

*Exploring Strategic Leadership of the ROK-U.S.  
Alliance in a Challenging Environment*

Luncheon Keynote Address by

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Today, I would like to highlight that the center of world politics and economy is rapidly shifting to Asia, and I will also offer my suggestions on developing strategic leadership in the ROK-U.S. alliance in such a challenging environment. Before doing so, I need to disclaim that the views I express today are my own and are not the official stance of the Korean government, the National Assembly, or the Saenuri Party.

Since the September 11<sup>th</sup> in 2001, U.S. foreign policy has focused primarily on the "Global War on Terrorism." The U.S. led the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and achieved military success, but it seems to need more time to declare political success.

While U.S. foreign policy has been excessively focused on the Middle East this past decade, Asia has been undergoing significant change. The center of world politics and economy begin shifting to Asia and now the pace of this shift is accelerating. From a strategic view, the U.S. needs to duly consider that China is at the center of change in Asia and that the political, economic, and military rise of China is a serious challenge to the U.S. not only in Asia but in other regions across the world as well. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has strived to legitimize a U.S.-led international order and play its role accordingly. But, such efforts are now under challenge in many areas across the world due to the rise of China. In particular, given that the U.S. is an Asia-Pacific nation, the U.S. must seek a new way to address the reorganization of the Asian order, which is mainly led by the rise of China and other regional countries.

Asia is the largest continent—about 30% of the world's land—and has the highest population density in the world, almost 60% of the world's population. The region represents more dynamic political, economic, military, and cultural change than other regions. Politically, it is truly diverse as nearly every type of political system created by humankind is found in Asia, from democracy to authoritarianism, monarchy, dictatorship, and communism. Economically, Asia already accounts for over half of the world's output and trade. So far in Asia, 31 free trade agreements have been completed, and even a larger number of negotiations are underway. The U.S. has so far signed free trade agreements only with Singapore, Australia, and Korea in Asia. Militarily, total military spending in Asia, mainly led by China, is likely to surpass Europe this year. The Chinese army alone is larger than total armed forces of any other single country in the world, including the U.S.

I believe the focus of U.S. foreign policy is returning to Asia not only due to the dynamics of Asia but also based on an extremely strategic decision driven by realistic needs to protect and promote the national interests of the U.S. and update and strengthen its leadership in Asia. In her article "America's Pacific Century" published in the November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy*, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that Asia is the center of world politics and wrote, "one of the most important tasks of American statecraft over the next decade will be to lock in a substantially increased investment--diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise--in the Asia-Pacific region."

In January 2012, the U.S. Department of Defense announced "New Strategic Guidance for the Department of Defense," which stresses the strategic importance of the Asia-Pacific region. Attending the Asia Security Summit, also known as the Shangri-La Dialogue on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that President Obama officially approved the strategic pivot to Asia last year and will re-assign the U.S. naval

forces currently deployed 50:50 between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean at 40:60 by 2020. The most explicit way for a country to express its grand strategic change would be to demonstrate strategic changes in military postures as military means is often considered as a strategic last resort when achieving a political goal.

As explained, more than at any other time since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. administration firmly believes in the strategic importance of Asia, and it has shown strategic resolve that is more than diplomatic rhetoric. I believe discussing the strategic leadership of the ROK-U.S. alliance amid such challenging environment changes is a strategic initiative that must be taken to promote mutual interests of the ROK and U.S., and furthermore for the ROK-U.S. alliance to contribute to regional peace and security and evolve into a global alliance.

Ladies and gentlemen!

I am very happy to evaluate the current ROK-U.S. relation is keeping the most harmonized and healthy one. However, I want to raise up three suggestions in exploring strategic leadership of the ROK-U.S. alliance for the future.

**First, the ROK-U.S. Joint Vision in 2009 alliance should be reinforced with specific action plans to realize the vision.**

- In 2009, the ROK and U.S. announced the Joint Vision as a blueprint for the future development of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Among several points in the Joint Vision, two are of especially great interest to me. First, the ROK and U.S. included the issue of unification of the Korean Peninsula in the statement, which was extraordinary. Second, the ROK and U.S. stated that they would step up civilian cooperation in space exploration. As far as I know, however, the ROK and U.S. have not yet had any chance of exchanging strategic ideas about national unification, and there is no substantial civilian space cooperation led by both governments. When there was little structural change of international politics during the Cold War era, presenting a vision itself had a strategic impact of suppressing unexpected change. However, in an era when the international political situation is very fluid, it is notable that a vision not followed by tangible and explicit action plans is sometimes not seen as development of the U.S.-ROK alliance but as a potential obstacle to development.
- I believe that upgrading the ROK-U.S. alliance to the global level may set a good example for other Asian countries regarding the demonstration of U.S. strategic leadership in Asia. It is true that regional security provided by the U.S. contributed greatly to the economic development of Asia since the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, Asian countries are unlikely to blindly join and cooperate with U.S. new initiatives in the region as it strategically intends. On the other hand, while protecting and promoting its interests in Asia and contributing to the prosperity and stability of Asia, the U.S. will not allow Asian countries to "free ride" on its diplomatic efforts, although it did during the Cold War.

