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Panel 1 – Partnership in Peace: Foundations for the U.S.-R.O.K. Alliance

## **RETHINKING THE FUTURE OF THE ROK-US ALLIANCE**

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The attempt by a few radical Korean youths to tear down General MacArthur's statue in Incheon last summer, accusing him of being a "war criminal," provoked a palpable fury from the United States. General MacArthur, whose historic Inchon landing led the way to a decisive victory during the Korean War, has long been cherished as a symbol of American security commitment as well as glorifying the U.S. role in defending South Korea from communist North Korea's invasion. An assault on his statue is to essentially deny the history of the alliance and American sacrifice. Even liberal senator Hilary Clinton was critical of the incident, lamenting that South Koreans were suffering from "historical amnesia."

The incident is symptomatic of the more serious underlying issue of the shifting American perception on the merits of the alliance. Having North Korea as a common enemy bound Washington and Seoul together through close military ties, but recent inter-Korean rapprochement amidst the North Korean nuclear crisis has raised critical concerns on the future of the bilateral alliance. As neatly put forth by U.S. Congressman Henry Hyde, "If you need our help, please tell us who your enemy is"

Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute argues that there is no need to continue the bilateral alliance because South Korea exhibits an "ostentatious popular hostility towards the U.S. and official appeasement of North Korea," suggesting "an amicable separation, rather than a nasty divorce." Dennis P. Halpin, an influential congressional aide, goes even further by saying that "the body, the alliance, is laid out in the front of the room for all to view... All that remain is for the family to take a final view of the body before the undertaker then seals the coffin." In his view, a "siren's song of romantic ethnic reconciliation" is winning the hearts of South Koreans and undermining the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The accusations of historical amnesia and the primacy of a Korean nation over the alliance are not groundless, but nevertheless blown out of proportion. South Koreans have not forgotten American sacrifices and contributions, and the ROK's hostility toward the U.S. and appeasement of North Korea is unfounded. More importantly, the ROK-US alliance is still healthy enough not to warrant an early epitaph.

The present security and prosperity enjoyed by South Korea would never have materialized were it not for American blood and the alliance. The alliance with the U.S. and forward presence of its troops have assured South Korea of its security through a credible military deterrence against North Korea, and American economic assistance, cooperation and policy guidance proved to be one of the most vital factors in shaping the South Korean economic miracle.

American soft power also matters. South Koreans as a whole strongly endorse and emulate the universal values embodied in American culture and civilization. The quest for liberty, human rights and democracy, the rush to the United States for education, and the dominance of American intellectual paradigms in South Korean academic circles are all indicative of Korea's appreciation of American values and aspirations. Koreans may oppose certain U.S. foreign policies, but this should not be seen as a denial of and opposition to the U.S.

South Korea has been a faithful ally of the U.S., as South Korean soldiers fought alongside Americans in Vietnam, and more recently dispatched troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to support American causes and also joined American efforts to fight global terrorism. More importantly, South Korea has become the most credible and convincing evidence of successful American foreign intervention. The subject of praise by both Rice and Rumsfeld, South Korea has become a role model for Iraq and other countries to emulate, as it denotes not only the South Korean success, but also an American one.

But it should be reminded that as in the U.S., South Korea is a pluralistic society and its people share diverse perceptions of the United States. *Banmi* (anti-American) is only one aspect of South Korea's national psyche, as there are, in fact, a variety of Korean positions toward the United States, ranging from *chinmi* (*pro-American*) and *sunngmi* (worship America) to *hyommi* (loathing America). Those who attempted to tear down the MacArthur statue represent only a tiny segment of the Korean population. A great majority of Koreans still remember the U.S. role as a savior and remain grateful.

The ROK-US alliance is undergoing a major realignment, and differences have emerged in the process, but it is far from being a corpse awaiting interment. Instead, I would argue that the bilateral alliance is suffering from the penalty of its own success. No alliance has ever been successful as the ROK-US alliance in modern world history, with the possible exception of NATO. It has been a hard alliance based on a firm institutional foundation (a mutual defense treaty), a combined forces command, regularized military maneuvers, defense cost-sharing, and a high degree of interoperability, rationalization, and standardization. However, such a successful alliance is all the more so subject to the laws of entropy, and it would be extremely difficult for the ROK and the US to maintain the current structure of the alliance in the coming years. The implacable tendency toward change will inevitably place pressures and stress on any structure, and present circumstances reflect the confluence of several fundamental forces. The present and future of ROK-US alliance needs to be understood in a similar vein, and the question should be whether or not the alliance is equipped to accommodate and absorb such change.

