

The U.S.-ROK Alliance: Projecting U.S. Power and Preserving Stability in Northeast Asia

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Introduction

The powerful deterrent provided by the U.S.-Republic of Korea security alliance has kept the peace on the Korean Peninsula for over 63 years. Today, with the rising threat of a nuclear-armed, aggressive North Korea, growing friction in U.S.-China relations, and rapidly changing security dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region, the U.S.-ROK security alliance is more important than ever and a pillar of America's ability to project military power, deal with uncertainty, and maintain stability in a region of vital importance to American interests. The 28,500 U.S. forces in Korea demonstrate America's determination to defend a key ally and reflect U.S. commitment to the region at large.

Nurturing and strengthening the alliance relationship—which has served U.S. interests well—will be a central task for the next U.S. president. This will be particularly true in light of growing concerns in the region about America's staying power, worries about neo-isolationist trends in the United States, and fears about China's attempt to become the region's dominant actor. Another challenge will be South Korean politics, where a victory by the center-left in the 2017 presidential election could bring to power forces critical of the alliance, sympathetic to China, and inclined to adopt a softer line towards North Korea.

Korea's Stake in the Alliance

Despite the ROK's lead in technology, training, and modern equipment, North Korea enjoys numerical superiority in terms of troops, tanks, artillery, and aircraft. The bulk of North Korean forces are forward deployed near the demilitarized zone, enabling them to strike the South quickly and with considerable effect in the event of a conflict.

The South Korean capital and a major portion of its population are within long-range artillery and tactical rocket range of the Korean People's Army (KPA). North Korea has in recent years carried out an artillery attack on a South Korean island, sunk a ROK Navy corvette in South Korean waters, and frequently threatens to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire." For South Korea, the North's threat is real and deadly. The U.S.-ROK alliance provides the confidence and military capabilities necessary to deal with it, especially as the DPRK tries to overcome its qualitative disadvantage by developing dangerous new asymmetric offensive capabilities.

In the event of war, South Korea would provide the bulk of forces to counter the North. While the ROK's military has grown increasingly sophisticated, the capabilities that the United States would bring to bear in a conflict would be essential to an allied victory. More importantly, however, with North Korea now in

possession of nuclear weapons and developing the medium- and long-range missiles with which to deliver them, the U.S. nuclear umbrella and America's strategic arsenal provide Seoul with an indispensable deterrent against the existential threat posed by the North.

The ROK government and people are generally confident of the U.S. commitment. Nevertheless, U.S. involvement in conflicts elsewhere, American budgetary challenges, and, despite the U.S. "rebalance" to Asia, lingering concerns about whether the United States takes Asia seriously continue to raise some doubts about American reliability. Reassuring Korea about U.S. staying power and commitment remains an important task.

The U.S. Stake in the Alliance

The American investment of blood and treasure in the Korean War set the stage for the ROK's remarkable transformation from an impoverished backwater into one of the world's major market economies, a leading trading nation, a vibrant democracy, and a key global partner of the United States. Korea's success story is a tribute to the effectiveness of the U.S. alliance system, U.S. leadership, and the appeal of the values and ideals America has espoused in leading the post-World War II liberal international order. The failure of the bilateral alliance would be a major blow to American prestige, and the end of the security relationship would severely damage U.S. ability to project power into a critically important region.

The U.S. stake in Korea extends beyond defending a success story and a nation committed to shared ideals. The alliance is the cornerstone of the American strategy to contain, deter, and, if necessary, defeat

North Korea, the leading threat to peace and stability in Northeast Asia. As North Korea develops missiles capable of striking U.S. regional military bases and, eventually, American territory, Korea-based ballistic missile defenses are becoming increasingly central to the defense of the United States itself.

The bilateral alliance protects America's ties with the world's 11th largest economy and our 6th largest export market. Beyond the Korean Peninsula, the alliance also serves to reassure Japan, which is particularly vulnerable to North Korea. The foundation provided by the bilateral alliance has also allowed the United States and South Korea to extend their cooperation into the global arena, where the ROK provides valuable support for U.S. goals and objectives.

