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Replacing the Armistice

THE SELF-RELIANT NATIONAL DEFENSE OF SOUTH KOREA AND THE FUTURE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

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Introduction

It has been more that fifty years since the conclusion of the Mutual Defense Treaty, and the U.S.-ROK alliance is at a crucial turning point. The U.S. Forces, Korea (USFK) has been the essential element in Washington's commitment to the security of Korea. The withdrawals of the USFK have had quite an impact on the perception of security in Seoul. The recent plans to redeploy the USFK are based on new U.S. military policy spelled out in the Global Defense Posture Review (GPR). They do not represent a basic change in the ROK-U.S. relationship, but instead represent U.S. confidence in the ROK capability to defend itself. Be that as it may, those who are anxious about the redeployment/reduction, especially the "pro-Americans," are warning that any possible discord between the two allies would jeopardize the U.S. defense commitment to Seoul. For some in Washington, the redeployment issue may be utilized as effective leverage in dealing with the "ungrateful" Koreans.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the United States seeks to transform the ROK-U.S. alliance into a regional alliance aimed at the containment of North Korea and China, while South Korea desires a more symmetric partnership in the alliance, an alliance limited to the Korean peninsula. The recent joint ROK-U.S. statement in January 2006 on the strategic flexibility for the U.S. forces in Korea (USFK) causes many "independents" in Seoul to worry about the possibility that it could drag South Korea into an unwanted conflict with its neighbors.

However, the Roh Moo Hyun administration appears content with the agreement and emphasizes the transfer of the wartime operational control as the next major issue in restructuring the alliance. For some critics, the renewed doctrine of self-reliant national defense (*Chaju Kukbang*) of the Roh administration means a basic shift in the alliance (the administration has also been accused of being soft on the North Korean nuclear issue and paying less attention to close policy coordination with Washington). Consequently, the ROK government coined the term "*cooperative* self-reliant national defense," which means cooperation with the United States, not the cooperative security with its neighbors or North Korea.

Self-reliance in defense has been the objective of both North and South Korea in their relationship with the superpower allies for a long time. However, it does not mean self-sufficiency or disengagement. It is nothing more than a quest for the normalization of the ROK-U.S. alliance: to transform it into a more symmetric, future-oriented one. This paper aims to analyze the contents, preconditions, and policy implications of the

ROK self-reliant national defense initiatives by analyzing the ROK-U.S. alliance and the North-South Korean relations including the inter-Korean military balance.

ROK-U.S. Alliance and the Security of Korea

For the last half century since the Korean War, the security threat from North Korea has remained the number one concern in ROK-U.S. cooperation. The United States has also played a deterrent role against a possible ROK "march to North" or the nuclearization of any Korean state. Since the Mutual Defense Treaty was concluded in 1954, the USFK has been a symbol of the ROK-U.S. alliance, and this core deterrent is a necessary prerequisite for the security of Korea. Despite the conflict and controversies caused by withdrawal of the 7th Infantry Division in 1971, additional withdrawals during the Carter administration, and the announcement in 2003-04 of the redeployment and withdrawal of ground troops, this alliance has remained firm.

Washington has, for a long time, played the leading, sometimes dominant, role in deterring North Korea. The U.S. liberated Korea from Japanese imperialism, saved the South from the invasion of the North, and helped the ROK in grant aid to organize, train, equip, and maintain its armed forces, retaining the operational control. For a quarter of a century, there existed a military division of labor between *U.S. capital* and *Korean labor*. Following this first twenty years, thanks to economic growth, the ROK began to finance its own armed forces and launched a series force improvement programs, code-named Yulgok, since the mid-1970s.

Thus, framework of the alliance was transformed into a new division of labor between *U.S. strategy* and *Korean tactics*. The U.S. has exercised strategic planning as well as strategic deterrence. After Washington stopped the covert nuclear weapon program of the Park government in the 1970s, the ROK has concentrated on modernizing its conventional weapons. However, the desire for South Korean "strategic" capabilities has led to the efforts to extend the range of ballistic missiles and strategic information capability including early warning, intelligence, and C^4I assets, which would be redundant and less urgent under the existing alliance. Consequently, the alliance has been transformed into a division of labor between *U.S. software* and *Korean hardware*. The key asset of the USFK is not its firepower, although formidable, but rather its advanced information capability. The ROK procurement plans include C^4I(SR) systems as well as advanced weapon systems. However impressive they may be, high-tech weapons are still "hardware" unless Koreans internalize the information technology and managerial skills involved in the revolution in military affairs (RMA).

