

Strategic Insight

The Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance

by [VADM Young-Kil Suh, ROKN \(ret\)](#)

Strategic Insights are published monthly by the Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC). The CCC is the research arm of the [National Security Affairs Department](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

October 1, 2003

Introduction

For the past fifty years South Korea and the United States have successfully contained the threat of a North Korean invasion with the resulting peace contributing to the security of both nations and the Asian Pacific region as a whole. Yet security concerns in the Northeast Asian and Pacific region have changed significantly since the early 1950s when the Korean-U.S. alliance was formed. The Cold War has ended, and the improvement of U.S.-China relations has changed the security climate around the Korean peninsula. These changes in the regional security environment dictate the need to find a potentially new model for the South Korea-U.S. alliance.

The fact that a military threat from the North Koreans remains emphasizes the necessity of a continuing alliance. Furthermore, other U.S. and ROK interests are also at stake—the United States has continued its forward presence in the Korean peninsula, which, in conjunction with the bases in Japan, has served to achieve U.S. strategic goals in the Asia-Pacific region; Korea and the United States, through the alliance, have increased interoperability of weapons systems and conducted many joint military exercises; and the United States has strived to further its interests in the political and economic areas through the maintenance of a close relationship with Korea based on the military alliance.

However, considering the economic gap between the two Koreas and the change in the overall security environment, we can assume that the current status will not continue forever. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to consider the optimal model of an alliance as the peninsula moves towards unification, as well as once the North Korean threat has been neutralized.

In researching the two nations' military security alliance, the following approaches should be taken. First, identifying the mid- to long-term security benefits for the two nations and analyzing any common and competing interests. Second, creating feasible alternatives to the current alliance model that can achieve common security interests. Third, applying a set of standards to these alternatives and evaluating them to identify the optimal relationship. This essay will pursue these approaches.

The Mid and Long-term Security Concerns for South Korea and the United States

An alliance is a collection of mutually related policies of understanding and agreement. There exists a common strategic concept and goals, and in order to achieve those goals, a system of shared responsibility reflecting a common defensive strategy. Many negotiations and agreements take place to determine how responsibility is shared, on topics ranging from the scale and type of the military force to how the costs for maintaining deployed forces are split. An essential point in these negotiations lies in figuring out the nations' common security interests.

A survey of the United States' and South Korea's mid- to long-term security interests on the Korean peninsula yields the following.

I. South Korean Interests

(1) Major Interests

- A. Discouraging the North Korean threat
- B. Discouraging North Korea's nuclear program
- C. Achievement of peaceful unification
- D. Preventing the emergence of a regional superpower

(2) Important Interests

- A. Attaining sufficient national self-defense capabilities
- B. Preventing regional crises
- C. Achieving weapons system compatibility with allies
- D. Protection of sea lanes and overseas assets
- E. Maintaining a competitive defense industry

II. United States' Interests

(1) Major Interests

- A. Discouraging the North Korean threat
- B. Discouraging North Korea's nuclear program
- C. Maintaining influence within the Asian Pacific region
- D. Preventing the emergence of a regional superpower
- E. Maintaining economic ties and creating markets in the Asian Pacific region.

(2) Important Interests

- A. Spreading democracy and free market economics
- B. Preventing regional crises and the emergence of possible enemy states
- C. Attaining allied weapon sales market
- D. Protection of sea lanes and overseas assets
- E. Defense budget savings through contributions by allied nations

Classifying the two nations' security interests can be quite subjective. However, if we accept the above classification, we see that there are many common interests and next to no areas of conflict.

More important, the United States and South Korea share many security interests even after the North Korean military threat is nullified. For example, neither a unified Korea nor the United States would want an unduly large defense budget, and both sides would continue to desire safe shipping lanes. Therefore there is merit in continuing some sort of an alliance.

Forecasting the Security Environment of the Korean Peninsula

Over the past half century the North's baiting and brinkmanship has continued largely unabated and, despite its economic crisis, the North continues to increase its strategic military might. Thus, for the South and the United States, the military threat has not been reduced nor gone away.

