

## **Evolving Military Responsibilities in the U.S.-ROK Alliance**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The U.S.–South Korean security alliance has been indispensable in achieving Washington's strategic objectives and maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia. A confluence of developments, however, is forcing changes in the alliance. These factors include a changing threat environment, an evolving U.S. military strategy, and South Korea's desire for greater autonomy as a result of its improving military and economic capabilities. It is important that the alliance begin the evolution from a singularly focused mission to a more robust values-based relationship that looks beyond the Korean Peninsula. Without substantial and sustained involvement by the senior political and military leadership, the alliance may not be sufficiently adapted to the new threat environment, including as a hedge against Chinese military modernization. The U.S. and South Korean administrations must also provide a clear strategic vision of the enduring need for the alliance and implement a robust public diplomacy program to prevent the erosion of public and legislative support. The plan to develop a U.S.–South Korean strategic alliance is a testament both to the successes of the long-standing military relationship and to the shared values of the two democracies.

**KEY WORDS:** US-ROK alliance, strategic alliance, US Forces Korea, Combined Forces Command, The U.S.–South Korean Strategic Policy Initiative, OPCON transfer, and Defense Reform 2020

The U.S.–South Korean security alliance has been indispensable in achieving Washington's strategic objectives and maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia. The U.S. security guarantee has long deterred a North Korean attack against a key U.S. ally while providing the shield behind which South Korea has been able to develop its economic strength and institutionalize democratic rule. The U.S. military presence has also precluded an arms race among countries in the region.

A confluence of developments, however, is forcing changes in the alliance. These factors include a changing threat environment, an evolving U.S. military strategy, and South Korea's desire for greater autonomy as a result of its improving military and economic capabilities. Several significant steps to modernize the alliance have been accomplished during the past five years but have largely been overshadowed by strains in the overall political relationship. President Roh Moo-hyun's strategy for South Korea to play a balancing role in Asia and a series of provocative statements and policy differences with the Bush Administration has led to a degradation of the partnership.

The election of Lee Myung-bak as South Korea's president in December 2007 brought renewed vigor and optimism to the alliance. Emphasizing that the bilateral military alliance is the bedrock of South Korea's national security, President Lee declared that repairing the relationship with the United States was his primary foreign policy objective. The election of Barack Obama as U.S. president will not alter Washington's assessment of the importance of South Korea as a military ally, a strong economic partner, and a nation that, like the U.S., values freedom and democracy. President-elect Obama has stated that he will support continued strong alliances with both South Korea and Japan to achieve U.S. security objectives, including maintaining peace and stability in northeast Asia.

Although there is agreement in Washington and Seoul on the need for transforming the alliance, there is great uncertainty over its form. U.S. officials have privately expressed frustration with the slow pace of efforts to define a new strategic vision for the alliance.

It is important that the alliance begin the evolution from a singularly-focused mission to a more robust values-based relationship that looks beyond the Korean Peninsula. Without substantial and sustained involvement by the senior political and military leadership, the alliance may not be sufficiently adapted to the new threat environment, including as a hedge against Chinese military modernization. The U.S. and South Korean administrations must also provide a clear strategic vision of the enduring need for the alliance and implement a robust public diplomacy program to prevent the erosion of public and legislative support.

The U.S. must eliminate its tendency in recent years to define its relationship with Japan as the only critical alliance for Asian stability. This prioritization is understandable, given the convergence of Washington's security objectives with those of Prime Ministers Koizumi and Abe and the commensurate difficulties with President Roh. However, U.S. policy statements that imply a secondary status for U.S. relations with South Korea are a disservice to the stalwart military bonds forged during 50 years of the bilateral alliance. U.S., Japanese, and South Korean security interests are best served by extensive and coordinated military cooperation among the three allies.

