

Re-Aligning the Military and Political Dimensions Of the ROK-US Alliance: The Possibilities

*Patrick M Morgan, Ph.D.
University of California, Irvine*

In a nutshell, the ROK-US alliance faces the following problem: for some time the military and political dimensions of the alliance have been out of alignment on adjusting to the international and national security issues that concern the alliance. In many ways the alliance should be doing well. After all, over time North Korea has become steadily weaker as an international actor, while those who explicitly oppose many elements of its foreign and domestic policies have grown in number, including all its immediate neighbors. The promising opening to the outside world that the North undertook after signing the Agreed Framework has been sharply devalued and it is back to being quite isolated. The economic recovery the North had begun earlier in this decade seems to have slowed. It is difficult to see how the North has benefited in any serious way from its missile tests or its test of a nuclear device. The alliance's goal of containing and deterring North Korea is well in hand – the DPRK has made no great breakout politically from containment and is militarily even weaker relative to the alliance than before, despite its missile and nuclear weapons programs. In addition, the alliance partners have been doing reasonably well in the East Asian system: flourishing economically, modernizing militarily. Despite all this the alliance has been under great strain in this decade, with much recrimination between the allies, so numerous analysts have suggested that it is not at all healthy. In this case, at least, success has been breeding decay.

Characterizing the Alliance

Compared with standard alliances in the past, the US-ROK alliance has been quite unusual. It has had a potent combined command in place, under US leadership, for any new war with North Korea and has generated elaborate additional military

cooperation, including a good deal of joint military planning and training, regular extensive exercises in rapidly moving huge American forces to Korea, considerable compatibility in weapons systems, and elaborate political consultation about all the details involved and the maintenance of the overall alliance orientation.

In fact, the two members have made the alliance the cornerstone of a very high level of *community*, which is manifested in:

- A wide range of extensive interpersonal relationships among elite Koreans and Americans;
- Movement of many Koreans to the US, and considerable intermarriage among Koreans and Americans in the US and Korea;
- Enormous economic ties – in trade and increasingly in investments
- A fair amount of cultural interpenetration

What makes this community particularly interesting is that it involves states and societies with very uneven levels of dependence on and importance to each other – in economic, political, strategic, and military terms - and with few cultural similarities in language, ethnicity, history, and development over time. Until recently, the members were quite different politically. The community also involves societies geographically far apart.

However, compared with other US alliances the US-ROK alliance does not look particularly unusual at all. It was developed to meet an imminent and very potent military threat, which was equally true of the Cold War NATO alliance, the US alliances with Taiwan and Japan and the very close association (short of a formal alliance) with Israel. It lay in the heart of what the US considered a vital regional system in terms of its own national security, just as NATO did or the US associations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel and others in the Middle East. As with many of its other allies, the US made significant efforts to promote ROK economic development with the idea that it would gradually assume the dominant share of the burden of its

national defense. The very high level of community, and the combined (wartime) command in the ROK-US alliance paralleled similar arrangements in NATO and in the lesser (in military terms) but still immense community developed between the US and Japan. All displayed an American liberalist penchant for promoting not just a handshake about plans to fight together but detailed preparations to do so, not just a political-military association of convenience but the domestic development in an imitative fashion of the allies along American lines. The US promoted democracy and capitalism to build a peaceful world of like-minded states and societies, and the allies always seemed to Americans like the best place to start.

In short, the US entered into alliances not only to successfully practice containment and the eventual defeat of the communist world, but to build the basis for a transformation of international politics along the liberalist lines championed by Woodrow Wilson after World War I and referred to ever since as Wilsonian internationalism. Those who characterized the alliances in realist terms, as arrangements of convenience in the face of common threats, were right occasionally, but this was usually on US associations with smaller, weaker governments. In its major alliances the liberalist US rhetoric was not a smokescreen. It should also be said that initially most of these alliances really were arrangements of convenience for the allies themselves; security was the primary goal, regardless of what the Americans had in mind. But over time and, for a variety of reasons it is not necessary to catalogue here, nearly all the major allies or close associates of the US (Iran is one exception, China another) moved in the direction the US advocated.

An Alliance in Trouble?

As noted in the title of this article, the alliance is in trouble because its political and military dimensions are out of sync. Why and how is this the case? Perhaps the best way to demonstrate this is to compare the recent developments in the US-ROK alliance with developments in other US alliance relationships.

Since 1945 American allies have always had to cope with tension, at times severe, between the US pursuit of its global

security responsibilities and its tendency to approach regional or local security concerns from some conception of how they fit in the American global effort, and the allies' natural desire to have American support for *their* local and regional security concerns. With regard to American global preoccupations, the allies and associates usually raised the following as standard complaints:

- 1) The US was devoting too much attention and too many resources to other places *at the allies' expense*. Europeans were less interested in what happened in Vietnam than that the US was stripping down its forces in Europe of many of its best people to fight that war.
- 2) The US might be damaged by its military and other operations elsewhere, thus shrinking its willingness and ability to come to their assistance. Taiwan, South Korea, and Israel feared that the Vietnam War would result in undermining the US willingness to fight for them, so each government tried bolstering its military self-sufficiency via a nuclear weapons program.
- 3) The US would somehow draw them, directly or indirectly, into its distant concerns and security operations, such as when US – supported Israeli operations in the Middle East eventually brought on the OPEC oil embargo against the West, including Japan.

