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Panel 3 – The R.O.K.’s Self-Reliant Military Policy and the CFC:
Replacing the Armistice

MEETING CHALLENGES IN TRANSFORMING THE ALLIANCE PRUDENTLY

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Abstract

Korean and U.S defense officials agreed at the seventh round of the Security Policy Initiative (SPI) talks, held on 21 March 2006, that the two sides would complete a road map by October for Korean taking wartime operational control of its troops from the United States. Also negotiations are ongoing between the ROK government and the U.S. Forces Korea over many issues such as relocation of the Youngsan Garrison, reduction of USFK manpower, transfer of military missions, restoration of contaminated land and burden sharing. Over the past 52 years, the ROK-US security alliance has been successful in achieving its traditional objectives of deterring North Korea's invasion and defending South Korea. And yet the past successes do not warrant the future successes. Now, challenges, pessimisms, distrusts overload the old alliance. New generations, new political elites, new rationales have already begun to undermine the robust bilateral relationship. The bilateral relationship between Korea and the United States is facing great challenges.

Now is the time for us to mend the relationship by creating a new vision and new values of the alliance to be followed by new alliance architecture. This historic adventure requires new entrepreneurial leadership. The presidents of the two allies should meet very personally to diagnose fundamental problems of the alliance and present new values of the alliance to Koreans and Americans. The two allies need to show a new vision to the people of the two nations in a form of new vision and guidelines. The new vision will include why the two Koreas must not have nuclear weapons, how to achieve peaceful unification, how the alliance can achieve peace and stability on the Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, how the two allies can resolve the North Korea's nuclear issue successfully and how to transform the alliance.

I. Alliance in Transition

In the past, the ROK-US alliance has been known one of the greatest success models for alliance. However, it was also true that there were challenges that rose from both sides of the alliance. Two major changes that happened in the past were attributed to the US initiatives and South Korea's resultant responses: the first being the late president Park Chong Hee's pursuit of self-reliant defense in response to the US troop withdrawal of the 7th Army Division in 1971 and the second being the US Nunn-Warner Act that authorized three-stage troop withdrawal from South Korea after the end of the Cold War. The second change was more comprehensive and forward-looking because it linked phased changes of US forces and the alliance structure with the progress of South Korea's relationship with North Korea.

The third and biggest change is taking place currently. The change is, in essence, revolutionary. The United States initiated such a big change in the alliance under the banner of alliance transformation. The USFK is undergoing fundamental change not only on the relocation of military bases and reduction of forces but also on military strategy to render the long-held tripwire function obsolete. According to the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, the tripwire function is being replaced by the rapidly mobile

forces, which is to implement capability-based force planning instead of numbers-oriented force planning of the past. The USFK is being transformed to conduct a network centric warfare by connecting all the US forces in the world.

At a similar time, a quest for fundamental change in the ROK-US relationship occurred from South Korea. With amelioration of inter-Korean relationship, the progressives began to see the United States as a hindrance to inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation rather than a facilitator of peaceful coexistence of the two Koreas and ultimate unification. Inside South Korea, there is growing nationalistic assertiveness that requested the nature of the alliance be based on a more equitable relationship. Such demand has been rising significantly after the accident of two Korean school girls.

On top of this, a number of serious security issues are challenging the future of the alliance: the rise of China, Japan's growing nationalism and territorial claims on its neighboring countries, North Korea's nuclear weapons program, and terrorism and spread of mass destruction weapons and related materials, etc.

Many in Seoul and Washington show concerns about the future of the alliance. Harsh debate on whether North Korea's resumed activities for developing nuclear weapons are true or not and whether U.S. responses to them are appropriate or not have been going on between Seoul and Washington. As the Bush administration pursues a hardline policy toward North Korea, majority of new South Korean leaders and public who support a soft policy stance toward North Korea expressed discontent with Washington and protested against the United States and the alliance itself. After the South Korean government made decision to send troops to Iraq and reiterated the importance of the ROK-US alliance, suspicion and allegations about the United States seemed to calm down but tension rises occasionally.

As of now, the prospects for the alliance are not so certain as the prediction of the future alliance varies from pessimism to cautious optimism. There are three major challenges to the future alliance. Differences between Korea and the United States on those three points could become bigger unless properly intervened and managed with open-minded policy makers and resolve the differences with organized efforts by Seoul and Washington simultaneously.