### **Changing U.S. Security Priorities**

The disposition of U.S. military forces in Asia has been affected by political, strategic, and technological factors far removed from the Korean Peninsula. Both the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review and the U.S. National Security Strategy reflect changes in U.S. threat assessments, restructuring and redeployments of U.S. forces, the requirement for strategic flexibility to respond more rapidly to simultaneous threats worldwide, and the need for greater contributions from allies and partners. To implement the Global Posture Review, the U.S. is reconsolidating its military forces into regional hubs to respond to several diverse scenarios rather than being tied to a single stagnant threat.

Three additional factors are driving the reconfiguration of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) footprint in South Korea: modernization of U.S. military capabilities; the drain on U.S. military forces from combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; and South Korean opposition to the large U.S. military presence. The manpower drain brought about by extensive U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has led to the redeployment of some U.S. forces from East Asia. This drawdown requires our allies to assume a large security role both for their own defense and globally.

### **Reducing the U.S. Military Footprint in Korea**

The U.S.–South Korean Strategic Policy Initiative will transform the bilateral military alliance by moving U.S. forces away from the demilitarized zone and transferring wartime operational command (OPCON) of South Korean forces to Seoul.<sup>1</sup> Washington is redeploying troops from forward bases and the large Yongsan base in Seoul and consolidating them at Osan Air Base and Camp Humphreys, both south of Seoul. This is intended primarily to further U.S. strategic flexibility capabilities, but it also removes a key irritant in bilateral relations by

returning 59 military installations and 36,000 acres to South Korean control.

Washington reduced USFK from 38,000 troops in 2005 to 28,500 in 2008,<sup>2</sup> primarily by redeploying one brigade of the 2nd Infantry Division to Iraq. The U.S. troop movements rekindled Korean fears of a U.S. abandonment similar to those experienced when President Richard Nixon removed the 7th Infantry Division in 1971 and President Jimmy Carter proposed in 1976 to withdraw all U.S. troops from Korea. To allay South Korean concerns, Washington agreed to spend an additional \$11 billion to augment the capabilities of the remaining U.S. troops.

### **Returning OPCON to South Korea**

President Roh Moo-hyun pushed for a more self-reliant South Korean national defense, including the recovery of wartime operational command of its forces. The U.S. and South Korea agreed in September 2006 that Seoul would attain OPCON on April 17, 2012.

The issue of OPCON's transfer became strongly politicized. President Roh saw it as the recovery of national sovereignty. Progressives who supported Roh wanted an unrealistically quick attainment of military self-reliance without the requisite increases in defense funding to attain it. South Korean conservatives were puzzled by the U.S. eagerness to embrace Roh's demand for OPCON transfer. They feared it reflected a declining U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea and that it was a potential precursor to an unraveling of the bilateral alliance and departure of all U.S. troops.

To allay Korean concerns, Washington pledged that its military capabilities, including air combat and strategic intelligence assets, will remain after OPCON transfer. Therefore, it is not necessary for Seoul to achieve an independent and unilateral ability to defend itself by 2012. Moreover, the strategic transformation plan has an integrated assessment and certification process to ensure that South Korean security is not jeopardized.

The OPCON transfer will lead to the replacement of Combined Forces Command by two parallel independent commands. USFK will become an independent joint warfighting command called Korea Command (KORCOM). U.S. and South Korean forces will operate separately but coordinate operations through the Alliance Military Coordination Center.

The loss of a unified command runs the risk of severely curtailing the ability of the U.S. and South Korea to fight in a coordinated manner. It also threatens the sense of purpose and justification for U.S. forces in Korea. The OPCON transfer could lead to reduced U.S. congressional

and public support for maintaining a military presence on the Korean Peninsula. In the absence of a clearly articulated mission after the transfer, questions about USFK's role could lead to calls for an even greater U.S. drawdown.