With the end of the Cold War, this third criticism of the US in the alliances became more problematic. Most analyses of this development stress that the alliances ran into difficulty because the threats the alliances/associations existed to confront largely disappeared. From a realist perspective, alliances deal with threats – take away the threats, and the alliances fade. However, a more accurate analysis would start with the fact that the decline in threats since the end of the Cold War *has mainly been experienced by the allies*. Europeans have seen serious threats in their neighborhood mostly from a decline from Russia and other European members of the former Soviet Union as well as from North Africa. American support of their security has been largely for residual and implausible concerns, like the possible return of a Russian threat or to help insure that Germany does

not again dominate Europe. Latin Americans face no external threats and few debilitating internal or interstate conflicts. East Asians worry about North Korea but the DPRK's conventional military capabilities have been decaying and there is still no evidence that North Korean missiles can carry nuclear weapons or do more than minor damage conventionally. Israel faces no threat of invasion, nor do Kuwait or Saudi Arabia; Israel's big concern is about a possible future Iranian nuclear weapons capability.

Unchanged in the US is the strong perception, even conviction, that there are serious threats it must deal with. This goes with being a hegemon, having to care for not only what are strictly American security national interests but for global security management. From the American view, the alliances might be as important as ever because the US must deal with threats all over the world. Thus, the tension between American global security concerns and the regional and local concerns of the allies has remained constant, even increased. The US wants their support in dealing with its major security concerns, wherever they exist. The allies are not only less interested in those elsewhere than in their own backyards, they have less need to tackle US concerns so as to ensure American help because the US is now less vital for their security.

Thus it is not surprising that the US has typically taken the lead in trying to refurbish and redirect the alliances; it has the most to gain. In Europe the US promoted a wide range of adjustments to NATO. It suggested that NATO needed new goals, new activities, and a broader focus. The slogan of the day was that it had to go "out of area" in its concerns or it would soon go "out of business." Next, it led the way in suggesting that NATO had to stress its community aspects, using them to *absorb* East Europeans so as to resolve their major security concerns, bringing the East Europeans into the West by, in part, offering them NATO membership. The US also pressed for NATO involvement in the American nonproliferation effort on WMD, and lately in the "war on terrorism" proclaimed by President Bush. The US added that the NATO's basic design should not change, a design under which the US provides the NATO Commander and the political and military leadership of

the alliance. The obvious goal was not just (as is often suggested in Europe) a continued dominant role for the US on the continent but a better NATO fit into US global security responsibilities.

Perhaps the best summary of this would be to say that the US has asked that NATO be strongly supportive of American hegemony. An alternative version would be that the US is seeking a better organizational basis, in part via a reformed and revitalized NATO, for what is really *Western hegemony*. Still another version would be that the US needs European help to exercise its unavoidable leadership in the international system, the stability and security of which is of great interest to Europeans like everyone else. Whatever the version, the point is that the US wants the alliances, starting with NATO, now to be primarily oriented toward serving the *senior partner's needs and responsibilities*.

There has been a somewhat similar development in the alliance with Japan. While the US has benefited from Japan as a base for power projection in Asia, from Japan's perspective the point of the alliance was to serve Japan's security needs. For years Japan participated in only a limited fashion in its national defense. Until the Gulf War it did not help pay for US security efforts outside Japan. In the 1990s the US began suggesting the alliance needed reorientation. Japan should do more and, as with NATO, this should be within the context of continued American leadership of the alliance. The alliance would focus less on defending Japan, developing broader responsibilities for regional peace and security. (This was almost an "either out of Japan or out of business" approach.)

Japan has responded.¹ It has continued expanding its power projection capabilities and has been slowly removing constitutional barriers to participation in regional and global security management. It has gradually moved toward cancelling restrictions on its participation in joint defense of the country. It has new arrangements for missile defense that will integrate its capabilities with US missile defense systems and is closer to joint command arrangements on some forces. It now says that a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan dispute is in its national interest, and has actively campaigned for permanent membership

on the Security Council. In short, it is becoming a normal great power within the framework of the alliance with the US and is accepting the shift in emphasis in the alliance toward regional and global security management.²

Washington can take satisfaction in its *modest success* in refashioning the alliances. Even modest success is of major importance. After all, the implications of the overall effort are vast and represent a major step for the peoples involved. No wonder they are cautious and careful, even if the trend is clear.

However, thus far the US-ROK alliance has developed differently. Washington has not pressed to give the alliance such a clear out-of-peninsula focus; it suggests this but not so energetically yet. Even though it believes the alliance needs a new focus along those lines, and even though Great Britain excepted, the ROK has sent the largest contingent of forces by an ally to aid the US in Iraq, such steps have been limited and ROK participation in the Iraq War has been obviously reluctant – plainly driven primarily by the need not to alienate the US. Instead of retaining US leadership of the alliance, the ROK government has insisted on taking over the wartime Combined Forces Command. The required arrangements for this will be complete by 2012 under current plans, and are so extensive that the ROK will be left largely in charge of the alliance situation and missions on the peninsula. While the ROK is rapidly upgrading its forces with this in mind, the US is moving its forces well south of the DMZ and Seoul, cutting them by a third, and reorienting them toward missions elsewhere around the world in addition to whatever contribution they might make to South Korea's defense.³ Most importantly, the allies have been displaying different priorities on security in a clash between the global security management concerns of Washington and the specific regional ones of Seoul.

