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Do the Ties Still Bind?
The U.S. – ROK Security Relationship After 9/11

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Summary

The U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea) security relationship today is something of a paradox: It is being severely tested at precisely the same time that its importance in advancing critical U.S. and South Korean interests is arguably greater than ever. Because of the many benefits each side receives from close security cooperation, the relationship itself is not currently endangered. But the ground is shifting. Recent developments, although not currently constituting a crisis, do represent a turning point. The paramount challenge in the short term is ensuring that the two countries stay in lockstep in dealing with North Korea. Sustaining the relationship for the long haul, however, will require a focused effort to adapt it to the new global and domestic conditions.

Both sides recognize this need and have actively begun to address it, most conspicuously in the “Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative.” Attention has focused in particular on the appropriate nature, size, and configuration of U.S. forces deployed in Korea. Along with the issue of command relationships, these are central questions that deserve heavy emphasis. But the answers provided to these questions will remain vulnerable to domestic political currents in both countries without affirmation of some larger common purpose. Such an affirmation should explicitly include the kinds of threats against which the partnership is targeted. Although the alliance can survive without a common definition of threat, it cannot survive without a common perception of what constitutes threats and a common commitment to prevent them from arising.
Adapting the security relationship to the new conditions will require movement on a number of other issues as well. At the top of the list is Yongsan, the sprawling U.S. military base in the heart of Seoul. The recent U.S.-ROK agreement to move the U.S. garrison out of Seoul in the next couple years is an important decision. Ensuring its timely implementation is critical to the relationship’s long-term stability.

Another issue has to do with Korea’s role within the alliance. Although both sides have long been committed to enhancing Korea’s role and have made some progress, much more is required. The Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative provides an opportunity to address changes not only in the U.S. force posture but also in the mission and roles of the ROK military, with a view toward transferring responsibilities to South Korea that enhance its role in the alliance. This clear U.S. intention has already shown some success, with agreement reached on transferring a number of specific military missions to South Korea. The inquiry should also include broader issues pertaining to Korea’s role in developing the next allied war plan, in conducting U.S.-ROK exercises, and in preparing for and managing problems caused by any potential North Korean collapse. Beginning a process of preparing South Korean military leaders for the transfer of wartime operational control should be an integral part of these discussions.

A third issue requiring movement relates to Korea’s desire for a more “equal” relationship. The perception among South Korean civilians and military officers alike that Korea receives treatment “inferior” to that of other U.S. allies, particularly Japan, is both deep-rooted and highly resistant to change. Reducing it will take affirmative action. This might include, for example, examining whether restrictions on weapons sales to Korea can be relaxed in certain areas. It might also involve a look at restrictions on technology transfers and whether the bar on permissible transfers might be raised. More broadly, an effort should be made to craft a “vision” for future U.S.-ROK relations and create opportunities for South Korea to be seen as taking the lead in shaping a new security relationship to meet it. The overarching goal should be to provide South Koreans a greater sense
of ownership. This should help send the message that the U.S. takes Korea’s desires for equal treatment seriously in what it considers more broadly a “special” relationship.

For its part, South Korea needs to act like an equal partner if it wants to be treated like one. At its core, this means taking its own responsibility for the health of the alliance. Repeated efforts to reaffirm the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the importance of the U.S. military presence would be a good place to start. Another important step would be for South Korean leaders to stop trumpeting the “differences” between South Korea and the United States on policy toward North Korea and start highlighting the common interests and shared policy objectives. Making clear that the ROK considers North Korea’s nuclear program and the war on terrorism to be alliance issues, not just problems for the United States, would be a third important effort.

Taking responsibility for the health of the alliance also requires a demonstration that Korea takes both U.S. concerns and South Korea’s own commitments seriously. The problem of dilapidated and inadequate housing for U.S. troops has already contributed to making Korea one of the most unpopular deployments in the U.S. Army. An even more serious problem is the lack of adequate training facilities and growing constraints on U.S. troop training. It is important that the South Korean government enforce its agreements with U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) to stop the encroachments on these training areas. Finally, at $11 billion over the next four years for force enhancements, the U.S. has made a major commitment to invest in the alliance. It will expect South Korea to fulfill its commitment to complement this investment with significantly improved capabilities of its own.

