

# The ROK-U.S. Alliance: Strength and Resilience after Progressive Victory in 2017

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Perhaps one of the most convincing hypotheses to date is that if political leadership is more pro-American and supportive of America's foreign policy, then the alliance would be more likely to thrive in ways that would be otherwise impossible. The ROK-U.S. alliance is a key test case. The ROK-U.S. alliance has undergone a stress test under the progressive Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations between 1998 and 2007. The alliance has prospered due in large part to the unwavering support of the conservative Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations that were back in power after ten years of progressive rule.

Now, liberal candidate Moon Jae-in has been declared as the new president of South Korea after winning 41 percent of the vote. New fears loom large, casting doubts on the strength and resilience of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Will the ROK-U.S. alliance continue to stand firm and remain resilient after the progressive victory in South Korea's presidential election held a few days ago? The alliance relationship will more likely face difficult times again if the ruling elites within the new administration refuse to give the alliance a central role in the country's grand strategy. This may be particularly true when it appears that South Korea and the U.S. are no longer perfectly unified in their strategic perceptions of the common threat posed to their security unlike the Cold War period.

What needs to be pointed out here is that a thorough understanding of the paradigmatic changes in the U.S. alliance policy and the accompanying changes in the division of alliance labor is essential to exploring why the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to enjoy strong cohesion regardless of political change.<sup>1)</sup>

## Capabilities as Determinant of Alliance Cohesion

The shift from threat-based approach to the capabilities-based one in the U.S. alliance strategy in the face of the challenges of the post-Cold War security environment serves as the starting point for research into the conditions that determine alliance cohesion. The U.S. declared its shift from ‘threat-based’ to ‘capabilities-based’ approach in its 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review and focused a greater proportion of its resources on transforming the U.S. military, which has subsequently triggered a dramatic shift from ‘threat-based’ to ‘capabilities-based’ alliances.<sup>2)</sup> Unlike the structural ‘threat-based’ alliances, in that the allies were expected to fight in their region against the communist threat, and/or serve as the basis for U.S. operations, in the nonstructural ‘capabilities-based’ partnerships, they are increasingly expected to embrace the situation where alliance cooperation expands in scope beyond the specific requirements outlined in the mutual defense treaties to include a broader range of security issues and threats.<sup>3)</sup>

Amid such developments, whether the longstanding allies of the U.S. are sufficiently capable of assisting the U.S. in the creation and management of the U.S.-led Asia-Pacific order, rather than their geostrategic location, gains increasingly more importance particularly in circumstances where the relative power of the U.S. and China is rapidly shifting in the direction of the latter.<sup>4)</sup> This is particularly important when as amply demonstrated by the 2016 presidential election, Washington is confronting the imperatives of overcoming intensifying domestic fiscal constraints and sharpening divisions within the American body politic.<sup>5)</sup>

## Changes in South Korea’s Capabilities and the Evolution of Division of Labor

The alliance division of labor that was operative during the Cold War was that the U.S.’ formidable

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1) Lee Jee-eun, “Envoys: Trump Expected to Keep Strong Ties with South Korea,” VOA News, November 30, 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/a/envoys-trump-expected-to-keep-strong-ties-with-south-korea/3617106.html> (Search date: February 6, 2017); “Trump defense chief stresses U.S. defense commitment to Japan,” The Mainichi, February 3, 2017, <http://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20170203/p2g/00m/0dm/082000c> (Search date: February 6, 2017).

2) Quadrennial Defense Review Report 2001 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2001), at (searched date: 25 June 2015).

3) Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman, “U.S. Alliances in the Asia Pacific: Doing More and Expecting Less,” in Carl Baker and Brad Glosserman, eds., *Doing More and Expecting Less: The Future of U.S. Alliances in the Asia-Pacific*, Issues & Insights, 13-1 (Honolulu: Pacific Forum CSIS, January 2013), p. 46.

4) Kenneth G. Lieberthal, “A Look at U.S.-China Relations from Beijing and Shanghai,” *Foreign Policy Trip Reports*, 13 of 61 (June 2010), at (searched date: 24 June 2015).

5) William T. Tow and Douglas Stuart (eds.), *The New U.S. Strategy towards Asia: Adapting to the American pivot* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, Abingdon and New York), p. xi.

offensive capabilities were the “spear” to be paired with South Korea’s “shield” whose role was limited to providing the bulk of defense capabilities. The ROK-U.S. alliance became more cohesive when there was an increase in the degree of autonomy the Northeast Asian ally has granted to Washington, as the patron compensated them for providing more robust protection.