At the heart of the different course for the alliance from the others is this divergence in threat perception.⁴ North Korea has remained a serious concern for both parties. As usual, the US has assessed that threat largely in a broad East Asian and global context while the ROK has emphasized its specific national security; there has been nothing new in that. However, since 1997 and especially since 2000, Seoul's national strategy has

married the traditional deterrence posture of the alliance with a strong engagement effort toward the North. Initially, the US was also pursuing engagement plus deterrence, but in 2001, it shifted to a more confrontational approach and away from engagement, indicating it had doubts about the reliability of deterrence over the long run vis-à-vis North Korea, preferred to think more along the lines of a preventive attack and regime change, and saw Pyongyang as almost certainly an unsuitable partner for engagement.

Ironically, both governments have tended to soft pedal the conventional military threat from the North, recognizing Pyongyang's sharp drop in relative military power in the past two decades so they have agreed on that aspect of the threat from the North. However, the South decided that the best way to exploit this in dealing with the North was to *deal with it* – to open up a wide range of cooperative interactions. This was while the US was moving toward restricting its already minimal cooperation with the North even further. The divergence reflected two broad elements:

- 1) a differing reaction to the North's resumption of its nuclear weapons development efforts. To the Roh government, this was not a sufficient escalation of the North's threat to justify relaxing its détente campaign. To the US, this was evidence of a rising threat to its allies in Northeast Asia and of the ability the North would soon have to make a major contribution to the global proliferation of nuclear weapons, possibly even to terrorists.
- 2) a difference in priorities. The US saw the broader North Korean threat as most important. South Korea insisted that its desire finally to erase the threat from the North and eliminate the major barrier to unification – the ultimate objective of ROK foreign policy and its national aspiration – took priority

Each then added the claim that the other's approach interfered with its own, that Seoul's engagement effort was bolstering the North's threat to major American interests or that the American hard line was the main barrier to eroding tensions

on the peninsula and opening the door to unification. This implied that the ally's goal and overall strategy toward North Korea was part of the problem, and thus something of a threat to its own security! That is a good indication of an alliance in trouble.

While not so directly pertinent, the ROK and US also developed disagreements on other matters. The invasion of Iraq was not popular in South Korea. American ambivalence about China clashed with blossoming Sino-ROK relations, as China became steadily more important to the ROK as a way to influence the North and promote unification. American deepening of cooperation with Japan and advocacy of improved ROK-Japan security cooperation collided with ROK frictions with Japan over territorial and other matters, more indications of trouble in the alliance.

Explanations

Most explanations for these developments do not seem to get to the heart of the matter. They are, however, worth repeating here, since they have been important in the domestic and intra-alliance dialogs in recent years. Perhaps the most valid one is the suggestion that the rise of China has been an important factor. As China is North Korea's foremost, almost its only friend, it is now the best source of advice to the South on intra-Korean issues, the best communications channel outside of Seoul's limited direct contacts to the North, and the government with the greatest leverage on the North. If events ever begin to slide toward unification, China's reaction would be very important. Seoul would want both China's support on unification and China's decision not to inject its forces into the North, for any reason. China is also a major destination of South Korean foreign investments and the South's largest trading partner. Two decades ago Seoul reached out to Beijing, and vice versa, when it became increasingly clear that each had much to offer the other, and it is hardly surprising that the relationship has continued to blossom. With a healthy alliance, this should not have contributed to any breach in US-ROK relations. After all, Washington and Beijing have been pursuing expanded relations too, economically and even militarily. But with the

alliance in trouble, this step by Seoul looks more suspicious to Washington. Also relevant on threat perceptions is the fact that the US is suspicious of China's rise, but the ROK thus far is not.⁵

Another element often cited is the rise of regional identity in East Asia, a development to which South Korea has made important contributions. This is being driven by rising economic interdependence in the area. The extensive bilateral economic ties between the US and many countries in the region are now mediated by the rise of China as more and more investment money (American included) has poured into China to make the cheap goods that flow to the US. Countries all over the region are depending very heavily on selling raw materials, machinery and semi-finished goods to China. South Korea aspires to an important role in the region, and, since many others have reservations about the dominance of the US, a relaxation in US-ROK relations is useful to the ROK. On the other hand, there is no evidence that a better relationship with other East Asian governments could only have been obtained by letting the alliance erode. No other country except North Korea has made that a prerequisite to expanded ties.

Perhaps the most popular explanation is the generational shift in Korean society and politics, reflected in the election of President Roh Tae-woo. Many emphasize that the younger generations in South Korea have no personal recollection of the US role in the creation of the ROK and its survival in the face of the North Korean invasion in 1950. For them, frictions with the US loom larger as the shadow of history ebbs, including the inevitable difficulties that come with hosting American forces. Others point to the left-wing, anti-American political orientation of teachers in the ROK as having shaped younger generations accordingly. It is said that this helped revive contentions that the US was responsible for the initial division of the peninsula, complaints about US military atrocities during the Korean War, and nationalist reactions to American complaints about ROK trade practices. Still others stress the shift in South Korea's identity as a generation has emerged that is not rooted in the South as poor and backward but reflects its immense progress. South Korean analysts often make the point while suggesting that the alliance needs to be "rebalanced," because South

Koreans no longer see their country as weak and dependent, but as a rising world powerhouse. This rebalancing is something the US has been slow to recognize as necessary. In this view, South Korean interests and concerns, perceptions and perspectives, priorities and policies should be much more important in shaping the alliance relationship. This is obviously a poor fit with American pressure to have the alliance be of greater service to American priorities.