### **South Korean Defense Reforms**

South Korea is engaged in an ambitious military modernization plan, Defense Reform 2020, to develop a smaller, technologically-oriented defense force. South Korea will reduce ground forces by 45 percent—from 680,000 troops to 500,000—and reduce the number of army corps from 10 to six and the number of ground divisions from 47 to 20.<sup>3</sup> The decrease in manpower will be offset by upgrading technology, improving command and control systems, and procuring more capable weapons. Goals to be achieved by 2011 include:

securing the capability of surveillance over the Korean Peninsula and the nearby area; establishing a command-communication system which will enable real-time integrated combat power; upgrading the long-range strike and counter-fire attack capabilities; securing the operational capability to protect the major maritime routes; and providing the capabilities of air operation over the whole Korean Peninsula and mid-to-high altitude counter-air operations.<sup>4</sup>

During the next five years, South Korea will increase defense spending from 2.7 percent to a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). New equipment purchases include high-tech reconnaissance and surveillance systems (four E-737 AWACs, multipurpose satellites, and four Global Hawk UAVs) and long-range strike forces (20 additional F-15K fighters, 48 Patriot missiles, three 7,000-ton Aegis-equipped destroyers, and six additional Type 214 submarines).<sup>5</sup>

The South Korean plan for defense reform is driven by military, demographic, and political factors. South Korea seeks to mirror the evolution in U.S. military capabilities and take advantage of the benefits provided by the revolution in military affairs by shifting reliance from a manpower-intensive, ground force-reliant military to a technology-intensive force with greater emphasis on air forces. Demographic trends indicate that, given declining birth rates, South Korea can simply not man the current force in the future.

The Roh administration advocated a reduced South Korean military as a means to alleviate tensions with North Korea. The plan was driven both by a decreasing perception of the North Korean threat and by a political emphasis to engage with Pyongyang. Roh dismissed the threat

from North Korea's missile forces by claiming they were not targeted at the South, despite the fact that the range of Pyongyang's 600 Scud missiles makes them effective only for attacking South Korea. The new Lee administration has a less benign assessment of North Korea's military posture.

### **U.S. Concerns about Korean Modernization Plans**

General Burwell Baxter Bell, commander of USFK, expressed concern in March 2007 about South Korea's intention to reduce its troop levels significantly. Specifically, he questioned whether the defense reform plan would lead to a degradation of Korea's deterrent capability: "It is our hope that the Republic of Korea carefully considers these large force cuts unless they are matched by similar North Korean reductions." He added that any cut in the length of mandatory military service could result in "hollowness" in South Korean deterrent capabilities against the North.<sup>6</sup>

Though well-intentioned, Defense Reform 2020 is behind schedule, is underfunded, and relies on unrealistic economic predictions. The budget was based on an assumption of 7 percent annual GDP growth and an annual 9.9 percent increase in the South Korean defense budget through 2011. There is a growing gap between plan and reality. It also does not incorporate the cost of assuming wartime operational command since it was developed before the OPCON decision.

If Seoul does not fully fund Defense Reform 2020, it will be forced to slow the pace of force modernization. If this occurs, the reduction in South Korean troops should be slowed. The Lee administration faces a budget dilemma: It wants to delay troop cuts until Seoul purchases more capable weapons, but it cannot procure them until the budget is freed through troop cuts. It will need to enact both programs simultaneously.

Because of budget shortfalls, Seoul is now reconsidering the purchase of Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicles to serve as reconnaissance assets. Doing so will, however, hinder Seoul's efforts to build independent intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities before assuming operational wartime command.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the purchase of 60 F-15 fighter planes, there are concerns over South Korea's 300 outdated F-4 and F-5 fighters. It will be increasingly difficult to keep the aging planes operational. Moreover, Seoul's air capabilities lag behind those of its neighbors: Japan operates 200 F-15s and 70 F-2s (a Japanese version of the F-16) with its own AWACs and in-flight tanker fleet, which extends the range of Japanese capabilities. The Chinese air force is also far more extensive than the ROK force.<sup>8</sup>

## **Missile Defense Inadequate to Defend South Korea**

Pyongyang's test launch of medium- and long-range missiles in July 2006 highlighted the continuing North Korean missile threat to South Korea. Under President Roh, South Korea resisted joining an integrated missile defense system with the U.S. as Japan had.