There are several factors that undercut the cohesiveness and longevity of the alliance. The most prominent challenge comes from the gradual erosion of a common threat perception. For Washington, a nuclear North Korea with severe human rights violations is a clear and present threat. The matter is not so clear cut for Seoul, which also regards the North as an enemy, but at the same time perceives it as a counterpart with which to realize peaceful co-existence and national unification. Whereas treating the North as the main enemy can perpetuate military tension and confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, promotion of inter-Korean exchanges, cooperation, and reconciliation can compromise its military alliance with the U.S. Escaping from this horn of dilemma is not a simple task. It is also true for China. Although some in the U.S. appear to regard China as a potential threat, it would be extremely difficult for South Korea to share such a threat perception because of inherent risks and interests. South Korea still wishes to maintain a quasi-alliance with Japan within the broad framework of ROK-Japan-US coordination and cooperation. But if Japan continues to spoil its Asian diplomacy under the right-wing nationalist banner as well as with the tacit

endorsement of the United States, Japan-South Korea relations are likely to be seriously deteriorated.

No alliance can last without corresponding social and political support in both countries. This is another challenge to the alliance, as democratization, the advent of the post-Cold War ambiance, and inter-Korean rapprochement have weakened social and political support for the alliance in South Korea. While the size of social and political forces supporting the alliance has dwindled, those critical of the alliance have become politically and socially more active and visible. The same can be said of the U.S., as a major realignment of the American social template and military posture following 9/11 has considerably diminished its traditional support of the alliance. War against global terrorism, protracted military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan and adoption of the doctrine of military transformation based on strategic flexibility are likely to produce negative trade-off effects on American alliance ties with South Korea. Moreover, cognitive dissonance among Americans stemming from the mismatch of past contribution and present resentment, as exemplified through the episode of the assault on the General MacArthur's statue, has been responsible for eroding the foundation of ROK-US relationships.

Apart from the issues above, some practical problems have also placed enormous strain on the bilateral alliance. They are disputes over cost sharing in the relocation of the Yongsan base to Pyongtaek and over who should bear the cost of cleaning the polluted areas of American military bases that are to be returned to the ROK government. Failure to reach a wise compromise could produce negative ripple effects on the smooth functioning of the bilateral alliance.

The divergent threat perception, waning social and political support, and disputes over military bases and cost-sharing certainly endanger the future of the alliance, but mutually complementary interests and institutional inertia serve as positive factors for sustaining the alliance.

The overall strategic landscape in Northeast Asia necessitates ROK-US security cooperation. Relinquishing its alliance with the U.S. will leave South Korea with a serious security dilemma. Neither bandwagoning with China or Japan nor realigning itself as a middle power with strengthened military forces can be viable security options for South Korea. Maintaining an alliance with the U.S. seems to be the most ideal choice. For Washington, the alliance with South Korea is still valuable because it is vital to maintaining *status quo* under its leadership. American abandonment of South Korea and the strengthening of ties with Japan would not only pressure South Korea to bandwagon with China, but also foster the transformation of Japan into a normal state with formidable defense capability. Given the strategic uncertainty of Northeast Asia, such developments would certainly not align with American national interests in the region which are framed around engagement and enlargement under American hegemonic leadership.

Additionally, institutional factors built by the half-century alliance should not be taken lightly either, as the ROK-US alliance is an extremely well structured alliance. The Mutual Defense Treaty, joint military maneuvers, the presence of American military bases in South Korea, regularized security consultative meetings, ROK-US

Combined Forces Command and U.S. operational control over South Korean forces during the wartime underscore its depth and cohesiveness. As noted before, no alliance, with the possible exception of NATO, has such a degree of institutionalized cooperation. Tearing down such an institutional foundation of the alliance would be neither easy nor desirable.

Thus, the ROK-US alliance shows a mixed outlook. Whereas mutual interests, institutional inertia, and shared fundamental values favor its continuing cohesiveness, changes in threat perception, weak social and political support, and disputes over cost-sharing point in an opposite direction. The future of the alliance will depend on how to reconcile the two conflicting dimensions.

There are additional agenda that can influence the future course of the alliance. The potential trade-off between South Korea's pursuit of military self-reliance and American security commitment could pose another challenge, as return of war-time operational control to Seoul within the Combined Force Command structure will not be an easy task, warranting skillful fine tuning. Expediting the process of building an inter-Korean peace regime will also entail formidable tasks such as dismantling the armistice regime as well as realigning the American command structure in the South. The doctrine of American strategic flexibility and South Korea's fear of entrapment in unwanted regional conflicts could become another source of discord.

Ultimately, an alliance is an instrument for enhancing national interests. The national interests of allies cannot remain identical, but rather change over time depending on domestic, regional, and international contexts. However, those differences should not be served as an excuse for undermining the ROK-US alliance of 50 years. They can and should be narrowed through diplomacy and mutual consultation. That is what diplomacy among allies is all about.

But one thing is clear. Seoul and Washington may not be able to sustain the current form of alliance, as a threat-based alliance is unsustainable. In the medium to long-run, the current military alliance needs to be transformed into a comprehensive alliance based on such common values as market economy and liberal democracy. As in Europe, a comprehensive alliance can pave the way to a collective defense system, multilateral security cooperation, and ultimately, a community of security that can assure a collective security system. The ROK and U.S. need to plan a positive transition and resuscitate the alliance by looking toward an entirely new horizon that goes beyond an exclusive bilateral alliance system.