Direct, Deploy, Deter, Defend, Defeat: Managing the Alliance

U.S. and South Korean forces work, plan, and would fight together in a joint command structure—the Combined Forces Command (CFC)—under an American four-star general who also serves as head of the United Nations Command (UNC) and U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). The deputy CFC commander is always a ROK general and the CFC includes officers and staff from both countries at all operational levels.

U.S.-ROK military coordination includes elaborate joint planning. Dialogue and exchanges take place at all levels, including regular cabinet-, joint-staff, and other senior-level meetings that ensure a high degree of transparency. Past North Korean provocations have found the two sides of the alliance able to communicate and respond quickly and effectively.

South Korean forces number over 630,000 and well-trained ROK armies have primary responsibility for the defense of the ROK and are deployed along the edge of the 160-mile long demilitarized zone. As part of an agreement with Seoul, the bulk of American forces, including the 2nd Infantry Division, are being relocated to two regional “hubs” south of the capital city of Seoul in a process expected to be completed by 2018-2019. This plan will greatly reduce the number of U.S. bases, rationalize the disposition of American forces, and help manage or eliminate many of the political and environmental sensitivities that arose because U.S. military facilities have often been situated in crowded urban or suburban areas.

Realignment will also mean that American forces are to play a supporting role, with the main responsibility for key combat missions to be handled by ROK forces. For example, in anticipation of the eventual transfer to the ROK of wartime operational control of South Korean combat forces, the “counter-fire” mission to locate and destroy North Korean long-range artillery will ultimately become the responsibility of ROK military units.

U.S. and ROK forces regularly conduct joint and combined exercises, some of them quite robust, to maintain operational readiness and fine-tune plans for the defense of Korea. These exercises, including Key Resolve and Foal Eagle, often include air, sea, land, and computer-simulated components. Major exercises are pre-notified to North Korea to avoid miscalculation or misunderstanding. North Korea nevertheless reacts strongly to these exercises, using highly threatening rhetoric to describe the defensive exercises as “war preparations.”

Cooperative defense against North Korean missiles is an expanding component of alliance cooperation. The ROK has largely focused on indigenous systems,

while also seeking to ensure maximum interoperability with U.S. missile defense systems. In response to a U.S. request, Seoul has agreed to discuss eventual deployment of Theater High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) by the United States. This deployment would greatly enhance the alliance’s ability to intercept and destroy North Korean missiles and set the stage for broader U.S.-ROK missile defense cooperation, including coordination with Japan-based systems aimed at countering North Korea.

The U.S.-ROK alliance works. In the event of war, North Korean aggression against the ROK would be met with a strong and immediate response. Pyongyang’s forces would suffer considerable losses and be unable to prevail, particularly with the additional forces and capabilities that the United States would bring to the fight.

The China Factor

The U.S.-ROK alliance is not directed against China. Nevertheless, as part of the U.S.-led alliance system in the region, the American presence in Korea serves to remind Beijing that the United States remains a major regional actor and a force for peace and stability. But this broader message conveyed by America’s military deployment is a delicate topic in South Korea, which by dint of geography must be careful not to offend its giant neighbor.

U.S. forces in Korea occasionally carry out off-peninsula missions and bilateral agreements on the “strategic flexibility” of American forces, which provide a basis for such activities in areas like disaster assistance and humanitarian relief. But South Korea is deeply sensitive to any suggestion that U.S. forces might play a role in a China- or Taiwan-related contingency.

The ROK government is also concerned that, with U.S. bases occasionally a problematic political and environmental issue in highly urbanized South Korea, opponents of the U.S. presence might question whether the U.S. needs as many troops in the ROK if their mission does not involve the defense of Korea.

China looms large in Korean thinking and strategic planning. The PRC is South Korea's largest trading partner and China is Pyongyang's sole treaty ally. In recent years as China-North Korea relations have cooled, Seoul has strengthened ties with Beijing in an effort to wean China from its traditional relationship with Pyongyang and strengthen China's confidence in the ROK as a cooperative neighbor. Seoul also seeks to solicit Beijing's support in managing North Korea and increase China's confidence comfort level that a reunified Korean Peninsula under Seoul's aegis would be better than today's status quo, in which Beijing is saddled with a dangerous and unpredictable partner.