II. Perception gaps regarding the North Korean threat

Inside Korea, there are diverging views about North Korean threat. There are reasons to explain such phenomenon. Those who regard North Koreans as "one people" or "a partner to cooperate with" increased to a considerable degree compared with those who regard them as "enemy." "One people" view holders, in particular, began to think that the United States and South Korean defense community have exaggerated North Korea's threat so that a lasting reduction of tensions can only happen if South Korea more actively aids Pyongyang, ends its military alliance with the United States and other threatening measures, and predicates its unification policies on an independent stance reflecting the reality that Koreans are "one people." Pyongyang manipulated this view so as to separate South Korean brethren from the United States by demanding that South Korea should choose one between national unity and cooperation with external forces.

South Koreans began to think that North Korean conventional weapons became so degraded and obsolete that there may be nothing to worry about except for Pyongyang's nuclear weapons. Some civic groups accused the South Korean Ministry of Defense for exaggerating North Korean military strength and South Korean military weakness. Although South Koreans' threat perception was reinforced by North Korea's nuclear adventures, they tend to regard North Korea's threat as having been overestimated by the U.S. military who have first-hand intelligence and information collection capacities.

In contrast, the United States viewed that the North Korea's threat had become bigger, better, closer, and deadlier dated to June, 2002. The Pentagon earlier noted that there was no tangible reduction of North Korea's threat despite the June 2000 inter-Korean summit. The United States alarmed South Korea and the rest of the world by disclosing that North Korea continued its nuclear weapon program by adding HEU program to the existing nuclear program. After the September 11 terror, North Korea was designated as one of evil axes by President Bush, followed by the recent labeling of North Korea as an outpost of tyranny. Since North Korea is adding more plutonium to existing plutonium stockpile, the United States estimates that Pyongyang may have had a couple of nuclear bombs.

In 2005, the South Korean government noted that North Korea is a major and real military threat by ending the internal debate regarding whether or not the defense ministry has to call North Korea as a main enemy in Defense White Paper. Now, the Defense White Paper does not carry such a word like enemy any longer but emphasize North Korea as direct threat to South Korea in the areas of North Korea's conventional military threat, weapons of mass destruction, and its forward deployed forces. However, the perception gap is so deeply rooted in North Korea policies of the two allies, Seoul and Washington that it is affecting their North Korea policy to a different degree. There is a growing gap in the Koreans' perception regarding North Korea's military threat with Washington. Thus, a big gap regarding which is more effective strategy to deal with threat from the North exists between Seoul and Washington.

III. Self-reliant Defense vs. Alliance

The Roh Moo-hyun administration for the second time in the Korean history put forward a self-reliant defense by stating that since South Koreans can not live in anxiety whenever the United States pulls out troops from Korea, Koreans need to establish self-reliant defense capabilities. The concept of self-reliant defense drew a particular attention from both the conservatives in Korea and Americans because Korean progressives claimed that the ROK-US alliance merely tended to prolong South Korea's subservience to the United States. Progressives in Seoul criticized conservatives for regarding even the self-reliant defense as harmful to both the South Korea's security and the alliance. The advent of self-reliant defense had undergone a national debate as much as the sunshine policy toward North Korea had been debated.

The present self-reliant defense resulted both from South Korea's reaction to the U.S. cutback of troops in Korea or from the realization that the alliance with the United States has put limits on South Korea's autonomy in security and defense policy. The

latter point was reinforced by South Korea's entrapment fears that South Korea might be dragged into a war unintendedly if the United States would make a surgical strike on North Korean nuclear facilities. The U.S. attack on Iraq not only affected North Korea to make their resolve firm on its nuclear weapons program for the sake of deterrence and defense, but also affected South Korean progressives to claim independence to avoid the entrapment situation that can be caused by merely following the US hardline policy toward North Korea. North Korea exploited this situation to make believe that North Korea's nuclear question rose not because of North Korea's nuclear weapons program but because of the U.S. hostile policy toward North Korea. Pyongyang's strategy to split Seoul and Washington partly succeeded.

To present a definitive answer to diverging views on self-reliant defense and alliance, the South Korean government made clear that self-reliant defense will be pursued at the same time with strengthening the alliance with the United States, by calling it as cooperative and self-reliant defense policy. South Korea intends to build up self-reliant defense capabilities to be able to deter and defend from North Korea's attack on its own within a decade. South Korean armed forces will be strengthened to the extent that they can command and control themselves within less than a decade. However, the issue of transfer of operation control authority from the CINCCFC to a South Korean Commander is being raised recently. How the transfer process will evolve will affect the future shape of the alliance significantly. The Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said at the briefing in March, that the transfer of OPCON would take place at a pace and in a manner that would not inject instability into the Korean Peninsula. General(ret) La Porte, the former CINC CFC, also said the capability of South Korean armed forces is the most important element in transferring wartime OPCON to the host nation.