USFK commander General Bell underscored the fact that South Korea does not currently have a missile defense system that complements deployed U.S. capabilities. He recommended that Seoul "look more directly at the anti-theater ballistic missile capacity, partner better with us and fully integrate with our capacity, so that they can provide a more protective envelope for their nation."<sup>9</sup> To do so, South Korea would have to deploy a more sophisticated missile defense system, including PAC-3 and SM-3 missiles, to protect South Korea against Pyongyang's 600 Scud missiles.

Since Lee Myung-bak's election, South Korean defense officials have indicated more receptivity to joining the U.S. global ballistic missile defense (BMD) initiative. General Lee Sung-chool, deputy commander of Combined Forces Command, stated that before joining a U.S. BMD system, Seoul would have to "conduct a comprehensive review of lots of factors first, such as a security environment around the peninsula, conditions of combat areas, North Korea's military threat, budgetary issues, and public sentiment."<sup>10</sup>

## **Defining the "Strategic Alliance"**

The nature of the alliance is already changing. Therefore, it is critical that U.S. and South Korean policymakers get ahead of the trend and direct that change by proactively defining the nature of the new alliance. Washington and Seoul should develop a joint strategic vision of the future purpose, objectives, and roles of the broader alliance and how it furthers the two countries' national interests. It will then be possible to identify the roles, missions, and required capabilities of the two militaries and then implement the broader alliance through procurement, deployment, and training. The two governments must then engage in extensive public diplomacy to gain public support for the revised military partnership.

Following their April 2008 summit, Presidents George W. Bush and Lee Myung-bak declared that they would unveil a strategic vision during a follow-on July 2008 summit meeting in Seoul. Although the July summit was postponed, the plan for the alliance should push the envelope in new ways but be realistic in scope.

Expanding the alliance will necessarily be an iterative process. To approach it any differently will create the real possibility of disappoint-

ment and backlash down the road. Already, despite the summit impetus, U.S. officials in Washington and Seoul have expressed dissatisfaction with a lack of Korean responsiveness, commenting that discussion on transformation is "frustratingly still at square one."<sup>11</sup>

Although military-to-military cooperation is going well, policy coordination at the political level has been lacking for several years. An in-depth assessment of the strategic vision necessary to provide an enduring justification for the long-term viability of the alliance has not taken place.

The 2005 U.S.–South Korean summit identified the need to develop the alliance into a "comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial alliance," but it failed to devise a concrete action plan. Rather than creating a blueprint, the U.S. and South Korea were preoccupied with addressing contentious issues piecemeal. "The need for revamping the alliance was not raised based on an assessment or discernment of threats and challenges or on consensus or coordination on change in the alliance's response strategy."<sup>12</sup>

### **Expanding the Alliance Role: Bigger Is Better**

To respond more effectively to the 21st century threat environment, the U.S. and South Korea should develop a strategic, multifaceted, values-based alliance that addresses peninsular, regional, and global security requirements. It is in America's interest to have South Korea as a global partner in responding to regional and global security issues. The military alliance is a critical component of the comprehensive bilateral partnership that encompasses diplomatic, informational, military, and economic aspects based on shared values of democracy, liberty, and free-market principles.

As General Bell stated in March 2008, there is a need to "recast the alliance as something beyond simply a confrontational alliance to prevent aggression against South Korea by North Korea and recognize that the treaty we signed in 1953 doesn't even mention North Korea. It talks about mutual defense against any aggression in the Pacific region on either partner."<sup>13</sup> The existing mutual security treaty of 1953 already provides the legal justification since its declared objective is maintaining peace and stability in Asia, not merely on the Korean Peninsula.