This view would be more convincing if the US had not recently agreed to more engagement with the North, to the transfer of the Combined Forces Command responsibility to the South in any future war with the North, and to reductions in the profile of American forces in South Korea. For years the US has suggested, as it has with its other allies, that South Korea should carry more of the load in providing for its security. Polls show no massive decline in good feelings toward Americans, nor of a big drop in Americans' attitudes toward the ROK.⁶ (Lee) This strongly suggests that the heart of the problem is a clash between the current governments and rejections by each of the other's recent foreign policy priorities. This is not really surprising since the enormous political, economic, and social progress of South Korea has made the two societies much more like each other, which is normally the road to much better relations among democratic countries.

The disagreements can plausibly be traced, in part, to political ineptness on the part of both governments in recent years. Generally speaking, the military leaders and other military personnel of the two nations seem to find their level of cooperation and compatibility quite high. They do not feel that the ability of the two armed forces to work together for Korea's defense has diminished.⁷ Hence the title of this article. The political and military dimensions of the alliance have become misaligned and this needs fixing to make the alliance healthy again.

Further Analysis

In terms of grand strategy, Washington is seeking an overarching association of the West and its friends for purposes of global security management, much like the one that handles

global economic management. An initial point is that it is now customary to extend the concept of security well beyond physical safety from attack by a state. Thus, global security management is about much more than in the past in terms of actors of concern, and the many possible components of what is now often termed "human security." The West has had a great deal to do with stretching this basic concept in international politics, being responsible, for instance, for getting some potential or actual efforts at genocide inside societies declared threats to "international peace and security."

Along these lines, the main Western strategy for peace and security now involves promoting democracy, capitalism, human rights, and globalization. There is nothing puny about the goals of the prospective association! Those goals are not really controversial among the potential members. It is American insistence on treating resistance to, or behavior contrary to, these goals as a *threat* that often deserves a coercive, particularly military, approach that is seriously contested.

This is hardly surprising given the ambitious sweep of the American perspective. It envisions a massive collective management of the international system under US leadership, and not with a status quo orientation. The aim is a forthright effort at radical change. In this sense the United States is a *revolutionary state in the international system*, seeking partners in a transformative reign. No other democracy is thinking in quite this way, with the possible exception of Britain under Tony Blair. Instead, when it comes to making substantial efforts up to and including the use of force, those governments think primarily in terms of a) regional security improvements and b) gradual change in the international system under Western encouragement. They favor giving history more of a nudge than a rude shove.

Hence the pattern that has emerged. Cooperation on the overall goals along these lines now exists, enough to make rulers uncomfortable from Moscow and Beijing to the Middle East and many other places. But the Americans are regularly frustrated with their allies for being insufficiently ambitious about the cause and too leery of possible costs and difficulties, complications and casualties. They aren't helping enough and,

all too often, are critical of American leadership. That stimulates American feelings, dating to a much earlier Cold War era that the allies are ultimately free-riding and status-quo orientated. From this have emerged familiar assertions associated particularly with the “neocons”: the allies are more trouble than they’re worth, too unreliable and under-equipped in military situations, not going to pull their weight. Washington is better off acting unilaterally or with coalitions of the willing. Multilateralizing the American response on major security issues is now likely to lead only to half-hearted efforts and disastrous results.

It is frequently claimed that this attitude is no longer fashionable, given the disaster the Iraq war has become. After all, the US has painfully discovered how much it needs its friends and international legitimation for its efforts. However, American alienation from its allies arose long before the Bush administration. Disparagement of having to act with allies was common in the Cold War and was quite evident in the Clinton years. It will readily return.

As for American allies, they are equally frustrated about the United States. It wants to lead but, in their view, in a rather authoritarian way, quite unsuited to a clutch of democracies. It is also too unilaterally inclined. It doesn’t “consult” enough, a word which they usually use as if it meant “take our advice.” It doesn’t limit its actions to those legitimized in some larger collective decision process. These irritating behavior patterns are made more disturbing by the fact that the United States regularly *takes security issues too seriously*. It sees threats as greater and more urgent than they are and therefore overreacts, becoming too ready to take extreme steps including the use of coercion.

This frustration has been clearly evident in recent years in NATO and other US alliances. However, in the US-ROK alliance, it has posed particularly troublesome difficulties. The broad ROK position is that the US has failed to adjust to today’s stronger Korean national feelings and to the enormous progress of South Korea that has helped inspire those feelings. The alliance has not been adjusted to the ways South Korea is now a much more significant country. It needs to become more

“balanced,” with the ROK playing a larger, more independent, role in shaping its own security policy and posture. It should be in charge of joint military operations in fighting a new war. It should be more self-reliant on national defense. It should be in charge of designing and implementing the political strategy for dealing with North Korea – settlement of the division of the peninsula should basically be in Korean hands. Hence the ROK role in the alliance would be larger, its priorities given much more attention. Instead, the US just dismissed the ROK engagement strategy and has pursued policies contrary to it that risked igniting a war on the peninsula and great harm to the ROK.⁸

The general American view can be summarized this way. The alliance has always been basically one-way: the US helps defend the ROK, not the other way around. What Seoul now wants is a greatly enhanced role in a continuing one-way alliance. This would not result in a more “balanced” alliance. To make it more balanced South Korea would have to shape its interactions with North Korea by reference to the overall regional and global security context, being sensitive to why North Korean behavior is so important to the United States. Only if the alliance becomes of more value to the US will it become more balanced. But Seoul is not really prepared for that. It indicates that the alliance can have other missions of a broader security nature but not necessarily the ones emphasized by the United States.

