

**EVOLUTION OF THE U.S.-REPUBLIC OF KOREA  
ALLIANCE  
PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE**

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Capstone Project

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## 1. Introduction

The United States Military has been instrumental in shaping perceptions of the United States in Korea, and has played an outsized role in the development of the South Korean state. This relationship dates back to 1945 and the end of World War II. The partnership has been bound in blood since the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, where 36,516 Americans died pushing North Korean troops out of the South and up to the Yalu River border with China.<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Military helped build the foundation for the ROK and has had a physical presence in the country for almost all of its history. Underscoring the importance of the relationship, it was during the short period after U.S. forces left Korea in 1949 that North Korea invaded the ROK and started the Korean War. North Korea remains a threat to both South Korea and American interests in Pacific Asia. From 1953 to 2003, North Korea was responsible for 1,439 major provocations, as well as for the deaths of at least 90 U.S. and 390 ROK soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

There are currently about 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea; however, the original Cold War logic that inspired the United State's need to defend against communist encroachment has become more of a historical memory than a driving force. In addition, South Korea is no longer poor and authoritarian, but economically dynamic and legitimately democratic. South Korea's democratic society is unable to repress latent anti-Americanism in the same way previous authoritarian Korean leaders could. U.S. leaders are losing patience with supporting rich allies while their economic situation is still troubled, and resources are under more pressure due to the Budget Control act of 2011. Furthermore, there is a large degree of uncertainty about whether the U.S. and the ROK can continue their alliance if the Korean peninsula is unified.

This paper will take a comprehensive look at the U.S.-ROK alliance, starting with the major historic trends of ROK abandonment fears, ROK anti-Americanism, and the U.S. practice of restraining the ROK. Next, the post Cold War evolution will be examined through changing U.S.-ROK relations changed during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidencies. Important considerations that are currently shaping the alliance context, such as the North Korean threat environment, burden sharing and operational control are shaping the current context of alliance relations will then be addressed. The final section of the paper will deal with regional views of a post Korean unification alliance. It is necessary to understand the past, present, and possible future outcomes of the alliance to ensure that both sides can engage in sufficient planning can be done to build a new, more equal, foundation for the U.S.-ROK relationship that can survive changing circumstances and still provide mutual benefits and promote regional stability.

## **2. Literature Review**

Much of the recent research about the U.S.-ROK military alliance revolves around the question of its continuing importance in the post Cold War era. Most scholars see the alliance as a source of stability in East Asia, and call for continuing the security agreement while recommending that the structure and reasoning be changed to reflect the new regional situation. Not all scholars agree with this assessment, some argue that South Korea is now a rich country that should be able to take care of its own defense, and furthermore the Korean peninsula is no longer strategically important to the United States. These questions will become even more important in the aftermath of any potential Korean unification. Scholars have identified possible friction developing, such as a lack of a shared U.S.-ROK identity, but most think that the alliance can adapt to a unified Korean peninsula.

In the 1995 Foreign Affairs article, *The Case for Deep Engagement*, Joseph Nye made the case for the importance of the United States close alliances in East Asia. In the article, Nye compares security to oxygen, noting that both are not noticed until they are removed, and argues that East Asia's stunning economic success has been built on a foundation of stability that the United States' presence guarantees. Already in 1995, Nye was looking forward into the future, musing about how East Asia would be marked by the rise of great powers, and the changing dynamics in the region. In this framework, the United States' presence is especially vital because unlike post-Cold War Europe there is no strong multi-lateral organization like the European Union or NATO to ensure cooperation and provide a forum for peaceful resolutions of disagreements. The organization's in Europe allow historical enemies like France and Germany to work together and bridge their enmity, but there is nothing comparable in East Asia where there are historical grievances amongst all the major powers, including the two close American allies Japan and the Republic of Korea. Nye argues that instead of abandoning the East Pacific and letting the regional powers set up their own balance of power system, which would likely result in instability and arms races, it is in America's interest to continue acting as a leader in the region and to maintain its forward deployed troops in Korea and Japan.<sup>3</sup>