### **Evolving Threat Environment**

The alliance is currently focused on the North Korean threat, but "heightened nationalism, historical animosities, territorial disputes, resource competition, and historical struggles for regional hegemony all

come together to pose long-term regional security challenges in this area which is so critical to our economy and other national interests."<sup>14</sup>

Although uncertain of Chinese intentions, South Korea has become increasingly wary of Beijing's growing military capabilities. As Seoul and Washington work to develop a blueprint for a new strategic military alliance, South Korea may unobtrusively adopt a long-term hedging strategy against China. However, South Korea is extremely reticent to name China as a potential security threat for fear of antagonizing Beijing. Seoul prefers instead to define its role in terms of maintaining "northeast Asian stability."

South Korea is already purchasing some capabilities that would allow it to assume a larger regional role. Some recent military acquisitions are better suited to addressing post-unification threats than to dealing with North Korean threats. These include King Sejong-class 7,600-ton Aegis destroyers, Type 214 submarines, and indigenous long-range cruise missiles such as the 1,500 km-range Hyunmoo 3C.

### **Accommodating Growing Korean Capabilities**

South Korea is a middle power with aspirations of attaining top-tier status like that of the G-8 nations. President Lee has defined "Global Korea" as one of his foreign policy objectives, asserting that Seoul is now able to increase its international stature and strategic value by assuming a larger regional and global role. Achieving such status, however, is a long-term quest that requires an integrated strategy to achieve significant economic growth, the acquisition of new military capabilities, and expansion of diplomatic strategies beyond the country's own self-interest.

South Korea's Ministry of National Defense (MND) has stated that it would enhance and diversify military diplomacy to enable South Korea to take on a larger international role and become a "mature world-class nation."<sup>15</sup> The Lee administration will enact a law to facilitate the dispatching of Korean troops for U.N. peacekeeping operations (PKO) and expand the standing force assigned to such operations. South Korea currently ranks 38th in terms of U.N. peacekeeping participation.

The MND will increase support to PKO from the current level of 390 troops to 1,000 and, potentially, 2,000 by 2012. Seoul is also considering establishing a company-sized unit of 150 Marines to support U.N. peacekeeping operations.<sup>16</sup> Other areas where South Korea can expand its global role include counterterrorism, counter-proliferation, regional stability, natural disaster relief, humanitarian operations, and protecting sea lanes of communication.

## **Building Public Support for a Strategic Alliance**

The primary alliance objective for the foreseeable future will be deterring—and, if necessary, defeating—the North Korean threat. This mission should be conducted in conjunction with diplomatic efforts to reduce the threat from Pyongyang, including missiles and conventional forces, but the U.S. and South Korea should begin to lay the foundation for expanding the alliance to broader roles.

Both countries must initiate a robust public-diplomacy effort to secure extended public and legislative support for the alliance. Failure to provide a sufficiently clear strategic vision as justification for the enduring need for the alliance could lead to an erosion of public and legislative support and calls for a reduction or withdrawal of USFK.

Planting the philosophical seeds now will reduce the potential for either the public or the legislature to declare the alliance unnecessary if the North Korean threat is reduced or perceived to be reduced, such as by the initiation of peace treaty negotiations. The transfer of OPCON could also lead to a perception that the alliance has accomplished its mission and that there is no longer a need for a U.S. military presence.

South Korea must realize that the U.S. Congress will not unconditionally maintain a USFK presence in the absence of a clear objective and domestic public support. Otherwise, U.S. legislators may direct additional redeployments of USFK units to support the global war on terrorism as a cost-saving alternative to increasing overall U.S. troop levels.

Seoul cannot rule out the possibility of the public's "aversion to the notion of a strategic alliance. It should therefore promote a national understanding [of the broader alliance concept] from the dimension of the overall national interest, spanning the security and non-security realms."<sup>17</sup>

A necessary first step is for President Lee Myung-bak to define his vision for the future of the bilateral relationship and South Korea's long-term regional and global role. He should develop a detailed strategic blueprint, similar to the U.S. National Security Strategy, that articulates his administration's goals and the means through which they will be accomplished. The document should define South Korea's national interests, strategic policy objectives, and the instruments of national power which would be employed to fulfill them.