In this sense, the ROK position on North Korea is inadequate. North Korea has been a declining threat in conventional military terms and no match for the South politically and economically. The one thing it excels in is making trouble. The real threat it now poses pertains to proliferation, a threat with serious regional and global dimensions. South Korea wants nothing done about the North’s proliferation that would damage its real priorities - bringing unification closer without risking a North Korean collapse. Thus it asks very little reciprocity from the North for engagement, downplays DPRK human rights violations, and will not participate fully in the Proliferation Security Initiative.⁹ It won’t support doing whatever may be necessary to prevent North

Korean nuclear proliferation – no serious sanctions, no use of force.¹⁰

The limitations of Seoul's concept of the alliance are apparent. It is continue providing a *deterrence* guarantee by the US, so that the ROK won't have to *use* its rapidly improving military capabilities in fighting a war with the North. Thus, the ROK's becoming self-sufficient militarily mainly means not having to defer to the US as much on dealing with North Korea. Meanwhile, Seoul insists USFK elements should be used outside Korea only when this does not clash with South Korean interests.

The United States is now very wary of arrangements in which it needs the consent of its partners to act, even as it bears most of the costs of global security management. This includes arrangements for using force in a multilateral fashion in which the other participants specifically tailor the use of their forces to fit their narrow national concerns (as with NATO forces in Afghanistan now). Why not go with coalitions of the (militarily) willing instead? Clearly the ROK is an awkward fit with US leadership of global security management via a Western coalition. It not only puts relations with North Korea ahead of global security issues, it is also uncomfortable with Japan, something which does not fit with the pluralistic security community the US expects the coalition to be.

There is a more fundamental problem as well. The United States wants the dominant role in the coalition. It wants the most say in determining the best interests of the international system, particularly as the state most capable of upholding those interests against threats. Therefore, it also wants the largest voice in determining what is done for that purpose. Of course, it wants the operation of the international system to be reasonably compatible with various specifically American interests, which gets problematic when the US (particularly when Congress is included) wants to uphold specific interests regarded by all other coalition members as unimportant for global welfare.

This American attitude needs to be taken seriously. The key to understanding American foreign policy is that it has often, for some time, *defined its national interest at least partially in international, communal terms*. Americans typically believe that:

- what is good for the US is, broadly, good for others;
- what is good for others is, broadly, good for the US;
- what is good for everyone should be a central American objective.

This has been the basis for the overall liberalist orientation of American foreign policy since World War II.

Many others, including many in Korea, disagree with this view. First, there have always been American proponents of a more traditional, more nationalist concept of American interests, people usually associated with a standard realist perspective. Outside observers and many American scholars therefore insist this is the true nature of American foreign policy and its motivations. Second, American policy makers have often departed from a liberalist course since 1945. The Cold War was framed and conducted in a largely realist vein. Often the US has conducted its arms sales, foreign aid efforts, foreign trade, covert actions, and other activities in a classic, self-interested fashion. This has certainly not gone unnoticed in Korea, as elsewhere. As a result, there is a constant refrain that the US is involved with South Korea because it serves American interests

All this distorts more than it informs. It is vital to grasp the dominant liberalist thrust of American foreign policy and not be misled by periodic departures from that orientation by Americans and their government. That liberalist thrust is clearly evident in the construction and operation of most of the Cold War American alliances in the development of their community dimensions, and the way they have continued since the Cold War ended. It is evident in the way the United States is constantly irritating in its pursuit of democracy, human rights, open economic systems, capitalism in and for its friends, its allies, and not just for neutrals and enemies. It has so imbued the modern American approach to international economic affairs, that the American involvement in those matters from Bretton Woods to globalization makes no sense without using that as the starting point. Realists from Morgenthau to Mearsheimer have lamented that the United States is not fundamentally realist in its orientation to the world. This is one reason realist-inclined administrations have repeatedly ended up pursuing *détente*,

engagement, the application of democratic peace theory, and the pursuit of international welfare policies, something that became increasingly evident over time with the Bush administration.

Many Koreans do not believe this. Koreans have a limited inclination to depict another society and government as not mainly motivated by narrow national interests. One of the best recent Korean discussions of the contemporary problems in the alliance proposes that the US would have a better image in Korea if there was a candid U.S. acknowledgement that international politics are driven primarily by national interests, including military security, economic opportunities, and political values, and that the alliance is one way of promoting such national interests.¹¹

This is despite the additional contradictory assertion that

“the United States tends to regard North Korea as evil, tyrannical, and a hellish nightmare; the ROK seems to view it as dangerous, though frightened and fragile, and requiring a cautious and reassuring approach. This divergence may derive from the fact that the South Korean approach is based on a historical experience with the North and the U.S. attitude is based on a universalist and moralist philosophy.”¹²

If this is true, and indeed it is, the US will not approach its alliances in a typically realist fashion, and does not have a typically realist national strategy.

From the Korean realist perspective the alliance exists because it serves American interests to have bases in Korea for projecting its power so as to maintain its dominance and conduct its rivalry with China (just as was the case during the Cold War vis-à-vis China and the Soviet Union). It defended Korea in 1950 because that interest and its credibility for other alliance commitments were on the line. It opposes North Korean nuclear weapons to preserve its privileges as a nuclear “have.” It supported military dictatorships in the ROK because they suited American interests. Any number of Koreans believe the US deliberately divided Korea in 1950, has treated the South as a satellite, and is covertly opposed to unification because it would diminish American influence on the peninsula.

Therefore, a stronger Korea must give priority to its specific national interests. It can stop deferring to the US. Just as with DeGaulle’s France (that bastion of realism), the essence of national dignity and the ultimate in national interests is self-sufficiency in national defense. Thus, the alliance has never really represented Koreans’ true needs and interests.