IV. Regional Security and Strategic Flexibility

As South Korea deliberates peace and security on a regional level to achieve the goal of peaceful and prosperous Northeast Asia, the role of the ROK-US alliance in this regard began to be discussed on a national level. Whether South Korea has tilted more toward China than toward Japan has been debated. Korea's trade with China already surpassed that with the United States and with Japan. Korean shift to China was pointed out by South Korea's new political elite and experts in Washington alike.

Japan's growing nationalism and territorial claims aroused anti-Japanism in Seoul echoed well with China's anti-Japanism out of historical animosity. Before all the rifts and fissures vis-à-vis Japan erupted, South Korea showed more affinity with Japan which had been encouraged by the United States for a long time. Some of Korean experts preferred more of southern triangular relationship including Japan to the shift to China. Disputes on territory and history text books added fuel on the unforgettable memory of Japanese colonial period. Japan's efforts to become a normal state and nationalistic were seen by South Koreans and Chinese, to a lesser extent, for being encouraged by the strengthened US-Japan alliance. Finally, the United States came to be under criticism for allowing Japan to become more assertive than could otherwise have been.

The United States needs to be aware of Koreans' memory of Japan's colonial rule and deeply-rooted distrust of Japanese possibility of rearmament. Washington feels fantastic about global expansion of the US-Japan alliance and began to conjecture ushering South Korea into the US-Japan alliance. However, it is worth remembering that South Korean political leaders and bulk of Koreans criticized the propensity of strengthening the trilateral relationship in a format of a security alliance as if providing immunity to Japan on its past wrongdoings. South Koreans are unwilling to embrace efforts to enhance the trilateral security cooperation beyond a certain point that could antagonize China unnecessarily. Instead, most of South Koreans want to establish closer relationship with China than its relationship with Japan. This propensity partly reflects a cognitive bias which results from people's anchoring to the most recent big event (the Japanese colonial rule) and memory and yet security policy of one nation can not neglect majority of people's propensity.

Strategic flexibility signifies that the US forces in one location can flow out to another region and at the same time, they can flow into another location without other country's interruption. This concept intends to apply the review result of the U.S. global posture to USFK by connecting all the US forces abroad to execute a network centric warfare in Korea as well as outside Korea. For American military planners' ease, it is conceivable. The strategic flexibility is indispensable for the conduct of new global military strategy that the United States has long pursued. The implementation of the global posture review is meant to utilize lighter, speedily deployable military capabilities by making the maximum use of the US superiority in C4ISR, PGM, and computer network. As the United States is transforming its alliances by connecting all the military assets across national borders, it is inevitable for the strategic flexibility to meddle in the sovereignty of its allies. However, Japan, Australia, European countries in NATO all agreed to the concept of strategic flexibility and the United States is persuading South Korea to join in.

However, the South Korea government and the Korean public had shown the tendency that the role of the ROK-U.S. should remain in what it means for Korea's direct security. Korean civic groups kept on expressing concerns about the possibilities that South Korea might be drawn into a war on the Korean peninsula as a result of the U.S. attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities and might be drawn into the conflicts between China and the United States if USFK were diverted into a conflict in the Taiwan Straits. President Roh also strongly stated that South Koreans will never allow themselves be involved in any conflict in Northeast Asia against their will. By saying so, President Roh set a firm principle concerning strategic flexibility that should not allow any possibility of South Korea's involvement in a regional conflict such as an inter-strait conflict. Herein, whether South Korea will allow USFK to move out into another region or not was not clearly mentioned but it is clear that South Korea will never compromise on the possibility that USFK's expanded role may provoke neighboring countries such as China, thus undermining the regional and Korea's security.

Here lies potential dispute for South Korea and the United States. If South Korea stands firm on not allowing flexibility to USFK at all, will USFK remain limited on the Korean peninsula or will USFK move out of the peninsula? Will USFK be shrunken to a small scale to take a peninsula specific role? Or will South Korea allow move-in and move-

out of USFK when the United States seeks South Korea's consent with a prior notice before any move?