On the U.S. side, in addition to the “future of the alliance” issues described above, there are a number of issues relating to management of the alliance today. These might be reduced to five short phrases.
• First, *stay focused*: The U.S. has two overarching interests insofar as North Korea is concerned. In the short term, the U.S. wants to bring about an end to the North Korean nuclear program and Pyongyang’s proliferation and other threatening activities. In the longer term, the U.S. wants to prevent potentially unfavorable developments after unification that would force it off the Korean Peninsula and undermine its position as an Asian power. Both interests require a concatenation of U.S.-ROK ties, as well as a stronger trilateral relationship among the U.S., Japan, and South Korea. North Korea understands this and is working hard to exploit perceptual and policy differences between Washington and Seoul (and, to a lesser extent, between Washington and Tokyo) to undermine these critical relationships. The central imperative for the U.S. is to make sure Pyongyang does not succeed. It is particularly important for the U.S. and South Korea to speak with a single voice in dealing with North Korea. A failure to do so will not only diminish prospects for inducing changes in North Korea’s confrontational behavior, it will also undermine U.S. long-term strategic interests (p. 68).

• Second, *don’t overlook South Korea*. North Korea’s rapid steps toward resuming its overt nuclear program suggest that it sees an opportunity to act while the U.S. is preoccupied elsewhere. The U.S. understands this well and has taken steps to ensure the effectiveness of its deterrent and defense capabilities. Although South Korea will remain firmly in the spotlight as long as the nuclear issue remains unsettled, if or when serious negotiations begin with Pyongyang there may be a tendency for this attention to dissipate. The U.S. needs to ensure that its commitment to South Korea’s security—including its nuclear umbrella—remains credible and that the U.S.-ROK security relationship continues to receive high priority as it addresses its other strategic objectives. It also needs to ensure that U.S. forces in Korea remain adequately equipped, and backed up by replacement forces, to fulfill their missions as competing needs rise elsewhere (p. 69).
• Third, *lean forward.* This should be the general U.S. posture on alliance management issues given the heightened nationalism in South Korea today, but the need applies in particular to demonstrating sensitivity to Korean cultural norms and practices. It is particularly important that, when incidents involving U.S. troops occur, the U.S. responds immediately, at a high level, and in ways that appear supportive of Korean sentiments. Impressions that the U.S. is insensitive to Korea’s laws and culture need to be countered more broadly. This will require stepped-up cultural awareness training for U.S. troops, as well as increased outreach activities with local communities. Both governments need to do a better job in getting information out to the public about the positive things the U.S. is doing already to demonstrate its respect for and sensitivity toward Korean cultural norms and practices (p. 69).

• Fourth, *be concrete.* This is particularly relevant to the global war on terrorism. Many Koreans see 9/11 as an isolated event and are dubious about the need for Korean participation beyond what they are doing already. Others recognize a need and are willing to consider ways to contribute but are unclear about what additional role Korea can usefully play. Both groups will look for U.S. leadership and guidance. Although responses will depend on a range of factors and cannot be taken for granted, Koreans will try to meet any specific U.S. request, particularly if they perceive it as a test of the alliance. In addition, there are steps the U.S. might consider that would increase the ROK’s *ability* to make useful contributions. Encouraging enhanced ROK aerial refueling and long-range transport capabilities would bolster those South Koreans seeking to develop a rapid response capability for contingencies outside of Korea, thereby advancing both Washington’s interest in increased contributions to the war on terrorism and Seoul’s interest in greater Korean power projection capability and self-reliance. Increasing out-of-country training for ROK Special Operations Forces (SOF) would further improve the relatively high level of interoperability between U.S. and ROK SOF, while acclimating Korean SOF
to contingencies other than North Korea. Encouraging Korea to expand its participation in regional military consultations and multilateral exercises would also be useful. Such activities will reduce Korean skittishness about interacting militarily with Japan over time, while broadening Korean security perspectives and developing practical ways to engage Korea in regional security activities (p. 70).

• Finally, remember Jimmy Carter. Koreans understand and accept the need for change. What they are concerned, even neuralgic, about is the possibility that they will be presented with sudden faits accomplis. U.S. plans to reduce and redeploy its forces will stimulate this neuralgia. This is an issue that has to be carefully managed. Koreans take the elaborate consultation mechanisms developed over the years seriously. They want these mechanisms to be actively used as the U.S. considers its future posture on the peninsula and pursues its broader strategic interests. South Koreans do not have a scale by which they measure the importance of their multiple messages. But for most, “avoid sudden, unilateral changes” comes close to the bottom line (p. 71).

Cutting across the many uncertainties in the world today is one increasingly urgent question: Will the system that has maintained international order over the past half century survive the fissures building since the end of the Cold War and the rise of global terrorism? The answer to this question will have a significant effect on U.S. security relationships everywhere, including with South Korea.