Many Americans, of course, talk in terms that reinforce this view. Just like Koreans, they cite American trade and investments in Korea, the strategic value of Korea for US forces, the strategic importance of Korea for Japan – the preeminent American ally in Asia, etc. to explain the alliance. Some of them are realists – this view of the alliance comes naturally to them. Some are catering to Koreans’ view of how the world works. Some are simply repeating what is used to sell the alliance to various communities in the US and Korea.

In fact, while the United States set about protecting South Korea years ago for classic realist reasons in the Cold War, its relationship with South Korea always also turned on US promotion of economic development, democracy, and social liberalization for the ROK. And one of its primary objectives was always to get South Korea, like its other allies, to take more responsibility for its own defense; it has been trying to cut its forces in the ROK for years.

A standard theme in discussions of the alliance, and of international politics in general, is that the end of the Cold War created a huge change in international politics and in the perspectives and positions of many individual states. Along these lines, one of the more underappreciated developments was a reduction in the necessarily realist components of American foreign policy associated with having to conduct the Cold War. In effect, its disappearance freed the United States from the Cold War’s limitations on more widespread pursuit of American liberalist, Wilsonian, inclinations in foreign policy. This has applied to Korea as it has elsewhere. From the American perspective the end of the Cold War initiated a process of marginalizing the North Korean threat *as a threat on the peninsula*, a threat the alliance was created to confront. What really matters is North Korea’s threat in the context of global and regional security management, as discussed earlier. That means

the alliance has to be evaluated much more than during the Cold War for its contribution to the American liberalist agenda as a hegemon. The ROK's reluctance to fit into that picture, insisting instead that the alliance be devoted much more now to what matters to Koreans, i.e. peninsular security and unification, means that to Americans the ROK is still not mature enough, farsighted enough, and liberalist enough to rebalance the alliance in the most proper, most significant way.

The Remedy

If the above analysis is correct there are some grounds for optimism in terms of at least easing the present strains in the US-ROK relationship, though not for eliminating them. The thrust of many explanations for the deterioration in the alliance scanned earlier is that the problems are the product of demographic shifts, major adjustments in the regional international structure, or profound shifts in national and regional identities which are the sorts of elements that require adjusting to rather than correcting – they won't go away. Instead, the first part of my analysis suggests that a good deal may be accomplished if the military and political dimensions of the alliance are brought into alignment once again. The strains in the alliance can be traced primarily to deficiencies in the two administrations during this decade with neither being a model of diplomacy and tact and both intent on promoting rather radical departures from prior policies on North Korea. The American and ROK armed forces have accepted with considerable equanimity the plans for and initial steps toward major changes that have emerged and are hard at work in implementing them. Now, if only the two governments can do the same.

Another reason for optimism, therefore, is that important political changes are coming. The Roh administration ends soon, with elections in December (for president) and April (for the National Assembly). The Bush administration is in its "lame duck" phase and will be gone early in 2009. In foreign policy the new ROK administration will very likely to want improved relations with the US, which opponents of the Roh government have insisted on and are likely to be in position to pursue after the election. The Bush administration has already retreated from

confronting North Korea in favor of a renewed engagement effort, something its political opponents, who are odds on favorites to win the next election, have long urged.

Still another reason for optimism is that the agreement reached with North Korea will mean, at least initially and hopefully for much longer, an end to the immediate source of much of the recent tension in the alliance. The allies disagreed over how acceptable and desirable it was to pursue engagement; the agreement makes them partners again in engagement efforts designed to lure the North into reforms, abandonment of nuclear weapons efforts, and a normal relationship with the outside world.

How can these grounds for optimism best be exploited? The place to start is with the situation on the peninsula. American disagreements with South Korea have had important parallels with the US-European relationship after 1990. In each case, the US pressed for more support of its global management of security, and in each case the allies resisted, preferring to put a greater priority on making progress in regional security, whether in Europe, on the Korean peninsula. The Europeans have an excellent case for considering the solidifying of the European security situation as a huge contribution to global security. A good sign of its validity is that the US has been drawn into participation in this European effort to a major extent, in the Balkans and in the enlargement of NATO. Europe has been less supportive elsewhere than the US has wanted, but its contributions have been important nevertheless. In the same way, South Korea can insist that a breakthrough in the security situation on the peninsula would be a significant contribution to regional and global security and that this is most likely to be brought about, not by confronting North Korea and seeking its collapse but by pursuing a normalization of that political system and its relations with others. As in Europe, the US should participate in this in a major way, through its own engagement with the North.

The rationale is straightforward. As the hegemon, the US has an important interest in quieting serious conflicts and cutting the presence of weak/disintegrating states in strategically and economically important regions. Obviously, the expansion of

NATO and the EU and the spread of Western ways in Eastern Europe serve that interest. Much of this involves the spreading of democracy, a central American security policy objective. In the same way, the most dangerous matter in Northeast Asia is North Korea; getting it opened up, normalized, and eventually absorbed into South Korea and the region would substantially boost peace and security in the area, which is very much an American hegemonic interest. If that proves impossible but North Korea can be tightly circumscribed in its impact on Northeast Asia, and if the problem it represents can be effectively managed by its neighbors; that is also a fine contribution. South Korea's preoccupation with the first of these objectives should, therefore, be considered as potentially a fine contribution globally and regionally, irrespective of the ROK's specific national motives. The US may be vital in Pyongyang's view for easing North Korean security concerns and international isolation, but South Korea is clearly the key to the future of that regime. The US should be satisfied if a basis exists for the containment, if necessary, of the damage a cantankerous North Korea can do. The cornerstone for isolating and containing the North, if necessary, was put in place when the Six-party talks culminated in the other five agreeing not only on a tentative deal with the North but before then on a sanctions regime (Russia has now officially joined.)¹³ If this can be expanded into collective containment of the damage from any breakdown of the nuclear weapons agreement, the North Korean problem will be far less worrisome. Thus, repairing the alliance should start with more American respect for what South Koreans have been trying to do in their own backyard. In view of the military changes in the alliance already under way, these steps would confirm Seoul's dominant role on dealing with and hopefully settling the North Korean problem, and secure a continuing alliance relationship with the US which Koreans are more ambivalent about but seem reluctant to abandon.