The Lee administration should also produce a National Military Strategy to define South Korea's perception of the near- and long-term threat environment, the missions assigned to its military to achieve national objectives, and the means required to do so. The South Korean

military should more fully describe to the public the nature and scope of the North Korean and Chinese threats.

The U.S. and South Korea must work together to eliminate the irritants in the bilateral relationship. Both countries, including their legislatures, need to do more to educate the public on the benefits of the alliance. There should be an increase in parliamentary exchanges.

Given the upcoming change in the U.S. Administration, there may be a tendency to see "2008 as a preparatory period" and to assume that "2009 shall be the year for the full-scale strengthening of the alliance to begin."<sup>18</sup> However, neither Washington nor Seoul should delay developing the strategic alliance since the new U.S. Administration will likely need a year for preparation, deferring a bilateral strategic vision until 2010.

### **South Korea's Uncertainty about Its Strategic Future**

There is clearly a perception gap between the U.S. and South Korea on the strategic alliance. The U.S. thinks that since South Korea has become more capable militarily, it should assume greater responsibilities for burden-sharing as well as play a larger role in regional and global security. Some U.S. officials question how much South Korea is willing or able to do and believe that Seoul has been punching below its weight.

An increasingly self-confident South Korea demands recognition and greater status but is unsure of its desired parameters and unwilling to bear the costs of greater responsibilities. South Korean progressives chafe at the presence of the U.S. military but fear its departure. They have clamored for an equal role in the bilateral military relationship with the U.S. but have refused to fully fund the country's defense needs.

The public is hesitant to embrace a broader strategic alliance because of economic constraints and uncertainty over what "Global Korea" entails. The U.S.-led global war on terrorism has not been popular in South Korea, and Seoul has been hesitant to engage in Washington's proliferation security initiative for fear of upsetting North Korea.

The next U.S. President's policies will greatly influence how much more involved South Korea becomes overseas. Some international operations will be seen as being in Seoul's national interests, while others could be perceived as capitulating to U.S. pressure. For President Lee to gain public acceptance for a more comprehensive alliance, he will need to provide strong national leadership and sustained public diplomacy.

### **U.S. Must Tread Lightly in Pushing for Progress**

Washington will have to balance achieving U.S. security objectives with sensitivity to South Korean domestic political constraints. Although

the U.S. will need to push South Korea in order to achieve progress toward a strategic alliance, it must not appear domineering.

Washington risks triggering strong public reactions due to lingering South Korean animus from the perceived superior-subordinate relationship. The scope and vehemence of the protests triggered by South Korea's April 2008 decision to reopen its market to U.S. beef imports showed the extent of latent anti-Americanism. Overstressing the newly improved relationship with excessive demands will be counterproductive.

Of course, the two allies' perceptions of what constitutes "excessive" will differ. The Bush-Lee Camp David summit, seen as wildly successful in the U.S. generated accusations in South Korea that Washington was taking advantage of Lee's desire to improve bilateral relations to levy excessive new demands. The U.S. asked for an increased Korean cost share for U.S. troop presence in South Korea and base relocation, as well as Seoul's involvement in the proliferation security initiative, missile defense, and the deployment of troops to Afghanistan. U.S. officials correctly pointed out that these have all been long-standing requests.