Accordingly, the ROK, particularly under the leadership of President Park Geun-hye, has been cautious about criticizing China and less vocal than the United States and Japan in expressing concern about Beijing's assertive approach to regional territorial and historical issues. The U.S. should expect South Korea to continue to be reluctant to take any actions that could alienate China, even if the ROK quietly shares U.S. concerns about China's rising military power and influence.

The Politics of the Alliance

South Korean elites are overwhelmingly positive about the United States and strongly supportive of the alliance. Under Korea's last two presidents (Lee

Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye), popular support for the alliance has reached historic levels. The growing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea and Pyongyang's conventional provocations have reinforced the importance of the alliance in the minds of the South Korean people.

Nevertheless, there is a major divide between Korean conservatives and "progressives" in terms of their views on North Korea, China, and the U.S.-ROK alliance. The progressive center-left has traditionally supported concession-laden engagement with North Korea and a more sympathetic and tolerant approach to the Pyongyang regime. The center-left has also been eager to establish closer ties with China. Progressive elements have tended to be suspicious of U.S. motives in Korea, a legacy of the era when U.S. support for South Korea's military governments angered the left.

All these tendencies came to a head during Roh Moo-hyun's presidency (2002-2007), when a strongly progressive government was swept into power by a wave of anti-American sentiment after a tragic accident in which two Korean schoolgirls were killed by a U.S. military vehicle.

During his presidency, Roh proved uncomfortably solicitous (in the U.S. view) of North Korean concerns in talks with Pyongyang. Meanwhile, some in the ROK government feared the U.S. hoped to undermine North-South relations. At the same time, pro-China sympathies spiked and emotional anti-U.S. sentiment peaked, putting a strain on the alliance.

These trends largely disappeared with the election of the pro-alliance conservative Lee Myung-bak

in 2007, and the alliance has been on a solid footing ever since, including under current conservative President Park.

The progressive camp stands a chance of winning the next presidential election, scheduled for December 2017. Importantly, the center-left progressives learned some hard lessons during the Roh presidency, as fissures in the U.S.-ROK alliance developed on their watch. Nevertheless, a progressive victory in 2017 could return to power forces with a different perspective on the alliance, and who might be prepared to ease considerably the pressure on North Korea.

Bases and Burden-sharing

Under the 1953 U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty and related agreements, Korea provides the United States with a large number of bases, facilities, and training areas. The ROK also pays about 50% of the non-personnel related costs associated with the U.S. military presence.

ROK financial support is provided via a Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiated every five years. The current agreement, which expires in 2018, saw ROK contributions rise to more than \$867 million in 2014. This funding will steadily increase during the term of the agreement in parallel with the inflation rate.

While burden-sharing negotiations have been contentious in the past because of the strongly held view by some Koreans that the ROK is paying more than its “fair share”, recent negotiations under conservative-led governments have gone more smoothly. ROK willingness to allow the Special Measures Agreement to run for five years has made it possible

for U.S. Forces Korea to plan ahead with greater confidence. It has also reduced the opportunity for the Korean media and opponents of the alliance to criticize the U.S. and ROK positions on burden-sharing.

Widespread Korean concern over the rising threat from North Korea and uncertainty about China should continue to provide a supportive environment for ROK financial support for the alliance, as well as for steady increases in ROK defense spending. However, a widely held view that the U.S. military presence is at least as much in U.S. interests as it is those of the ROK means that future burden-sharing support increases are likely to be modest. The U.S. should nevertheless continue to press for maximum ROK financial contributions, but should keep in mind that increases in such assistance might be taken out of the ROK defense budget itself, thus detracting from the overall alliance effort to deter and defend against North Korea.

The U.S. should also continue to press the ROK to increase its purchases of American arms, systems, and military technology. Because of the size of its market and significant requirements, South Korea has been a major target of European firms. In urging Korea to buy American, the U.S. should emphasize interoperability and the need to maintain political support in the United States for the alliance.

Finally, thanks to the efforts of both countries, the U.S.-ROK alliance is stronger and more cooperative than it has ever been. But the alliance can become even closer if it is managed well. If it is, the result will be a more prominent American profile in Asia at a time when the regional demand for U.S. leadership is greater than ever.

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