Next, the ROK and US need an extended conversation to bring their policies on China into greater alignment. The ROK needs to make it clear to China that its alliance with the US is a central component of its security (if that is how it feels), even if Korea is unified, and that this is also true of the US alliance with

Japan – it is also crucial for Korean security. The ROK must also explain to China that if its massive military buildup continues while it remains opaque about its intentions, the alliance could eventually be oriented against China. With Beijing's concerns in mind the ROK and US should agree that there is no intent to maintain more than token US forces, if that, in a unified Korea. The US should make it clear that it will not seek to maintain significant forces in Korea if the North Korean problem is resolved unless, due to other serious security concerns, the Korean government requests it. If the US and ROK also remain committed to steadily expanding their economic interactions with China, this will bring their overall foreign policies on China into alignment.

One implication would be that Korea will regard a major military clash between China and Taiwan as potentially threatening to its security. Thus the US and ROK would be more in tune with regard to Taiwan. The most likely outcome of the China-Taiwan situation seems to be a partial reconciliation driven by rising engagement. This would be politically palatable for third parties if Taiwan forgoes efforts to become independent but remains autonomous enough to be heartily democratic (far more so than Beijing allows in Hong Kong). The US and ROK should strongly agree to support this and resist steps in other directions.

A necessary accompaniment to all this would be extended US-ROK planning (with China and Japan and probably Russia) on how to deal with a North Korean collapse or a prolonged unification process. A US military response should be almost entirely ruled out – no US participation in an occupation of the North, no American forces stationed in the north of a unified Korea. (This is to ease Chinese concerns and discourage any Chinese occupation.) It would also include plans for substantial aid to the reconciliation/reintegration effort, both directly and through strong American solicitation of aid from others, so as to ease ROK concerns about this. It would have to include plans for tailoring the alliance to the disappearance of the North Korean threat. If the ROK sustains the kind of relationship with China it wants, the alliance would then be focused on regional

and/or global security management, with joint power projection plans for that purpose. (See below)

The one other adjustment necessary concerns Japan. The US will not end its alliance with Japan, nor reverse the rising cooperation of the American and Japanese military establishments. In Europe, a US-dominated alliance was the best framework for the transition to Germany's return to full great power status. This is also true for Japan's resumption of a normal status and role as a great power. Expecting Japan to settle for less is unrealistic. Such an association is also the best context for the rise of China, with Beijing's choosing whether it handles that arrangement in a participatory or an antagonistic way.

South Korea has recently disparaged the rise of Japan which, by implication, rejects the whole basis of the American strategy for security management in the region. Unless it somehow wants to be most closely linked with China, or feels it will have the heft to provide a balance or bridge among the system participants – neither of which seems feasible – the ROK must reconcile itself to the rise of Japan just as is to the rise of China. What is likely to emerge, and has been suggested by Japan, is an association of East and South Asian democracies.¹⁴ Such an association will eventually want to be the fundamental element in managing regional security. Koreans must figure out how they want to relate to this. Among the possible options for Seoul are the following:

- as an opponent of any efforts to isolate China;
- as the leading proponent of regional multilateralism and regional economic integration;
- as manipulator of the tension between its natural political associates and its naturally dominant economic partner.
- as a founding member and vigorous contributor to regional management built on the region's democracies.

For its part the US needs to expand on an important but overlooked (in the US) feature of the Six-party talks. While the

US sought to use the talks to isolate and contain North Korea, which to a degree the participants succeeded in doing, the talks also served to *contain the United States*. Just as in the North Atlantic regional system, success for the hegemon requires that it uses its leadership position to gain an *earned influence* rather than operate on an assumed or structural influence. American influence should continue to be gained in the well developed ways employed during the Cold War in the transatlantic region – putting an emphasis on constant consultation, showing a determination to build consensus whenever possible, often displaying a willingness to defer to other members' concerns and a readiness to take advice. Leadership in those days involved offering important ideas and normally setting the agenda, then coming up with the working proposals for discussion, but consistently ensuring that all parties had their say and being open to adapting proposals to gain a consensus. The United States needs to bring this sort of leadership to bear in Northeast and East Asia, abandoning the more clearly unilateral posture which the Bush administration unsuccessfully pursued. There are certainly many frustrations in using this form of leadership, and the US is not a patient nation. But it learned to operate this way during the Cold War to its everlasting credit, and it needs to return to it now.

This section began by noting that there are grounds for optimism about the US-ROK alliance, that it can be adjusted in important ways to get onto a more solid track. However, there is also an important reason to be pessimistic, and this can also be gleaned from the earlier analysis. All the American alliances and important associations will continue to be stressed by the tension between the American preoccupation with conducting global security management responsibilities and the reluctance of others to support wholeheartedly the United States in that endeavor. The US-ROK alliance is not the only exception, it is one of the more vulnerable alliances to which this applies.