Unarguably, South Korea has become one of the most ‘capable, interoperable, and trustworthy’ alliance partners of the U.S. South Korea has steadily increased capabilities to expend tangible and intangible supports and resources to narrow the capabilities gap and promote interoperability through standardization with the U.S. The new division of labor that has been facilitated - and indeed made possible - by South Korea’s enhanced capabilities has not only significantly contributed to making the ROK-U.S. alliance more capable and sustainable than any time in recent history, but has incentivized both the U.S. and its most capable ally to work together to enhance alliance cohesion and credibility regardless of political change.

The U.S. provides South Korea protection through extended deterrence, the major components of which include nuclear, conventional, and political deterrence.<sup>6)</sup> Nuclear weapons are the supreme guarantor of deterrence, but conventional deterrence has become an indispensable component of US assurances to South Korea given that the credibility of conventional deterrence vis-à-vis nuclear deterrence appears to be increasing given the current security environment defined by low-level conflicts.<sup>7)</sup> Indeed, the incorporation of advanced conventional systems in the ROK-U.S. alliance can provide a more credible deterrent complementing existing nuclear and conventional capabilities. Two such advanced conventional systems that could enhance the alliance’s deterrent capabilities are conventional strike systems and ballistic missile defense systems, such as the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system operational in South Korea.<sup>8)</sup> In the new division of labor, consequently, the U.S. assumes the primary responsibility of providing more effective, credible extended nuclear and political deterrence, while its allies with the most sophisticated conventional defense capabilities are increasingly expected to assume more of the defense and deterrence burden far beyond their own territories, although the demarcation of duties is not yet clear-cut.

Worth noting here is that given recent further declines in U.S. defense spending, South Korea is increasingly expected to take on greater responsibility for its own defense by taking advantage of its enhanced conventional deterrence capabilities. As South Korea is increasingly aware of the need

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6) Ariana Navarro Rowberry, “Advanced Conventional Weapons, Deterrence and the U.S.-Japan Alliance,” Herbert Scoville Jr. Peace Fellowship, Arms control and Non-Proliferation Initiative at Brookings, 2014 December, p. 2. <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/advanced-conventional-weapons-deterrence-us-japan-rowberry.pdf> (Search date: May 12, 2017)

7) Ibid., p 13

8) Ibid., p. 2.

to respond to the US call for greater burden sharing (or responsibility sharing) in the Asia-Pacific region, it is also well poised to embrace the situation where alliance cooperation expands in scope beyond the specific requirements outlined in the mutual defense treaties to include a broader range of security issues and threats. In return for its conventional contributions to deterrence, Seoul elicits more of the “soft” components of extended deterrence, which consists of U.S. declaratory policy, clear statements of U.S. support after provocative actions by adversaries, and formalized bilateral dialogue.<sup>9)</sup> They are intended to send a signal to adversaries that the United States will protect Seoul.<sup>10)</sup> In addition to the transfer of wartime operational control of South Korean military forces from the U.S. to the ROK, which represents more autonomy in security and defense policy formulation, South Korea is increasingly given more opportunities, under the guardianship of the US that is in desperate need of a joint leadership role played by one of its most capable allies in this region, to make its voice heard and acknowledged both regionwide and globalwide.

It can be therefore inferred that the possession of ‘capabilities’ by U.S. allies to assist the U.S. that is in desperate need of alliance partners capable of assisting in the creation and management of the U.S.-led regional order serves as the major determinant of whether or not they can enjoy considerably more autonomy and influence in Asia-Pacific and beyond while at the same time eliciting much stronger types of security commitments from the U.S. Thanks in large part to the enhanced role of its capable alliance partner, the U.S. enjoys far more opportunities than ever to concentrate more resources on shaping a new Asian century favorable to American principles and interests by preserving or restoring a balance of power in the U.S.’ favor.

This signifies the possibility that an asymmetric military alliance is more likely to evolve into a highly sophisticated institutional arrangement if its members develop the capabilities to create, extend, and modify the ways in which it operates, as it provides the underlying framework for building the Asia-Pacific’s security architecture in ways favorable to the common principles and interests of both strong and weak states, which is also widely regarded as highly important by political leaders of all stripes in both parties of the alliance.

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9) Ibid., p. 7.

10) Ibid.