*The Korea Times* has warned President Lee not to let his "self-declared pragmatic diplomacy be taken hostage for the alliance with the U.S....The Lee administration should not sacrifice South Korea's national interests under the name of alliance."<sup>19</sup> *Chosun Ilbo* editorialized that "if the U.S. piles up its demands on Korea like overdue homework, it will end up frustrating our side and may result in growing skepticism about the alliance and give anti-American factions an excuse to raise their voices."<sup>20</sup>

### **The Impact of Barack Obama's Election on the Alliance**

During the recent U.S. presidential campaign, Senator Barack Obama emphasized the importance of the U.S. alliance with South Korea. He described the military partnership as a "remarkably strong and successful one. Forged in blood during the Korean War more than a half-century ago, the alliance has sustained itself through the crucible of the cold war and remains central to US security policy in East Asia"<sup>21</sup>

Obama has affirmed the U.S. objective to transform the existing military relationship into a 21<sup>st</sup> century strategic alliance to address challenges beyond the Korean Peninsula. Washington will continue to press Seoul and Tokyo to assume larger regional and global security roles even as the U.S. looks beyond traditional bilateral alliances to resolve pan-Asian problems.

The strengthening of the relationship will lead to a bigger role and responsibilities for South Korea. He will shift the focus of the war on terror from Iraq to Afghanistan. As a result, he will request greater

involvement by both Korea and Japan, including the deployment of troops or police units. The Obama administration will seek greater contributions in Afghanistan with fewer restrictions. This could lead to tension between Washington and Seoul.

Perhaps more troubling for South Korea will be the fact that northeast Asian issues will not figure as prominently on the new president's agenda as Seoul would hope. U.S. domestic economic issues will figure most prominently in the first year of the new administration. There will also be pressure for the Democratic Party-controlled Congress to implement legislation in response to a pent-up demand for an expansive social agenda.

Foreign policy discussion will be dominated by Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran. Of course, North Korea has historically shown an aversion to being ignored. If Pyongyang feels the Six Party Talks or direct talks with Washington are not achieving its objectives, look for Kim Jong-il to return to provocative brinkmanship. As Vice President-elect Joseph Biden warned, "It will not be six months before the world tests Barack Obama like they did John Kennedy....we're gonna have an international crisis, a generated crisis, to test the mettle of this guy."<sup>22</sup>

### **What the U.S. and South Korea Should Do**

Washington must not abandon its vision for a more comprehensive alliance, but it should prioritize its alliance objectives and lower expectations to conform to local South Korean realities. Both governments must ensure that Seoul's quest for a broader global footprint is not depicted as an attempt by the U.S. to offload its security needs onto a reluctant ally. The American and South Korean administrations must set a positive tone in bilateral consultations and address developing issues before they become contentious.

To this end, U.S. policymakers should:

- Affirm the importance and benefits of the alliance even while modernizing and transforming it. Continue efforts for Seoul to assume a larger responsibility for its defense consistent with a continued U.S. military presence and commitment to the defense of South Korea.
- Affirm its unequivocal commitment to defending South Korea by maintaining existing U.S. force levels and deterrent capabilities, including missile defense, attack helicopter, and ground combat units.

- Support joint efforts to sustain and improve C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) to enhance integrated command capabilities.
- Maintain the development of high-altitude air defense, airborne laser, and Aegis ballistic missile defense to provide layered missile defense capability and deploy additional PAC-3 missiles to South Korea.
- Balance U.S. objectives with South Korean domestic political constraints so as not to endanger the domestic support of a key ally. The U.S. must be wary of triggering public anger while continuing to implement military reform plans. The recent protests against the importation of U.S. beef show the need to proceed carefully.
- Coordinate with Seoul on public-diplomacy efforts to underscore that the alliance is vital for maintaining regional peace and stability while promoting the common values of democracy, liberty, and free-market principles. Underscore the scope of the North Korean and Chinese threats.
- Balance the upgrade in South Korean foreign military sales status with Seoul's concerns about perceived pressure to buy U.S. weapons.
- Advocate greater congressional and National Assembly attention to the future of the alliance. Implement a joint legislative study group on transforming the alliance.
- Fully fund alliance requirements, including the Yongsan base relocation, the land partnership plan, and family housing for accompanied tours to improve USFK troop morale and demonstrate U.S. commitment to staying in South Korea.
- Coordinate with Seoul to develop Operations Plan 5029 to prepare contingency plans for instability crises in North Korea. Little contingency planning was done under Roh out of concern that it would aggravate North Korea.