The latest phase of the division of labor in the ROK-U.S. alliance is *U.S. initiatives and Korean demand for equality*. Recently, the security relationship between the two allies has been undergoing a transformation from a patron-client relationship to a more or less symmetric partnership, due to the democratization and economic development of South Korea. Still, it is the U.S. that initiates changes in the alliance, while South Korea demands the normalization the existing alliance structure, that is, autonomy and equality. The U.S. also wants symmetry, albeit with differing implications. Washington demands equal contribution to the alliance including higher ROK defense burden sharing and support to U.S. overseas military operations that may culminate in a regional U.S.-Japan-ROK tripartite alliance against China.

Due to the augmentation of the ROK military and the deterioration of North Korean forces brought about by the North's economic crisis, the USFK become "surplus" defense assets. While the North is superior in "bean counts" or sheer "firepower scores" such as division equivalents (DE), the South enjoys a qualitative edge in military training, equipment support, logistics, and state of readiness, all supported by much larger defense spending. The North has lost badly in the inter-Korean conventional arms race. In particular, owing to the RMA, the South is far superior to the North in advanced weapons and information capability, an extremely important force multiplier. In addition, the geostrategic conditions on the peninsula, with numerous mountains and hills, definitely favor defense. A successful surprise North Korean attack with widespread use of chemical agent is an extremely unlikely, worst- case scenario.

However, there is one area in which North Korea has a major strategic advantage. Due to Seoul's close proximity to the DMZ, the North is able to bring major destruction upon the capital city with its long-range artillery. Although over-rated, the threats of the artillery as well as the alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) remain credible. There exists an *asymmetric balance* between the two Koreas in spite of the ROK superiority in military capital stock. It is a balance between the ROK(-U.S.) superiority in war-fighting capabilities against low cost DPRK deterrents. The two Koreas possess such strengths and vulnerabilities that a mutually assured destruction, with or without nuclear weapons, is highly probable. The security dilemma of the asymmetric arms race needs *political solutions*. South Korea and the United States, in cooperation with other nations in the region, should seek arms control and disarmament with North Korea including the North Korean nuclear program.

Still, the recent announcement of redeployment and withdrawal of the USFK has quite an impact on threat perception in South Korea. While the public opinion calls for

a more equal partnership in the alliance, it is also true that many South Koreans have maintained a deeply entrenched sense of insecurity. For them, the ROK-U.S. alliance and the USFK remain the backbone of national security in spite of the dramatic growth in economic and military capabilities of the South vis a vis the North. In fact, both Pyongyang and Washington have effectively manipulated the South Korean perception of insecurity in their negotiations with Seoul. A more serious problem concerning the troop redeployment and withdrawal would be that it might cause unnecessary conflict and mistrust between Seoul and Washington.

ROK Self-Reliant National Defense

In order to overcome this security dependence (or dependency) on the United States and potential conflict involved in the process, and owing to its rapid economic growth, South Korea has pursued "self-reliant national defence" since the 1970s. Self-reliance in defense aims at more responsibility, autonomy, and sense of security in the asymmetric alliance with the superpower. Basically, it is what Kenneth Waltz calls "internal balancing," or maintaining a balance in the entrapment vs. abandonment dilemma in the alliance politics. It also aims at identity building and self-respect of the client state in the asymmetric alliance.

President Park Chung Hee launched the policy of self-reliant defence in response to the shock of the Nixon doctrine and the withdrawals of U.S. 7th Infantry Division against strong protest in Seoul. It was also a route to autonomy from the U.S. Park became indignant with U.S. interference in the internal affairs of South Korea -- Washington reduced its military aid to Seoul in the early 1970s as a warning against the authoritarian rule and human right abuses of the Park regime. He sought self-sufficiency in defense budgeting – U.S. grant aid was terminated in 1976 -- indigenous arms production, and a covert nuclear weapons programme, but he never abandoned the alliance with the U.S.

President Roh also declares his firm position on self-reliant defense regardless the question of being pro- or anti-American. The term "self reliance" means, among other nuances, the take-over of the wartime operational control of the ROK armed forces and defense reform. The administration has taken self-reliance and defense reform very seriously. In 2005, it introduced "Defense Reform 2020, The Way Ahead," to outline the future of defense reforms. The legislative binder, the "Basic Law on Defense Reforms," is limited to indispensable items for reform, thus ensuring consistent

momentum while allowing for some flexibility. The law stipulates that reform measures be re-evaluated every three years. The National Assembly also passed a bill in December 2005 that enabled the launch of the Defense Acquisition Program Administration that will manage the purchase and development of military equipment. Its annual budget is approximately 10 billion USD.