**Second, the ROK and U.S. should fully prepare to meet environmental changes in Asia on role-sharing and cooperation.**

- Korea should seize every opportunity to efficiently promote its contribution to the international community based on the ROK-U.S. alliance. Although the ROK and U.S. are increasingly cooperating with respect to the economy, society, and culture in addition to politics and security, Korea's contribution to the international community based on ROK-U.S. cooperation is being promoted in limited respects such as participation in international peace-keeping operations and overseas development programs. The two nations need to seek a new way to promote our mutual national interests in the international community based on the ROK-U.S. alliance, which has developed substantially over the past five decades. Such efforts would be crucial toward realizing the ROK-U.S. alliance global.
- As the ROK-U.S. alliance evolves into a global alliance, the ROK will need to assume greater responsibility. Korea's global responsibility will grow, and its responsibility may become more important in ROK-U.S. bilateral relations as well. Because of such duality, discussions on change in ROK-U.S. relations tend to be politically sensitive. One good example would be defense-burden sharing between the two nations. Whenever the U.S. and ROK authorities discuss the sharing of military expenditures, the U.S. always asks Korea to take a greater responsibility, and Korea negotiates in various ways to minimize the burden requested by the U.S. Discussion over sharing a defense-burden should not be dealt with like a negotiation of the price of a commodity. In other words, rather than a bargaining between the seller and buyer, we have to mass up our capabilities toward achieving mutual objectives. I believe our responsibility should be discussed from a comprehensive perspective considering the current nature of the ROK-U.S. alliance, instead of limiting it to an immediate issue at hand.
- When the U.S. designs its national strategy toward Asia, the U.S.-ROK alliance should not be perceived as a "dependent variable" but as an "independent variable." ROK-U.S. relations are not only a national agenda for both countries but also an important issue in Korean politics. When we are discussing the global ROK-U.S. alliance, if there is less reflection of Korea's stance in shaping U.S. policy toward Asia or if what is not fully discussed between the two nations is accepted alone by the U.S., there will a much bigger negative impact on domestic politics in Korea. In addition, we are required to develop and streamline a constructive mechanism to improve a discussion process of sensitive bilateral issues. The "2+2 meeting," which began last year between the ROK and U.S., may be a good starting point in resolving this problem and should be expanded to not only include policy-makers but also working-level officials.
- Lastly, people in the ROK and U.S. begin to view the alliance as a critical social issue as the alliance evolves into a comprehensive form beyond the traditional area of politics and security. As the KORUS FTA goes into effect, changes in the ROK-U.S. alliance affect the lives of the ROK and U.S. people directly. Such a new perception of the alliance has both pros and cons. On the one hand, it is conducive to building a national consensus on the advancement of the alliance. On the other hand, the ROK-U.S. alliance has become politically sensitive and can easily invite negative public sentiment. Although the downside risk may become greater, there is a realistic approach that could maximize the positive aspect,

which is for both countries to expand public diplomacy and the governments to get involved proactively and not spare required support.

**Third, mutual understanding and trust should be enhanced and deepened in dealing with ROK and U.S. bilateral issues.**

- The most critical issue facing the ROK and U.S. is of course North Korea. After the death of Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un has assumed power as the new leader, but there still exists a possibility of change in North Korean leadership and an attendant sudden change. While North Korea repeatedly conducts provocations, the ROK and U.S. have reiterated imposing international sanctions and engaging in negotiations. From a deterrence perspective, expressing our intention clearly in advance is seen to be effective in theory. North Korea's behaviors, however, illustrate that our deterrence strategy has been not that effective in forestalling North Korea's provocations. In this context, I believe it is time for the ROK and U.S. to increase strategic flexibility across time and situations by considering a somewhat non-traditional response, that is intentionally increasing the uncertainty surrounding North Korea's speculation about our future response.
- The ROK and U.S. should jointly make strategic and persuasive efforts to help China understand that the advancement of ROK-U.S. relations does not aim at hedging against China. The best way is to identify an issue where Korea, the U.S., and China can cooperate with each other and promote cooperative relations. We need to take note that the Korea-China-Japan summit meeting has been taking place since 2008. There might be a number of factors in the inception of the Korea-China-Japan summit meeting, but I think "ASEAN+3" played a crucial role. The U.S. participated in the East Asia Summit for the first time in 2011 and opened a new representative office at ASEAN. As the U.S. increases its involvement in ASEAN or regional bodies within Asia, building cooperative relations where the four countries, namely the U.S., Korea, China, and Japan, could work together does not appear to be impossible in a long-term perspective.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to advance the ROK-U.S. alliance, we need to continuously develop the existing relations and be prepared to adapt more flexibly to changing environments. Changing bilateral relations according to environmental changes is not at all easy. The reason is that ROK-U.S. bilateral relations are much more extensive than ever and making a strategic judgment on the impact of a change in one area on another area is very limited. Also, both policy-makers and the public express their opinions through various means regarding changes in ROK-U.S. relations. However, over the past half a century, whenever ROK-U.S. relations faced a new challenge, we sought solutions wisely. I believe this is why the ROK and U.S. were able to form and maintain an alliance that is firmer and sounder than any other bilateral alliance.

Thank you.