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

THE CASE FOR THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

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Introduction: The U.S.-ROK Alliance: Not as Bad as It Sounds

The organizers of the Seoul-Washington Forum have asked me to make the case that the U.S.-ROK alliance should continue into the future as a security alliance and to speculate on what must be done to that end. Taking a comparative perspective with other American security relationships, it is clear that alliances rarely disappear, but also rarely stay exactly the same. For example, the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Australia alliances have been strengthened over the past ten years; NATO has expanded; the U.S.-New Zealand alliance has lost its military dimension but remains close in terms of diplomatic and intelligence cooperation; and the U.S.-Thai and U.S.-Philippines alliances are on the back burner but have developed new areas of cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism.

A visitor from Mars comparing the U.S.-ROK alliance with these other alliances purely in terms of output –and ignoring the press and public opinion -- might assume that the U.S.-ROK alliance is today America's strongest alliance in the world. The list is impressive, after all:

- The United States and the Republic of Korea have reconfigured U.S. forces on the peninsula to make them more mobile and effective and less intrusive, backed with a U.S. commitment to spend more than $11 billion on modernization. In contrast, the United States and Japan are still struggling to implement a series of decade-old agreements on restructuring and modernizing bases on Okinawa and Honshu.
- The Republic of Korea has dispatched highly-capable brigade-sized forces to Irbil in Northern Iraq. This is the largest military deployment by the ROK forces since Vietnam and is now the third largest contingent in Iraq.
- The United States and the Republic of Korea have initiated their first vice-ministerial dialogue to coordinate security and diplomatic strategies on a regional and global basis.
- The United States and the Republic of Korea have launched negotiations on a Free Trade Agreement which will represent the most significant economic integration effort by the United States since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) a decade ago. The agreement follows very close coordination and cooperation between the U.S. and ROK delegations in the Doha Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- The United States pushed against North Korean and Chinese resistance in 2003 to move from Three Party to Six Party Talks that include the Republic of Korea as a full and equal partner for the first time in the regional diplomacy of denuclearizing the North.
- In the September 19 Joint Statement of the Six Party Talks and the Bush-Roh Joint Statement at the Kyongju Summit in November 2006, the United States and the Republic of Korea have agreed on the broad outlines of the first comprehensive effort to resolve the legacies of the Korean War, including complete denuclearization of the North, establishment of a permanent peace mechanism and a framework for expanded diplomatic, energy and economic cooperation on the peninsula.

Of course, if our visitor from Mars read the headlines in U.S. and Korean newspapers, viewed opinion polls, or listened to the debates in the National Assembly or parts of the U.S. government, he or she might conclude that the U.S.-ROK alliance is the worst in the world and on the verge of collapse.

The truth, of course, lies somewhere in between. As Mark Twain might have quipped, "rumors of the demise of the alliance are premature." Twain might also have said of the alliance what he said of the music of Richard Wagner: "it isn't as bad as it sounds."

There is a danger in projecting the future of a major security alliance based on the immediate tensions of two nations at any one time. After all, in late 1995 many were predicting the demise of the U.S.-Japan alliance. There had been a tragic rape incident on Okinawa that led to prefecture-wide protests and a collapse of national support for the alliance in opinion polls. Japan seemed poised to converge with China based on long pent-up hunger for more autonomy from the Cold War alliance with the United States and the attraction of China's growing market. The prevailing trend in academia in both countries was to predict steady dealignment from Washington and alignment with China. Yet ten years later even critics acknowledge that the U.S.-Japan alliance is the strongest it has ever been and have ironically now shifted their criticism to saying the alliance is *too* strong (something to be addressed later in this essay).

I believe there is also a solid "floor" to the U.S.-ROK alliance below which our security cooperation is very unlikely to fall. Regardless of external power dynamics or bilateral political tensions, the alliance will remain indispensable to maintaining confidence in the Korean economy and preventing major power competition in Northeast Asia. This will be true even if deterring North Korea aggression becomes less important as the rationale for the alliance. However, that does not mean that the alliance is indestructible. It is not. In fact, I see the greatest danger to the alliance as a scenario in which a future U.S. administration misreads the debate in Seoul and prematurely downgrades security relations in order to preserve U.S. freedom of action in Northeast Asia. History is replete with examples of alliances that continue in name but drift or decay in substance, often because of miscues. Therefore, while the tensions in the alliance may be transitional or temporary in nature, they must be well understood by both sides so that they do not become self-fulfilling prophesies. In areas where there are structural or ideational tensions, the alliance may have to be adjusted to survive and grow strong.