The military are ready to exploit the defense reform as an opportunity for military modernization, while maintaining a close alliance with the United States and the current force structure. Particularly, defense reform is now being seen as compensatory measures to cope with the redeployments and withdrawal of 12,500 U.S. troops. The Defense Reform 2020 envisions force reduction from 690 thousand to 500 thousand, mostly in ground troops, but these cuts are supposed to be carried out in the 2010s. The Ministry of National Defense proposes new programmes including the Korea Helicopter Programme (KHP), while reinstituting programmes that were shelved due to the financial crisis in 1997-98 and the "Sunshine policy" under President Kim Dae Jung. They include: next-generation guided weapons (SAM-X), airborne early warning control system (E-X), next-generation fighters (F-X and F-XX), airborne refuelling aircraft, Aegis-class destroyers, and submarines with air-independent propulsion. The shopping list requires a sharp increase in the defense budget, from 2.6-2.7% of GDP to over 3.0%.

Yet these force restructuring and modernization plans are not quite future-oriented, but rather, dwelling in the past. They depict the hypothetical ROK military capabilities attainable at present, focusing on the overwhelming military superiority over the North. The future-oriented defense posture should emphasize flexibility and mobility to cope with new and uncertain threats in the future security environment, defense-oriented capabilities, and "reasonable sufficiency" in military investment. The investment plans requires, first of all, balanced budget allocation for both "material capital" and "human capital" is necessary. Second, not only the RMA but also the revolution in management and personnel that constitutes the so-called "military transformation" are sorely needed. Third, the ability to select the optimal force structure and weapon systems that suit to the nation's strategic, economic and technological conditions is required. Considering its economic base, South Korea is unable to replicate expensive C^4I(SR) capabilities of the U.S., however tempting they may be for the joint U.S.-ROK joint operation. Fourth, as the decision to purchase the F-15Ks demonstrates, the shopping list is a far cry from the manifested goal of increased indigenous production. Fifth, more efforts should be made toward research

and development (R&D) for non-WMD deterrents, especially in information technology in which South Korea has a relative advantage.

More importantly, the reform requires indigenous strategic planning and possibly a future defense posture without the USFK. Arms build-ups themselves are not an answer to the call for self-reliance. While South Korea has embraced the goal of self-reliant defence for more than three decades, the dependent mentality in national security has not changed considerably. The foundation of self-reliance is the consciousness of autonomy, responsibility, creativity for a long-term vision, and a wider consensus of and support from the people.

Future of the Alliance

The future of the ROK-U.S. alliance depends heavily on the developments on the Korean peninsula and in Northeast Asia. Both the ROK and the United States need to re-adjust the nature of the alliance in the changing security environment. Washington has been increasingly interested in transforming the U.S.-ROK alliance into a regional alliance, while Seoul prefers to maintain the alliance and the role of the USFK focused on the Korean peninsula. The U.S. global and regional strategies in Asia and the ROK security strategy basically tied to the Korean peninsula should be harmonized by pursuing and expanding common interests of both parties.

The inter-Korean reconciliation and the changing military balance between the two Koreas in favor of the South have enabled the ROK and the United States to explore new possibilities and challenges. Seoul and Washington should closely coordinate their policies toward North Korea. The tensions in the alliance during the two nuclear crises are partly due to a lack of mutual coordination of differing priorities: Seoul wants to avoid an unintended war, while nuclear non-proliferation is a more important concern to Washington. A breakthrough in U.S.-DPRK relations in parallel to the inter-Korean reconciliation could lead to the establishment of a peace regime that replaces the Armistice.

At the same time, the ROK security strategy, which has hitherto relied upon the ROK-U.S. bilateral alliance, must now face up to a more multilateral security environment in East Asia. In parallel to the peace process on the Korean peninsula, the alliance with the U.S. would be reoriented into a regional alliance to cope with new, uncertain threats in the region. If one examines the future configuration of power in this region, South Korea would remain a minor power, although it has become an economic powerhouse ranking 12th in the world. Korea, unified or not, should not commit itself to

an arms race against its neighbors. As peninsular power, Korea can match neither the continental China nor the maritime Japan. It needs to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance, while fostering a multilateral security regime in East Asia.

The joint ROK-U.S. statement in January 2006 indicates that both the Roh and Bush governments agreed on the strategic flexibility for the USFK. Many in South Korea, including a worried President Roh in the spring of 2005, opposed the strategic flexibility as it could drag South Korea into an unwanted conflict with its neighbors. In November 2005, however, an agreement was made between the two presidents to initiate ministerial-level talks in order to reach a bilateral understanding on the issue of strategic flexibility. These talks aimed at reaching an understanding on a wide range of strategic issues as well.

Public sentiment in South Korea is less confident. Despite the clause that the U.S. "respects the ROK position that *it* shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people," in the 2006 agreement, critics point out that the Roh administration succumbed to U.S. demand without acquiring firm U.S. guarantee on the ROK position or U.S. concession in other areas in return. Critics also argue that the agreement requires a revision of the mutual defense treaty and thereby the approval of the National Assembly. Another serious problem is the lack of public debate and communication between the government and people, which contributes to the declining public confidence in the administration.

