. To that end, the two allies agree that the use of the USFK from bases in Korea and/or the flow of US forces into and out of Korea shall not jeopardize the security of Korea. In specific cases, the two sides shall jointly determine, through their respective constitutional processes, whether the use and/or deployment of the USFK will constitute a direct threat to the security of Korea.

The rationale behind acknowledging the necessity of a strategically flexible USFK is to demonstrate the strategic importance of the U.S.-Korea alliance through joint efforts to swiftly meet global security challenges and prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon that is hostile to both U.S. and Korea interests. The acknowledgement is basically in sync with the U.S. position that the USFK is in the end an American force and that the “strategic flexibility envisaged for the U.S. Forces in Korea is not a one-way street and the concept would allow the U.S. to deploy additional forces stationed in other regions to Korea in any emergency on the peninsula.” It would also be a precautionary and a reassuring measure for Korea in that it could contribute to mitigating the concerns in Seoul caused by the recent Chinese “Northeast Project” which Koreans tend to perceive as having an expansionist motive, and by the possibility of a Chinese takeover of North Korea in case of the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang.

The two allies should avoid the term “regional” so as not to unnecessarily provoke China and other countries in the region. The use of concepts such as “global security” and “new threats” would show that the U.S. is not anticipating a pre-destined clash with China.

The other principle governing the expansion of the USFK’s role is that expansion should not jeopardize the security of Korea, except when the territories of the U.S. was attacked. The U.S. and Korea shall determine whether the strategic flexibility of the USFK constitutes a direct threat to the security of Korea. The “joint determination” should not be construed as Korea’s inclination to veto the use of the

USFK from bases in Korea and/or the flow of U.S. forces into and out of Korea. What is important is the political confidence between the two nations and the U.S. global leadership respected throughout the world. The joint determination clause shall be a symbol of a mature partnership between the allies.

Policy recommendation 3: The U.S.- Korea alliance, with an expanded role, should be adapted to operate in close collaboration with a multilateral security regime seeking to prevent crises and maintain peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

The Mutual Defense Treaty between the U.S. and Korea, which is the basis of the alliance that authorizes the existence of the USFK, stipulates that the two nations “desired to strengthen their efforts for collective defense for the preservation of peace and security pending the development of a more comprehensive and effective system of regional security in the Pacific area.” More than a half century has passed since the signing of the treaty and the Cold War has ended; thus, the primary structural reason for the treaty no longer exists. It is time to think about the development of a comprehensive and effective system of multilateral regional security in Northeast Asia to replace the rigid alliance politics currently in place.

However, given the increasing probability of clashes between expansionist forces in the area and mistrust among the regional powers, the creation of a regional security system based on the concept of common/cooperative security and on abolishing the military alliances is not likely to receive strong support from the U.S. or Korea. A reasonable compromise, therefore, would involve the coexistence of the alliance system with a multilateral security institution. The product of the Helsinki process, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), can be used as a benchmark.

There are many complications in the institutionalization of multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Historical enmities, a lack of experience in multilateral coordination, and nationalist cultures are often cited as the main problems obstructing such collaboration. However, the more prevalent the obstacles are, the greater the need to collectively remove them. As the severe Cold War tension, exacerbated by nuclear and conventional arms races in Europe, helped invent the notion of common/cooperative security and led to the Helsinki process, the increased possibility of a serious conflict among major powers in Northeast Asia, for example over the North Korean nuclear threat or security in the Taiwan Strait, highlights the need for an effective regional security regime.

In addition to this obvious need, there are some recently emerging facilitating factors, including the generational change in the Chinese military. The younger officers of the People’s Liberation Army are “better educated and trained, spent time abroad, speak foreign languages, and do not evince the insular tendencies” of their seniors, who “spent their careers largely in regional field commands deep in the interior of China, have been socialized in a military institution and political culture that prizes discipline and secrecy, and thus do not appreciate the importance of defense transparency as a security-enhancing

measure.” Moreover, six major powers in Northeast Asia agreed at the conclusion of the fourth round of Six-Party Talks in 2005 that they “committed to joint efforts for lasting peace and stability in Northeast Asia” and would “explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation” in the region. A couple of months later, the U.S. and Korea noted at the Gyeongju summit meeting that “there was a common understanding among the participants in the Six-Party talks that the talks could develop into a regional multilateral security consultative mechanism once the North Korean nuclear issue is resolved.”