What has held the alliance together in spite of a strongly divergent threat perception, and not only divergent but often opposing national strategies for dealing with the threat, is that it remained clear that North Korea was a serious threat, of sorts, on both the peninsula and at higher levels. But if the North Korean

threat continues to ease, the US will replace it with another on which it will want active cooperation from the South, while the South is going to continue to stress peninsular security affairs above all else.

In short, underneath the divergence between the Seoul and Washington about the nature and dimensions of the threat from North Korea is a different threat perception in general between the US as a hegemon chasing global-level threats and one of its most locally preoccupied allies, a divergence resting on a very different conception of how a modern democracy defines its national interests. What the United States is going to be asking for, what it is trying to construct, will continue to make South Koreans uneasy. That uneasiness and the behavior that will result will continue to make the US frustrated and even resentful.

It is fair to say that today all democracies are, by virtue of being democracies, friends of the United States. They are likely to resist the extinction of democracy by interstate aggression virtually everywhere. Thus to this extent the alliance of the US and the ROK will continue even if on paper it were allowed to expire. But whether the current alliance can be adapted not only to South Korea's current concerns vis-à-vis the peninsula (which it can) but to American concerns about adapting American alliances to the pursuit of much broader security management is an open question.

Conclusion

The specific developments of the next two or three decades in the Northeast and East Asian regional systems cannot be predicted with a high probability of success. It seems certain there will be extensive changes of all sorts in the foreign relations and domestic situations of the members, changes that will often not be successfully anticipated. Thus, the best route to the effective pursuit of security and order is establishment and maintenance of a flexible and legitimate system management that has a leader, suitable opportunities for members to play important roles, the capacity to contain disagreements and outright conflicts, and the ability to maintain the necessary domestic political support from and within all significant members. While no model for such management can be simply

lifted from the past, many analysts have suggested that the most successful model has emerged and persisted in the North Atlantic region and was then extended to encompass nearly all the rest of Europe after the Cold War era. Sketched above is how the US-Korean alliance might be successfully adapted for more immediate purposes in Northeast Asia, but also concern about how to make the alliance effective in security management for East Asia and for the world as a whole.

Notes:

¹ On Japan's military changes and closer links with the U.S. see Christopher W. Hughes, "Japan's Re-emergence as a 'Normal' Military Power," *International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper 368-9*, International Institute for Strategic Studies: London, 2004

² The US alliance with Australia has moved in this direction as well.

³ On US military shifts in the ROK and ROK military improvement plans see Nam, Chang-hee, "Realigning the U.S. Forces and South Korea's Defense Reform 2020," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 19 No. 1 (Spring, 2007) pp. 165-189.

⁴ Scott Snyder, "A Comparison of U.S. and South Korean National Security Strategies: Implications for Alliance Coordination Toward North Korea," in Philip W. Yun and Gi-Wook Shin, eds., *North Korea: 2005 and Beyond*, Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Research Monographs: Stanford University, Stanford, CA., 2006, pp. 149-165.

⁵ Choi, Jong-kun, "Predictions of Tragedy vs Tragedy of Predictions in Northeast Asian Security," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 18 No. 1 (Spring 2006) pp. 7-33.

⁶ Lee, Nae-young, "South Korea and the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Public Opinion About ROK-U.S. Relations," in Korea Economic Institute, ed., *Challenges Posed by the DPRK for the Alliance and the Region*, (Korean Economic Institute: Washington, D.C. 2005) pp. 1-11.

⁷ On recent allied military cooperation see Nam, Chang-hee, "Realigning the U.S. Forces and South Korea's Defense Reform 2020," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 19 No. 1 (Spring 2007) pp. 165-189.

⁸ See *Ibid.*, and Park, Kun-young, "A New U.S.-ROK Alliance: A Nine-Point Policy Recommendation for a Reflective and Mature Partnership," Korea Economic Institute, ed., *Challenges Posed by the DPRK for the Alliance and the Region*, (Korean Economic Institute: Washington, D.C. 2005) pp. 12-34.

⁹ For background on the PSI and the ROK reaction to it see Mark J. Valencia, "The Proliferation Security Initiative: Making Waves in Asia," *International Institute for Security Studies Adelphi Paper 376*, International Institute for Strategic Studies: London, 2005.

¹⁰ An example of ROK aid no matter what the North does: "Seoul OKs W240 Billion for N. Korea," *Chosun Ilbo*, May 16, 2007. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report*, May 16, 2007, available through Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development, University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim, bscott@nautilus.org.

¹¹ Park, Kun-young, "A New U.S.-ROK Alliance: A Nine-Point Policy Recommendation for a Reflective and Mature Partnership," Korea Economic Institute, ed., *Challenges Posed by the DPRK for the Alliance and the Region*, Korea Economic Institute: Washington, D.C. 2005 p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 33

¹³ According to "Russia Makes U-Turn, Joins UN Sanctions Against N. Korea," *RIA-Novosti*, May 30, 2007. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report* May 30, 2007, available through Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development, University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim, bscott@nautilus.org.

¹⁴ See: Yukio Okamoto, "Prime Minister Abe's Visit to the United States," *Napsnet Policy Forum Online*, May 17, 2007. Available through Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development, University of San Francisco Center for the Pacific Rim, bscott@nautilus.org; Dan Blumenthal, "America and Japan Approach a Rising China," *Asian Outlook* December 8, 2006, published on line by the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC.; and Brad Glosserman and Bonnie Glaser, 2007, "And Now to Trilateralism," *PacNet Newsletter*, May 24, 2007, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Hawaii.