For its part, South Korea should:

- Strengthen security capabilities by fully funding Defense Reform 2020 with necessary augmentations brought on by assuming wartime operational command. Though South Korea does not have to develop

an independent military capability, it should assume larger defense responsibilities commensurate with growing capabilities.

- Increase the standing force available for overseas peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and stability operations. Procure sufficient transport and logistics capabilities to support sustained overseas deployments.
- Join the U.S.-led Proliferation Security Initiative to monitor North Korean airborne and maritime shipments and interdict suspicious shipments.
- Resume trilateral policy coordination meetings among the U.S., South Korea, and Japan on mutual security issues. Explore trilateral military cooperation, including cooperation on missile defense.
- Expand South Korean diplomatic and peacekeeping operations to assume a greater international security role. South Korea should join values-based strategic initiatives involving the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India.
- Engage in vigorous public-diplomacy efforts to convince the public and legislature of the need to expand the role of the security alliance with the U.S.
- Implement economic reforms to generate sufficient economic growth to fund security requirements.
- Remain open to dialogue with North Korea while defending South Korean sovereignty, including the Northern Limit Line in the West Sea. Military deterrence does not preclude outreach to Pyongyang, but engagement should be principled.

## **Conclusion**

Despite strained political relations between the U.S. and South Korea during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, the underlying military alliance between the two countries remained strong. The U.S. and South Korean commands continue to operate extremely well together as they implement plans to integrate evolving strategies and revolutionary military capabilities. The plan to develop a U.S.–South Korean strategic alliance is a testament both to the successes of the long-standing military relationship and to the shared values of the two democracies.

The path ahead, however, is complicated. The U.S. must constructively channel its exuberance for rapidly transforming the alliance.

Although President Lee is eager to repair and expand the bilateral partnership, he faces political and economic constraints as well as a populace uncertain of South Korea's role in the world. Washington must take into consideration the seemingly contradictory requirements of shifting greater security responsibilities to South Korea while concurrently reassuring against U.S. abandonment.

An expanded security role for Seoul remains controversial, and South Korean strategic thinking on the topic is in the early stages. President Lee must be both a visionary and a strategic communicator to convince the populace of the need for dramatic change while not getting too far ahead of his public support. The scope and vehemence of the protests against imports of U.S. beef show the volatility of South Korea's political landscape.

Lee Myung-bak will hopefully move forward on the right path but perhaps not as quickly as the U.S. wants. Washington must accept both a slowdown in initially-expected timelines and a certain amount of nationalist rhetoric as President Lee responds to domestic constituents. It is important that both nations prioritize their security and political objectives and focus on the ones that are the most important.

The U.S.–South Korean alliance has been undervalued in recent years. It is critical that Washington overcome its seeming inability to have more than one key Asian ally at a time and emphasize that its alliance with South Korea is not secondary to the U.S. alliance with Japan. South Korea has capabilities that are not available to Tokyo because it is not constrained by Japan's historical legacies, pacifist constitutions, and low defense spending. U.S. security objectives, as well as the best interests of the region, are best served by strong and enduring relationships among Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul.

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<sup>1</sup> South Korean President Syngman Rhee transferred operational command authorities for ROK forces to United Nations Command commander Douglas MacArthur in July 1950. Peacetime OPCON was transferred to the ROK in 1994.

<sup>2</sup> The originally announced level was 25,000, but this was amended to 28,500 at the April 2008 Camp David summit between Presidents George W. Bush and Lee Myung-bak.

<sup>3</sup> Nam Chang-hee, "Realigning the U.S. Forces and South Korea's Defense Reform 2020," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. XIX, No.1 (Spring 2007), pp. 165–189.

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<sup>4</sup> The Strategic Balance in Northeast Asia 2006, Korea Research Institute for Strategy, p. 266.

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<sup>6</sup> "USFK Commander Warns of Security Vacuum," *The Korea Times*, March 8, 2007.

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