However, the Roh government moves to the transfer of the wartime operational control as the next major issue in restructuring the alliance. Remarks made by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General B.B. Bell, commander of USFK, show that the U.S. agrees on the transfer in principle. If Seoul gets Washington's consent on the transfer issue in return of the agreement on the strategic flexibility, however, it would be a grave mistake. The transfer of the wartime operational control of the ROK armed forces is not a negotiable item in principle.

The "independents" in Seoul complain that U.S. unilateralism involved in the withdrawals of its troops from Korea has reinforced the perception of vulnerability and affcting self-respect of Koreans. While the psychological dimension of national security is important, the so-called "security emptiness" of a South Korea without the USFK is false consciousness. If North Korea misunderstands South Korea's will or ability to defend itself, then Seoul has to make Pyongyang face the reality. North Korea does not, however, have a monopoly on misunderstanding. U.S. misreading of North Korea is a subset of a more profound lack of understanding of Korea in general. U.S. ignorance or misconceptions of South Korea, a close ally with stable democracy,

prospering market economy, and millions of devoted Christians, are grating to South Koreans and has the potential to poison the alliance.

In the long run, Korea will be compelled to carry out cool-headed cost-benefit analyses of the ROK-U.S. alliance, centering on the China factor as well as issues in trade and defense burden sharing. The alliance with the U.S. does not constitute an end in itself but a means for establishing peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula. A regional ROK-U.S. alliance in the future could be an "alliance without the U.S. troops" or a "political" (that is, non-military) alliance, but only if the ROK takes stronger measures to "stake its claim" in the alliance. The regional alliance should be a strictly defensive alliance that rejects a war of preemption. There is a concern in Washington that Seoul may lean toward China, its number one economic partner who also shares complaints regarding the imperialist past of Japan and joint interests in preventing the collapse of North Korea. However, as the sensitive missile defense (MD) issue implies, many South Koreans are worried that the alliance would be transformed into a U.S.-Japan-South Korea tripartite alliance against China, which would jeopardize the security and prosperity in Northeast Asia. Not only an expansionist China but also a nationalistic Japan, engaged in territorial disputes with its neighbors, could become a revisionist power that threatens the status quo in the region. A future U.S-Japan alliance against China that may alienate South Korea would push the South as well as the North into the arms of China, leading to a tight bipolar environment in Northeast Asia.

The U.S. will and should remain an ally of (South) Korea, deeply involved in the peace process on the Korean peninsula. For geopolitical and historical reasons, the alliance with Washington will remain central to the security of Korea. First, the much debated power transition from the U.S. to China is a quite unlikely scenario, for the projections of China's economic output or military capability are overrated. More importantly, global hegemons such as England in the 19th century and the U.S. in the 20th century enjoyed superiority in "soft power" -- productivity, flexibility, culture, and leadership. Second, Korea would be unable to match China or Japan in overall national power or military capabilities. Although Korea remains a valuable security asset to the U.S. -- it has the largest and probably the strongest ground forces among its allies -- it is unlikely that it could play the role of a balancer between the U.S. and China or become a neutral power. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to search for alternative forms of alliance in which it maintains cooperation with both the U.S. and China: a non-neutral buffer/stabilizer state for peace and stability in the region. It requires a new look in U.S.

policy toward East Asia that envisions multilateral security cooperation in Northeast Asia.

Conclusion

The changing balance of power between the two Koreas in favor of the South and the inter-Korean reconciliation have enabled the ROK and the United States to explore new possibilities for the security on the Korean peninsula. The ROK security strategy, which has hitherto mainly relied upon the strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance, must now face up to a more multilateral security environment. For economic and geopolitical reasons, South Korea should actively lead the way for peace on the Korean peninsula and East Asia, while maintaining a minimum requirement for self defense under the framework of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The future security of Korea and its role in regional cooperation is at stake as the U.S.-ROK alliance transforms into a new post-cold war dimension. The alliance structure will be fundamentally re-examined, particularly in accordance with U.S. force redeployments, the new role of the USFK, wartime operational control over South Korean troops, reorganizing allied command structure, and the ROK defense reform for self-reliant defense. It is important that the self-reliance does not mean disengagement, but rather mutually satisfying and productive roles in light of shifting security scenarios as well as growth and development into roles more suited to their economy and policies on the peninsula and in the region.

In addition, since the security of the South is no longer attainable at the detriment of the security of the North, a multilateral, cooperative security approach is required to bring North Korea into Northeast Asian regional cooperation as a responsible member. The re-evaluation of the ROK-U.S. alliance is an opportunity for the South to pursue arms control and disarmament on the Korean peninsula, while enhancing its capabilities for strategic planning, intelligence, and operational skill by a series of defense reform and taking the wartime operational control of its forces.