In Europe, coexistence of an alliance (NATO) and a multilateral security cooperation (OSCE) is the reality. The dynamic interactions between the two entities tend to lessen the impermeability of alliance politics and promote preventative diplomacy. The U.S.-Korea alliance, in close consultations and collaboration with multilateral security institution in Northeast Asia, would contribute significantly to reducing mistrust, misperception, misunderstanding, and miscommunication among the regional players and therefore enhance peace and stability in the area.

Policy recommendation 4: Create a unified front toward North Korea by institutionalizing a U.S.-Korea North Korea Policy Coordination Meeting that will produce a joint, systematic “bottom-up review” of North Korea policies.

The U.S. and Korea, while contributing together to the emergence of a new, peace-enhancing security structure in Northeast Asia, should work together to meet the security challenges currently threatening the regional peace and stability. A more pressing challenge is North Korea’s nuclear tinkering.

Securing effective coordination between the U.S. and Korea on North Korea policies is important in abating anti-American sentiment in Korea and in restoring and strengthening the bilateral relationship, not to mention the positive effect it could have on the North Korea problem. Many have argued that the drift in the alliance was caused, in part, by differing North Korea policies resulting from divergent interests. Korea’s fundamental interest is the preservation of stability that would lead to peaceful unification, whereas the U.S.’s primary interest is the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons on the peninsula.

However, elements no less important are the two allies’ differing perceptions on North Korea. The U.S. tends to regard North Korea as “evil,” “tyrannical,” and a “hellish nightmare,” while Korea seems to view it as dangerous, though frightened and fragile, and requiring a cautious and reassuring approach. This divergence may derive from the fact that Korea’s approach is based on a historical experience with the North and the U.S.’s attitude is based on a universalist and moralist philosophy.

In order to create a unified front that will increase the efficacy of its North Korea policy, and that will significantly alleviate confusion and tensions in the alliance, the U.S. and Korea should create what might be called a U.S.-Korea North Korea Policy Coordination Meeting, in which experts from all relevant departments, agencies, and Congressional (legislative) committees would participate. The body

would produce a joint, systematic “bottom-up review” of North Korea policies. One task would be to define a precise objective of their harmonized North Korea policy: for example, whether policy should or should not pursue the resolution of ‘non-nuclear problems’ at this point. The two allies should also reassess North Korea’s threat, conventional and non-conventional, and its intentions based on a ‘first-hand understanding’ of North Korea’s military power, economic conditions, its atypical political culture, and its authoritarian decision-making process.

With a unified front, the U.S. and Korea can “kill two birds with one stone.” The institutionalization of a North Korea Policy Coordination Meeting, if executed and managed under strong political leadership, will not only bring forth a more integrated and collaborative policy toward North Korea, but will also reduce communication errors and promote confidence between the U.S. and Korea in general, thereby helping to put the alliance back on track.

III. Conclusion

The U.S. has great stakes in the security dynamics of Northeast Asia, a region which is home to four of the world’s major economies, three of America’s major trading partners and, above all, five of the world’s strongest military powers. Korea, with its strategic location, strong economy, and unique position in resolving the North Korean nuclear dispute, has been and will continue to be critically important for the U.S. in this volatile region. Looking ahead, the impact of a unified Korea on the regional balance will be substantial. In a way, the U.S.-Korea alliance is a keystone in the regional security structure; without it, the U.S.-built structure will crumble.

However, the alliance has not kept up with the greatly changed political, security, and economic environment affecting both nations. This paper has constructed a framework of some policy suggestions designed to help the U.S. and Korea develop their alliance into a more mature partnership that would be realistic, stable, mutually beneficial, forward-looking, and peace-enhancing. The foundation for this framework can only be American respect for its Korean ally, demonstrating that the U.S. does not view Korea simply as a horse on the chessboard and that it will be happy to update the alliance relationship whenever needed.

An enhanced alliance will become one of the most effective and efficient means available to help promote U.S. and Korean interests, including global security, for the earlier years of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that although “the alliance is alive,” it is not self-sustaining. It must be continuously attended to and nurtured by both parties in order to be healthy, productive, and enduring.