The two countries reached an agreement last January on strategic flexibility of US forces in Korea. Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice agreed on a joint statement in which Seoul respects the necessity for strategic flexibility while Washington respects Korea's position that it shall not be involved in regional conflicts in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean People. However, further consultation process is required to deal with the possible inter-strait conflict in depth between the two allies.

V. Conclusion

The U.S. influences on South Korea's defense planning, force structure, crisis management, military strategy, and doctrine are so dominant that South Korea's defense cannot be thought of without the ROK-U.S. alliance. However, this nature is changing as the United States applies its military transformation and new global posture to the Korean Peninsula. As South Korea endeavors to take a primary role of defending against North Korea with self-reliant forces, the command structure of the ROK-US combined forces and force mix of the two allies on the Korean Peninsula needs to change accordingly. South Korea's force structure, C4I system, and defense modernization will undergo changes.

As most of South Koreans begin to realize rightly or mistakenly that military parity with the North has been achieved and the small number of US forces remains in Korea with the current combined command structure intact, demands for a new alliance will rise inside South Korea. During this transition period, Seoul and Washington should pay more attention to the maintenance and development of the alliance lest the two allies should meet the alliance crisis like in 2002 and 2003.

Over the past 52 years, the ROK-US security alliance has been successful in achieving its traditional objectives. And yet the past successes do not warrant the future successes. Now, challenges, pessimisms, distrusts overload the old alliance. New generations, new political elites, new rationales have already begun to undermine the robust bilateral relationship. The bilateral relationship between Korea and the United States is facing great challenges.

Now is the time for us to mend the relationship by creating a new vision and new values of the alliance. This historic adventure requires new entrepreneurial leadership. The presidents of the two allies should meet very personally to diagnose fundamental problems of the alliance and present new values of the alliance to Koreans and Americans. Above all, presidents of the two nations should roll up their sleeves and show a new working relationship to mend grudges, mistrust about the alliance. They need to show a new vision to the people of the two nations in a form of new vision and guidelines. The new vision will include why the two Koreas must not have nuclear weapons, how to achieve peaceful unification, how the alliance can achieve peace and stability on the Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, etc.

Seoul and Washington should organize a political advisory council for the political CEOs as the United States has with Canada and NATO countries. The Political Advisory

Council should take the mission of creating new values for the alliance. If there had been shrewd political management just on time after the two school girl accident tragedy, the bilateral relationship could have been better than now.

Traditional goals of the alliance have been tarnished and need to be redefined. Its traditional values were being challenged by organized pro-action groups in Seoul, often intermingled with North Korean propaganda war activities, whereas complacent expansionists who become increasingly impatient want to turn the current alliance into a regional without prudence. Deterrence and defense need to be supplemented by a new vision of peaceful coexistence and peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. Devaluing and mistrusting the alliance should end in Seoul, while impatience and anger about South Korean new elite and questions raised by them should end in Washington. Therefore, the two countries need to begin two plus two dialogue between Defense Minister and Foreign Minister of the Korean side and Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State on the US side as is happening between Tokyo and Washington.

Now is also the time for us to rebuild and enhance trust through joint actions, not by words. So far, Washington had been failing to recognize growing national pride and sentiments in South Korea resulting from its remarkable economic growth and change of generations in Korea. Instead of complaints and disappointments, we need to take care of demand by new generations in Seoul and in Washington at the same time. It is time for the two allies to build a strong public diplomacy to inform and educate the mass with new values and vision on the future alliance.

In this regard, the United States should avoid unilateral notification of its policy of the U.S. forces in Korea. The “shock therapy” to arouse South Korea’s concerns about the regional implications on US outflow of forces from the South should be avoided if the two allies want to keep the healthy two way alliance. Security consultation talks needs to be expanded to include the issues of how to deal with the emerging China and other countries in the Northeast Asian region to plan the ROK-US alliance for the long term future.

In attempting to have a self-reliant defense posture, South Korea needs to be more responsible for increasing defense expenditures and assuming command and control authorities from the ROK-US Combined Forces. With South Korea more self-reliant, then defense policy making process will become more mature and accountable and the force structure will become more balanced. Finally, South Korea could manage the alliance relationship more prudently and skillfully. Therefore, policy of strengthening a self-reliant defense posture is desirable for South Korea and the United States. This is the reason why the United States welcomes and helps South Korea. South Korea will need more of the U.S. advice and mature consultation for the success of the self-reliant defense policy.