Before re-examining the fundamental strengths of the alliance and making some recommendations for future architecture of the alliance, I think it is therefore important to assess the longer-term implications of current areas of bilateral tension in the security relationship. These tensions all appear rooted in three issues: (1) divergence over the North Korean threat; (2) divergence over Japan and China; and (3) divergence over command relationships and leadership in the alliance.

Divergence over the North Korea Threat

Divergence over North Korea seems the most threatening tension in the alliance today and deserves the greatest attention. The alliance was created primarily because of aggression from the North and the inner military workings of the security relationship are

almost entirely tied up with the operational planning to deter or defeat the North should conflict occur again. While there is not yet a substantive divergence in planning to deal with the North Korean military threat, there is an undeniable divergence in the American and Korean peoples' broader threat perception, particularly since September 11.

For the Korean people, the overwhelming concern today is preventing another war on the Korean peninsula. Because of the mythology about the first nuclear crisis with North Korea, the people of the South now largely believe that the United States was on the verge of military action against the DPRK over the Yongbyon reactor in April 1994. According to that mythology, former President Jimmy Carter prevented almost certain catastrophic war by engaging North Korean leader Kim Il Sung directly. The resulting Agreed Framework appeared to have frozen if not stopped the North's nuclear ambitions and together with the broader U.S.-DPRK accommodation this became the indispensable foundation for Kim Dae Jung's own Sunshine Policy towards the North. The Sunshine Policy achieved broad support because it appeared to remove the danger of war or collapse of the North, which was good for Korea's economic recovery after the 1997 financial crisis, and because it allowed the Korean people to give full expression to their desire for reconciliation with the North and control once again of their destiny.

An aggressive push by President Kim Dae Jung to convince the newly elected President Bush to continue the Clinton administration's approach to North Korea in March 2001 led to contradictory statements out of Washington, but eventually the Bush administration announced a comprehensive approach to North Korea on June 5, 2001 that promised continuation of the Agreed Framework and a broadened dialogue with the North to include more than just the nuclear issue. September 11 intervened, however, and the administration and the American people became consumed with preventing another terrorist attack and especially an attack using weapons of mass destruction. Responding to the 2002 State of the Union Address (the famous "axis of evil" speech) and the administration's tough stand on Iraq and counter-proliferation, North Korea declared that it would not talk until the U.S. side changed its "hostile policy." This stance by the DPRK delayed bilateral engagement until October 2002, when Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly was finally able to go to Pyongyang with a delegation that included this author. The Kelly delegation was authorized to explain to North Korea the President's readiness for a "bold approach" with North Korea that would include major steps by the U.S. side to improve relations if Pyongyang was ready for serious changes in its behavior. But first, the DPRK would have to abandon its large scale highly enriched uranium (HEU) program and return to its commitments under the Agreed Framework and the North South Denuclearization Accord. In response, the North Koreans defiantly acknowledged the HEU program and demanded completion of the U.S. obligations under the Agreed Framework and other significant concessions before the DPRK would be prepared to even discuss HEU.

The Bush administration was not prepared to enter into a bilateral negotiation based on blackmail nor to use the threat of military action and assessed that international pressure on North Korea was likely to be more effective and better for peace and stability on the peninsula. In February 2003 Secretary of State Powell convinced Beijing to host multilateral talks (first Three Party, and then at President Bush's insistence, Six Party). For an administration concerned about the danger of nuclear weapons proliferation in an

age of undeterable terror, the key was to ensure the elimination of North Korea's *entire* nuclear weapons programs and not just another temporary halt to one piece. This was particularly important because an unchecked HEU program would allow the North to produce dozens of nuclear weapons a year once operational. In fits and starts the Six Party Talks led to the September 19, 2005 joint statement which is historic in its scope and clearly declares that the DPRK must eliminate *all* nuclear weapons and nuclear programs. However, the North immediately announced it would not take any steps until it received a light water reactor and compensation for frozen money-laundering assets and the talks have been stalled since.