But in the near future the security environment in the Korean peninsula will change significantly. First, the North cannot afford to keep competing militarily given its economic crisis. Second, growing concern among Southeast Asian states for their own security interests will encourage those states to steer North

Korea toward societal reform and a revitalization of its economy in the interest of regional stability. As time progresses we can expect three different stages of relations between the two Koreas.

Maintaining the status quo: Here, North Korea continues to maintain anti-South forces and deploys them forward; no talks or cooperation between the two Koreas are taking place at the government level; and North Korea continues its development of weapons of mass destruction.

Movement towards unification: Efforts are made towards building trust between the two Koreas with visible cooperation taking place in the form of trade, communication and investment; and talks are pursued in order to reduce military spending.

Post unification: If unification takes place, the United States and Korea will shift their focus toward trying to prevent a regional powerhouse from emerging, and maintaining security in the region. Therefore the alliance will change significantly.

These three stages are very conceptual. In them we do not consider how they will come about, say through the implosion of the North Korean government, or through peaceful talks. Also we did not consider how neighboring states would react to this fundamental change in the security around the Korean peninsula.

The New Korea-U.S. Alliance Model

Now we shall try to picture four security environments, equally applicable to pre-and post-unification Korea, that can be expected around the peninsula. We assume that the United States and Korea will judge it necessary to continue pursuing their shared security interests even after the peninsula's unification, but the form this pursuit takes can vary widely depending on the overall security situation. In describing these possible environments, we look for each alternative's main emphasis, effect on security, and each nation's responsibilities.

Model 1: Strong alliance

This model is identical to the current alliance, where the two nations jointly face military threat, basically to deter and, if needed, to fight. In order to fight such a strong external threat, the allies require a singular chain of command and periodic joint exercises.

Such an alliance requires adequate sharing of roles including having Korea focus on initial levels of warfare up until the arrival of reinforcements from the United States. In the case of an emergency, reinforcements will mostly consist of navy and air force, and Korea will support them as the host nation. To maximize Korean defenses, the USFK must maintain early warning and intelligence capabilities. Even after unification, though the military threat may decrease, the roles will not change significantly to counter large threats to Korean security. Under this model, the United States will continue to have a troop presence on the Korean peninsula. The scale of the forces will largely depend on the external threat and other factors, but we can expect some land forces as well as air force deployment in the Korean peninsula.

This model currently is a must given the current North Korean threat. However, once the North Korean threat goes away, or when unification takes place, it does not automatically mean the nullification of this alliance. A unified Korea still would face China, Russia and Japan across its borders and likely could not guarantee its safety on its own. While Korea could develop an alliance with one of those three nations to cope with the other two, this is unlikely given the historic ties between Korea and the United States and the United States' interest in maintaining its military in a unified Korea to help its role in the Asian Pacific region.

Model 2: Relaxed Security Alliance centered on Korea.

Under this model, Korea will be responsible for a greater portion of its own defense. Most land, air and sea forces will be Korea's responsibility while the United States will offer crisis reinforcements to aid a Korea-centered defense. The strategic concept of the two forces will mostly center on crisis management. Since the United States' role will diminish the forces deployed will decrease as well with the remaining forces mostly responsible for maintaining the infrastructure for the reinforcements.

In Model 2, Korea has more responsibility in the strategy, command, and force structure of national defense compared to Model 1. Korea will react to most outside threats on its own, relying on the United States only when self-defense is impossible. Thus, the United States will be a major security partner but will exist as an outside force, and the provision of a nuclear umbrella will continue. Under this model, USFK will exist not to aid Korea's self defense but to prepare for the instability of the region, a concept closer to forward deployment. Under this model, reinforcements from the mainland can be sent as well.

In this model, the United States will maintain various communication and intelligence assets and capabilities to accept and support reinforcements. The concept of POMCUS, which is placing U.S. equipment prior to a crisis, continued periodical joint exercises, and a small-scale force would all be maintained. U.S. forces would periodically visit Korea for exercises but, again, Model 2 assumes a significantly smaller force.

Model 1 assumed a strong North Korean threat, and Model 2 assumes that there is less threat. This model assumes that even after the North Korean threat is gone, uncertainty in the security environment will persist in the region and thus a USFK presence is needed.

