

The Future and Current Status of the Defense Cooperation between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America

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The security environment of Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula changed with the rise of China and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The region's security also has been affected by the development of nuclear weapons in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. However, the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States, based on the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Agreement (MDA), reacted slowly to the change. Although the MDA has provided South Korea a strong deterrence from a threat by North Korea, the time has come to reevaluate and redevelop the defense cooperation for both nations.

The ROK-U.S. alliance marked the foundation of peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, functioning as a strong deterrent against a potential attack from North Korea. The U.S. nuclear umbrella and United States Forces Korea (USFK) reinforce the guaranteed security for South Korea. No one can ignore the severe threat that North Korea's nuclear weapons program and ballistic missile programs pose to South Korea as well as to the Northeast Asian region. Yet, South Koreans are accustomed to ongoing controversy involving their national security. A recent series of tense events, the Yeonpyeong Island shelling, the test firing of a long-range missile, and preparing for North Korea's third nuclear weapons experiment, seemed not to faze South Koreans. Only a few South Koreans believe that an attack by North Korea is imminent. Many Koreans instead feel that conservative and rightwing media exaggerate these events. Many have not taken seriously any threat from North Korea's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and nuclear weapons program.

Liberal scholars posit that North Korea's nuclear weapons program is not to mount an attack, but

rather is to defend against the ROK-U.S. alliance. Pyongyang may use the nuclear weapons program as a bargaining chip to solicit a U.S. guarantee of regime survival. The purpose of the USFK is not only to protect South Korea from the North, but also to push back against South Korea's ambition to force the ultimate reunification of the Peninsula. Conservatives and military generals want to postpone regaining wartime operations control as much as they can in the belief that South Korea could not defend itself without military aid from the USFK. In fact, Seoul is 30 miles away from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), close enough for a North Korean artillery attack. South Korea no longer harbors tactical nuclear weapons approximately 150 U.S. tactical nuclear warheads were fully withdrawn since the early 1990s. However, it would be ironic if South Korea, the world's 12th largest economy and 13th largest military spender (\$30.7 billion, 2.7% of its GDP),¹⁾ were unable to defend itself.

Against this backdrop, defense cooperation between the United States and South Korea should first be reoriented toward an updated mutual understanding of the current security environment. A lack of agreement between the two nations is currently creating conflict over their respective national interests. Several South Korean policy-makers may have somewhat misunderstood the current U.S. strategic concerns.

As shown by Joseph Nye's initiative²⁾ urging Japan to engage strongly with global affairs, the United States would like to establish a comprehensive vision of alliance that adapts to changes in the 21st century security environment.³⁾ The United States is having difficulty maintaining its hegemonic role as a global policeman. It discarded a win-win strategy in global theaters several decades ago. The current efforts to recover from the subprime mortgage financial crisis retard its ability to maintain its traditional engagement policy. While the European took the lead in ousting Kaddafi in Libya, the United States took a marginal role, sending cyber-supported drones. Due to financial problems, President Obama terminated the U.S. Iraqi mission and has announced the withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan.

In the 21st century era of cyber technology, the traditional tripwire deterrence policy in Korea is no longer workable. Uncle Sam believes Seoul can go it alone in defending itself. Under this consideration, the United States had already decided to reallocate some portions of the USFK to places of more imminent security threat. Uncle Sam pressed Seoul to deal with Tokyo by having a military pact emphasizing multilateral policy coordination toward the rise of China. In addition, the U.S. requires South Korea to be a responsible global actor as befits its status as the world's 13th largest economy. Washington demands that Seoul share higher USFK station costs too. In the long run, the

1) See the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://www.sipri.org/databases> [accessed on 26 June 2012].

2) Joseph S. Nye Jr., "The Case for Deep Engagement" *Foreign Affairs* 74, no.4 (1995).

3) See the White House, *Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea* (16 June 2009).

U.S. government calls for the ROK-US alliance to take on more comprehensive roles such as the global challenge of terrorism, proliferation of WMD, organized crime and narcotics, environmental protection, energy security, and human rights.

It is time to reconsider the real meaning of the alliance as regards South Korean national interests. Does the U.S. military presence in Korea a peace regime or does it perpetuate the division of the Korean Peninsula? Does the MDA still offer a mutual benefit in the face of ongoing security environmental change? Is the ROK prepared to take responsibility as a sole sovereignty without depending on the U.S. for security? Is there any possibility that the current lopsided ROK-US relationship may become extricated in a perilous situation of Sino-American conflict in the worst case? It is undesirable that one is performing as a rational actor maximizing its national interests, while another believes an altruistic big brother is taking care of its needs.

When South Korea, on its own, is able to manage the current North Korean nuclear weapons development and build permanent peace in the Korean Peninsula, it can assume a balancing role as a middle power in Northeast Asia (former President Roh Moo Hyun' s vision). The defense cooperation of both nations should be based on a mutual understanding of challenges of the current security environment. Building a real interdependent relationship of both nations means South Korea should take care of its own self-defense consistent with its national interests.

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