Park Min-hyoung (2013) acknowledges that some necessary changes to the alliance, such as the transfer of Operational Control, will be controversial and can lead to mistrust and fear of abandonment. As South Korea gets stronger and America faces economic trouble and things like sequestration it is inevitable that South Korea will take more charge of their own defense and the United States will transition to more of an equal partner, and then to a supporting role. Park discusses the split in Korean society between the younger and more progressive elements viewing operational control (OPCON) as a matter of sovereignty and the elder and more

conservative factions worrying about defense capabilities and U.S. abandonment. Park argues that the transfer of operational control should be part of an evolving relationship, and that it will not necessarily lead to the security vacuum that some fear.<sup>4</sup> Park Hwee-rhak (2010) has a different view on the importance of maintaining U.S. OPCON over ROK forces. Park makes the point that by transferring OPCON it will also dismantle the Combined Forces Control that has been successful in deterring North Korea since the Korean War. In Park's view, joined command of operations is inherently more capable than joint command, and is worried about the two sides disagreeing about strategy and not working closely together in the outbreak of a conflict. There is a concern amongst many Korean defense specialists that the transfer of OPCON is being driven by politics and strong anti-American feelings present in the so-called "386 generation." Park mentions recent North Korean aggression like the sinking of the Cheonan as a reminder that North Korea is still an active threat, and that by transferring OPCON, it will harm the unity of command that he believes is necessary to be successful militarily.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most open-ended questions of the U.S.-ROK military alliance is what will happen in the aftermath of Korean unification. Carl Haselden (2002) notes that Korean unification would have important consequences for the strategic calculus for all the major powers in East Asia, and one possible consequence might be that without the North Korean threat it might lead to calls for the United States to leave the region. Haselden argues that while currently U.S. forces are ready to meet a specific threat, but once that threat has been removed they will have to be ready to adapt to face other security concerns like piracy and terrorism. These threats will require a more multi-lateral approach than the current bilateral nature of current U.S. security agreements. The article argues that even after a reunification, it is important to maintain a U.S. troop presence to maintain the stability of the region.<sup>6</sup> Victor Cha

(2003) makes the case that the continuance of the alliance will not only depend on Seoul's wishes, but the American public's as well. As Cha notes, the U.S. public considers Europe to be the more important theater, and most consider domestic issues like protecting American jobs more important than protecting allies' security. This obstacle can be overcome by shared identities, such as the continuing and close U.S. alliance with the United Kingdom, but unless the United States creates a shared identity with Korea, there is a chance the relationship will falter. The United States can build this relationship by focusing on commonalities such as liberal democratic society and the shared free market system, but it requires work to demonstrate these ideas to the broader public. Cha also suggests that portraying Korea as a loyal ally that has historically stood with America, as in during the Vietnam War, can help shape U.S. perceptions of the value of the U.S.-ROK security agreements.<sup>7</sup>

While most scholars believe that the U.S.-ROK alliance is a force for stability in East Asia and should be continued, Doug Bandow (2010) takes the opposite view and believes that the alliance is outdated and unnecessary. He notes that the Cold War is long over, and that there is little chance that Russia or China would back North Korea in any case of North Korean aggression. In addition, now that South Korea has far outpaced North Korea in terms of development and technological capability it should be able to provide for its own defense. Bandow argues that the alliance has little benefit to the United States, but due to the security agreement might be dragged into a costly and dangerous conflict on the Korean peninsula that ought to be avoided. The alliance is not purely beneficial to Seoul either, due to U.S. constraints and possession of operational control of the ROK forces, it reduces Seoul's freedom of action in response to North Korean provocations such as the 2010 sinking of the Cheonan. In the aftermath of North Korea sinking the South Korean ship, Washington urged Seoul not to use

force, even if the limited use of force might have been the best option to deter further North Korean attacks. Another concern is the possibility that that South Korea might be drawn into conflicts caused by the United States, such as when the Clinton administration threatened the use of force over the North Korean nuclear program, or if U.S. troops stationed in Korea were involved in a conflict with China. Bandow's most important point is that the Korean peninsula is of little strategic value to the United States, and that while North Korea is a troublesome country, it is too weak and small to present a true strategic threat to the United States, unless the United States is drawn into a conflict because of its security guarantee to South Korea.<sup>8</sup>