For the government and citizens of the Republic of Korea, this second nuclear confrontation has threatened to unravel everything they have built on the basis of the Agreed Framework and the Sunshine Policy. Because people now believe that the alternative to diplomacy in 1994 was war and because the Bush administration waged war on Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction, the Korean public has concluded that collapse of the diplomacy this time would also lead to a U.S. attack and war on the Korean peninsula.

That this entire mythology is wrong seems not to have penetrated the public or political debate at all. First, there is the question of whether the Clinton administration seriously prepared for attacks on North Korea in 1994. Certainly, Pentagon planners did planning, but that does not mean that the White House was ready to follow through. Second, there is no evidence at all that the Bush administration has plans to attack North Korea. While the administration has always been careful to say that "no options are off the table," the geography of the DMZ and the dangers posed to Seoul and Tokyo are well known at senior levels of the U.S. government. Moreover, the military option is even less attractive than it was in 1994, when the North Koreans were not yet thought to have nuclear weapons or 200 Nodong missiles capable of hitting Japan. That is why the President and other senior officials have repeatedly said they have no intention of invading or attacking North Korea and why the North Koreans have been told by the U.S. and other delegations in the Six Party Talks that there is no U.S. strategy for attacking North Korea or forcing regime change.

Part of the problem is that the progressive camp in the Republic of Korea has grown up on the mythology of U.S. division of the peninsula and the notion that the U.S. is the greater threat to peace and stability. It has been remarkable how quickly the so-called "386 generation" in the Blue House and the National Assembly have come to embrace the alliance and to push for important policies like FOTA and the Iraq dispatch. However, these same progressives are using their new alliance management credentials to tell their political base that they alone can stop the United States from attacking the North. As long as the ruling elite describes the United States as the dangerous variable on the peninsula for domestic political gain, the mythology about U.S. attacks on the North will continue to gnaw at the underpinnings of the alliance. I suspect, though, that succeeding generations of Korean presidential candidates will move from the right and the left towards the center and this will help.

The U.S. side is not without blame, of course. The President's abhorrence for the North Korean regime's horrific treatment of its people is well known and it is exploited by those outside of government who claim that the administration's focus on human rights

reflects a hidden policy of regime change. The North has also skillfully conditioned international audiences to interpret criticisms of the human rights situation as a hostile policy of regime change. The bottom line is that I cannot think of a senior U.S. official who would keep the DPRK in place if there were a peaceful scenario for liberating the North Korean people, but neither can I think of a single U.S. senior official who would put peace and stability on the peninsula at risk to achieve regime change. Instead, there is a broad consensus that the United States must stay focused on the diplomatic process of the Six Party Talks while simultaneously enhancing measures to protect allies and the American people from North Korea's ongoing efforts to export counterfeit money and illegal drugs and import materials for its nuclear weapons program. And I fully expect that the administration will continue to do what it can to keep human rights concerns on the agenda.

So is the apparent diversion over North Korea a long-term threat to the alliance? Political scientists have shown effectively over the past few years that *constructed* reality can shape a nation's security choices just as much as the objective reality of its external environment. The myth that a U.S. attack is the greatest threat to peace on the peninsula must therefore be taken very seriously. The United States must go the extra yard to demonstrate that it is serious about diplomacy with the North, and that means continuing to develop with the Republic of Korea a concrete plan of action for implementing the September 19 agreement even as Pyongyang prevaricates and stalls. In addition, U.S. officials cannot say too often that the peace and prosperity of the Republic of Korea is a critical U.S. interest that will not be put at risk, even though that is self evident to them. At the same time, leadership in the Republic of Korea must resist the temptation to perpetuate the myth of the "American threat" for short term political gain. Seoul will also have to be careful about what signals it sends to Pyongyang and Washington with respect to any new expansion of North-South economic cooperation if there is no move by the North to implement the September 19 agreement, let alone return to the talks.