Model 3: Regional Security Alliance

The elimination of the North Korean military threat in the Korean peninsula or the unification of the two Koreas will cause significant changes in the security environment of the Asian Pacific region, as well as the U.S.-Korean alliance that was formed fifty years ago, greatly changing the need for U.S. troops in Korea. If the North Korean threat is eliminated, the focus of the two nations may shift towards regional security, including the uncertain security situation in Northeast and Asian Pacific region, and the protection of sea-lanes.

Today, where the North Korean threat is present, the United States and South Korea have maintained early surveillance and readiness for war. This limits the military flexibility of both nations. This model assumes the elimination of such an omnipresent threat thus making more flexible alternatives possible. Compare this situation to that of NATO's Operation Allied Forces in the former Yugoslavia, where much of the USAF was sent but not deployed permanently. Under this model of continued alliance for regional security reasons, there are three different models of alliance depending on what strategic and tactical goals are pursued.

A. A regional alliance centered in the U.S. homeland: U.S. troops will mostly be stationed in the United States with foreign-based forces having special missions. The force deployed in the Korean peninsula would be symbolic. Such an alliance will require close cooperation with a regional security partner such as Korea or Japan and the United States will focus more on power projection or sending emergency reinforcements upon times of crisis.

B. Spread regional alliances: The two nations will maintain an alliance for regional security, and USFK will remain and cooperate closely with other U.S. forces that are deployed in the area. Here the 'spread' concept means that the United States will spread its forces roughly evenly to allied nations around the world. As before, the forces needed for homeland defense and worldwide reinforcement will remain in the U.S. homeland while forces required for regional security will be forward deployed in allied nations to prevent redundancy in investment.

C. Alliance centered in the Korean peninsula: The United States will continue keeping a major force in Korea for regional stability and will try to respond to any crisis in the region with the forces stationed in Korea. This model will have a larger U.S. presence in Korea than 'a' and 'b' above.

In any of these regional alliance models, Korea will support needed bases and logistics, commence joint military exercises and actively participate in regional multinational excursions with the United States. If the North Korean threat is eliminated, these exercises will serve to keep peace or to prepare for crises. For the United States, the Korean force will be part of the allied force that can be counted upon in a regional crisis. In order to prepare for such a multilateral force the United States will maintain interoperability and exercises in order to establish a singular chain of command.

Model 4: Political Alliance

This model assumes that Korea does not feel any sort of threat to its security. Without an external threat, no military alliance is maintained but political ties remain. This situation is similar to that of NATO prior to 1949 when a centralized chain of command was formed. The two nations will continue high level talks regarding security exchange and cooperation but no large-scale military exercise will take place. In any crisis Korea will respond on its own. When needed the United States may enter the conflict, but no expectations are placed.

In this model, the United States will send aid or participate in Korea's defense due to its political affinity, and no peacetime exercises are commenced. Therefore Korea sees the United States as being over the horizon. In this model, no combat force is stationed in Korea save for a small contingency of liaison officers and perhaps symbolic air and navy units.

Standards of Comparison when Choosing a Model of Alliance

Deciding on an alliance model requires a standard of comparison between models. I suggest focusing on three key points:

A. *Suitability:* Which model most suits the national and security interests of the allies at a given time or in a given security scenario? Which model works best for deterring a North Korean invasion, preventing a regional superpower from emerging post-unification, preventing nuclear arms in the Korean peninsula, and balanced sharing of the alliances defense budget?

B. *Feasibility:* Can the two nations afford the political and economic costs of an alliance, and maintain it while considering other states in the region? Factors to be considered here will be Korea's independence, sovereignty, balanced steering of the alliance, reduced costs, national support for the alliance and keeping negative responses from the neighboring states to a minimum.

C. *Flexibility:* What kind of an alliance can best deal with unforeseen events such as the collapse of the North Korean government from within, to the development of nuclear arms by North Korea, the emergence of a state more dangerous than North Korea, entreaties to regional cooperation, and unpredictable actions taken by China and Russia?

Evaluating the models on the criteria outlined, or any criteria for that matter, can be a very subjective task. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to create a team of experts in politics, diplomacy and security to evaluate these, and judge accordingly in order to go beyond subjective reasoning.

Using these criteria, I believe the following to be an acceptable view of how the U.S. - South Korea alliance may adjust over time.

Category	Maintaining Status Quo	Cooperation between the two	Post-unification
----------	------------------------	-----------------------------	------------------

		Koreas, moving toward unification	
Phase 1	Strong alliance for the security of the Korean peninsula (Model 1)	Strong alliance for the security of the Korean peninsula (Model 1)	Relaxed security alliance centered on Korea (Model 2)
Phase 2	Strong alliance for the security of the Korean peninsula (Model 1)	Strong alliance for the security of the Korean peninsula (Model 1)	Regional security alliance (Model 3)
Phase 3	Strong alliance for the security of the Korean peninsula (Model 1)	Relaxed security alliance centered on Korea (Model 2)	Regional security alliance (Model 3)
Phase 4	Strong alliance for the security of the Korean peninsula (Model 1)	Regional security alliance (Model 3)	Political alliance (Model 4)

As long as the North Korean threat remains as is, it makes no sense to alter the U.S.-ROK alliance. The need for a strong deterrent, both in terms of conventional forces and the nuclear umbrella, remains crucial. Clearly this model is suitable and feasible for the situation, and we have 50 years of history to prove it.

As the two Koreas move towards unification, however, the alliance would shift. At first the U.S. presence would remain as is, but as talks progressed and relations become normalized the United States could begin to lessen its presence on the peninsula and South Korea could begin to take on a greater portion of its own defense. Such a move would demonstrate goodwill towards reconciliation efforts by North Korea. As unification draws near, the ROK-U.S. alliance could shift further still, acknowledging the normalization of relations and allowing the United States to focus on regional concerns. By not jumping immediately to a regional security model, thereby removing a significant U.S. troop presence, the alliance retains flexibility in responding or reacting to any breakdowns in negotiations. It also acknowledges that moves toward unification could have 'ripple effects' on the Southeast Asian security environment, and allows the United States and South Korea to maintain adequate resources to aid in regional security matters.

The timetable for these shifts, and the specific inter-Korea interactions they would be bound to, is tricky to determine—one need only look at the steps and missteps toward the Agreed Framework in the 1990s to understand how difficult these negotiations will be. But there is no doubt that movement towards unification will necessitate a change in force projection on the peninsula and indeed in the very nature of the U.S.-Korea(s) alliance.

Finally, assuming a smooth transition to a unified Korea, the alliance will be irrevocably changed—the threat requiring a strong U.S.-Korea alliance will be removed, and tensions within the region will trump tensions on the peninsula as the focus of all concerned. However, the U.S.-Korea alliance will be able to proceed immediately to a political alliance. Three factors will dictate the speed at which the alliance can move towards a regional security model and eventually to a political alliance: the economic hardships created in the North over the past half-century and the necessary strains of uniting two long-separated nations; the regional stability and security environment; and Korean relations with the other regional powers—namely China and Russia.

Again exact timetables are difficult to ascertain, but it seems appropriate to assume that the alliance would move from a relaxed model to a regional model once the peninsula is free from significant threats to its security and unified Korea is fully integrated economically and militarily to be able to provide for its own defense. The move to a political alliance would be driven more by external factors, and therefore may take more time to achieve.

Conclusion

South Korea managed to defeat the North Korean invasion thanks to international support with the United States at the fore. This support took the ROK's security and military might and used it as the foundation upon which the Korean people obtained political freedom and economic prosperity. After the Korean War, the two nations have formed an alliance and with it deterred North Korean invasion for the past half-century, all the while preparing to win a war if deterrence failed. However, recent decades have brought an end to the Cold War and changes to the Korean peninsula's security environment. Therefore, this is the time when we must begin seeking possibilities for a new model.

This essay has classified the future environment of the Korean peninsula into three stages, suggested four possible alliance models the United States and Korea can opt for, and evaluated them with three standards depending on specific situations. We believe that there is a need for interested pupils of strategic administration to take this approach and try coming up with a more specific evaluation of policies.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.

For related links, see our [East Asia](#) Resources.