The objective reality is that North Korea's nuclear weapons programs are a threat to the security of the Republic of Korea and that is broadly understood in Seoul and publicly confirmed from President Roh on down. If North Korea continues refusing to implement the September 19 joint statement and continues developing its nuclear weapons programs, I do not think tactical disagreements between Seoul and Washington will necessarily matter in the long run. The key will be to make certain that any tactical disagreements do not reinforce the myth that the United States is just waiting for its chance to confront the North. A divorce over North Korea policy is only possible if Seoul and Washington let the constructed realities overwhelm the objective interests of each side.

Divergence over China and Japan

The second threat to the alliance is divergence over threat assessment vis-à-vis China and Japan. Let me begin with China. The honeymoon period in China-ROK relations lasted from 1992 normalization until the 2003 dispute over Koguryo. However, the issue of "strategic flexibility" for U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula prolonged the apparent U.S.-ROK divergence on China for another two years after that. The strategic flexibility issue looked on the outside like a heavy-handed U.S. demand that the Republic of Korea

give the United States a blank check to use its forces on the peninsula in a Taiwan contingency. In fact, the U.S. need for strategic flexibility has been the result of a broader evolution of U.S. global military doctrine and technological change and the increasing opportunity costs imposed on the United States for keeping significant forces "tied down" to one region and one mission. Moreover, it is entirely consistent with the Security Treaty that the United States has discretion in how it disposes of its forces in and around the peninsula. The tensions over strategic flexibility resulted in part because of insufficient patience on the U.S. side, in part because of inappropriate leaks on the ROK side, and in part because of the misperception that the Bush administration was attempting to use its alliances to contain China (in fact, the U.S. has never had a deeper economic, political and diplomatic engagement with Beijing).

In May 2005 Presidents Bush and Roh "rebooted" the system and the two governments arrived at a gentleman's agreement that reiterated each side's rights and obligations consistent with the Security Treaty and ROK sovereignty. At this point in history, this "strategic ambiguity" on the Taiwan question serves the U.S.-ROK alliance well and we should settle for it. When it comes to the US-ROK role in Taiwan contingencies, it would be useful to follow the advice of skilled litigators, which is "don't ask the question in court unless you're sure you'll get an answer you want." If we put the China issue on hold, does that mean there will be a divergence if China becomes belligerent in the future? I would argue probably not, but the best way to be sure of that is to focus on strengthening the fundamentals of the U.S.-ROK alliance today rather than opening up hypothetical issues that cannot be clearly settled at present and risk undermining the broader stabilizing role played by close U.S.-ROK security ties.

The deterioration of ROK-Japan relations is a vexing problem for U.S. strategy in Northeast Asia. Close U.S.-ROK-Japan coordination has always been essential for progress in the Six Party Talks and over the longer-term close U.S.-ROK-Japan coordination will be indispensable for any changes to U.S. force structure or alliance arrangements, particularly if there is movement on negotiating a peace mechanism in the Six Party Talks process.

In 1998 ROK-Japan relations seemed to be moving forward in a positive direction in the wake of Kim Dae Jung's visit to Japan, where Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi expressed remorse and apologies over Japan's history and President Kim accepted that by expressing his desire to see Japan play a larger role in international affairs. However, if our friendly visitor from Mars were watching Korean television today he would assume that Japan and Korea were mortal enemies posed on the edge of war.

The proximate causes of these tensions are the history issue (and specifically the Yasukuni Shrine visits of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi) and the dispute over Dokdo, which is called Takeshima in Japan. The problem is exacerbated in Korea by the progressive camp's efforts to continually paint the conservatives into a corner by highlighting their "collaborationist" past with Japan and Japan's own misdeeds. On the Japanese side the situation is made worse by a tendency to dismiss these problems as the results of internal ROK politics, rather than the serious diplomatic problems they really are for Tokyo.

Some Korean scholars and officials have urged the United States to press Japan to change its policies. Some Americans agree with this. I do not. Koizumi's decision to visit Yasukuni was a personal decision that he will not change even under pressure from the United States. Pressure from the U.S. side will cause a backlash within Japan that will make this issue harder, not easier, for the next Prime Minister to resolve. Furthermore, Dokdo is administered by the Republic of Korea and it is very unlikely therefore that Japan will be able to put its claim to the territory into practice. Moreover, the United States does not intervene in territorial disputes of this nature and if Seoul's position is that Dokdo is its territory, than the ROK government should not need U.S. intervention in this case either.

Instead, the United States should use the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), the Asia Pacific Clean Energy Partnership, and other opportunities to highlight the values and the strategic objectives that the United States, Japan and the Republic of Korea share. And while it is counterproductive for the U.S. government to push Prime Minister Koizumi to change his stance on Yasukuni, it is appropriate and necessary for the U.S. government to press Japan to think about what it must do to improve its overall relationship with the Republic of Korea.

The odd thing about discussing Japan-Korea relations with security experts in both countries today is the degree to which South Koreans talk about a Japanese military threat while Japanese strategic thinkers do not talk about a South Korean military threat. The tensions between Japan and the Republic of Korea today are the result of ideational and not material factors. There is a constructed security threat in the Republic of Korea and it is Japan's fault that it has gotten that far, but it is therefore within Japan's ability to bring it under control. I believe the next Japanese Prime Minister will do that precisely because of the strategic problems caused for Japan in its relationship with China by the current tensions with Seoul. Once again, this is a case of leadership to ensure that the constructed security realities do not overwhelm the objective national interests of each country.

Divergence over Command Relationships and Leadership in the Alliance

The U.S.-ROK command relationship has always been a source of tension in the alliance. Today the question is whether the United States should retain wartime operational command. Both President Roh and the major opposition candidates to succeed him are on record saying that wartime operational command should be transferred to the Republic of Korea. On the one hand, U.S. alliances around the world have seen a natural evolution in which more autonomy is given to the alliance partner in exchange for a greater commitment by that partner for its own defense and for contributing to the international security environment. In that sense, this is a healthy thing. On the other hand, there is no joint and combined command structure anywhere in the world (certainly not NATO, for example) where U.S. forces could be ordered into harm's way on foreign soil by a non-U.S. commander. It is not at all certain whether the U.S. Congress and the American people would support such an arrangement on the Korean peninsula. In other words, reversion of wartime operational command could jeopardize domestic U.S. political support for the U.S. military presence in Korea.

I do not see this issue on its own getting out of control, but as a derivative of a crisis of confidence over approaches to North Korea or possibly China, pressure on the current command relationship could become very acute. It is critical, therefore, that both governments "wall off" this issue by beginning a deliberate process of reviewing the longer-term structure and purpose of the U.S.-ROK alliance. This long-term planning process is also critical as a backstop for the discussions that may flow from the Six Party Talks on establishing a permanent peace regime to replace the armistice that ended the Korean War.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Reviewing the major sources of tension in the U.S.-ROK alliance relationship today, one is struck at how many of the problems are ideational or constructed in nature. The areas of divergence are not the result of a differentiation in the objective material security threats we each face. Rather, it is how those common threats are interpreted in each side's changing domestic political cultures, and particularly on the ROK side. The task for those in leadership is to articulate a future vision for the alliance based on a realistic assessment of the threats we face and an agenda that draws on our common values as democracies and our peoples' respective aspirations.

The exact nature of the U.S. military presence, the bilateral command relationships, or our responsibilities in regional contingencies, should all depend on a shared assessment of the objective security environment. My own personal preference and prediction would be that the United States retains wartime operational control until there is a permanent peace mechanism on the peninsula, but that a permanent peace mechanism will not be possible without prior efforts at real threat reduction. After that point, I suspect U.S. command relationships across Northeast Asia will be reoriented and the U.S. military presence on the peninsula will consist of a command element with air and naval forces and regular brigade-sized rotations for joint and combined arms exercises with ROK forces. Meanwhile, I would expect to see increasing deployment by ROK forces for stabilization and reconstruction operations on a global scale, embedded within the U.S.-ROK alliance.

However, we will not be able to develop a shared assessment of the objective security realities and the future shape of the alliance between the governments until we have broader understanding between our publics. When then Foreign Minister Yoon proposed a blue ribbon panel of U.S. and Korean leaders to review the alliance in 2003, I may have been the only U.S. official who thought it was a good idea. But I did and I think it is an even better idea today. Bureaucrats on both sides feared the results of an open-ended +public discussion of the security relationship, but if the objective reality of our security environment is what should bond us, then what better way to cut through the constructed reality that divides us?