The U.S.-ROK alliance does not exist in a vacuum, regional considerations are important to any examination of the alliance and its continued relevance. One of the most interesting aspects of the U.S. security arrangement is the hub and spoke system where the United States maintains a system of bilateral security agreements with Asian powers. This has resulted in a triangular security structure between the United States, South Korea and Japan, which Victor Cha has described in detail in his 1999 book *Alignment Despite Antagonism*. According to Cha, Japan and South Korea cooperate informally despite the historical animosities between the two countries. In addition, the level of cooperation is based on the external level of perceived threat and levels of abandonment fear that both countries feel towards their great power sponsor the United States.<sup>9</sup> Another important regional actor that the U.S. factors into its thinking about the South Korean alliance is China. There has been a great deal of debate about the likelihood of a future U.S.-China confrontation. Many scholars, including Graham Allison, have warned about the Thucydides trap that dictates that when there is a rising power it will likely challenge the current dominant status-quo power for hegemony. As Allison points out in his 2012 article *Avoiding Thucydides's Trap*, since 1500 eleven out of fifteen times a rising power emerged and

challenged a ruling power war occurred.<sup>10</sup> If the United States believes that confrontation with China is likely, than maintaining a presence on the Asian mainland via South Korea will be highly valued, but for the ROK it could cause concerns about being entangled in an unwanted conflict with a regional giant and important trade partner.

This paper will take a comprehensive approach to the alliance to use past historical trends to examine the reasons for the staying power of the alliance, and to make predictions about its future. While most of the reviewed literature argues for the importance of the alliance and the need for it to continue into the future to provide stability to the region, dissenters like Bandow raise legitimate concerns about the cost of the alliance that will become increasingly important as the U.S. goes through the austerity of the budget sequestration. Also, as Victor Cha points out, the current U.S. alliance system is made up of strong bilateral bonds, but weak connections between Asian partners that create inefficiencies in the system that will be difficult to address due to the historic animosities that make cooperation difficult. Ultimately, as Stephen Walt's work on alliances points out, strong alliances depend on shared threat perceptions, so much of the alliance's future may depend on how the U.S. and ROK view China in the future, and if these views are in harmony or not.<sup>11</sup>

### **3. Alliance Origins**

The U.S. military was involved in Korea before the founding of the ROK itself, and was instrumental in shaping the early ROK government. After the Pacific War against Japan, the United States took control over the southern half of the Korean peninsula and established the United States Army Military Government (USMGIK). The Korean peninsula was divided at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel because of a deal between the United States and the Soviet Union, with the Soviet



Union maintaining influence on the northern part of the Peninsula through the creation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and support for the first DPRK leader, Kim Il Sung. The USMGIK, which controlled Korea from the end of WWII until 1948, did not consist of Korean specialists, but American personnel who were located in nearby Japan at the end of the Pacific War. Lt. General John R. Hodge, the head of USMGIK, relied on Japanese reports about Korea to learn about the country, and arrived in Korea already biased against the population.

Before the USMGIK arrived, a group of Koreans, called the Korean People's Republic, had already established a basic government structure, and had popular support. Hodge was distrustful of Koreans in general, and in specific anything that resembled leftism. Instead of working with the Korean People's Republic, Hodge initially relied on former Japanese colonial officials, letting some of them remain in power. When the USMGIK realized how unpopular the Japanese officials were, it instead strongly supported right wing Korean factions, and allowed these factions to flagrantly violate the civil rights of any Korean who was suspected to have links to their more left wing opponents. The USMGIK squandered the good will the US military had earned through defeating the Japanese, and during its time in power, there were many large demonstrations against its policies.<sup>12</sup>

On August 15, 1948, Syngman Rhee was elected the first president of the newly founded Republic of Korea. After the founding of the new republic, all of the U.S. military members left Korea by 1949. The absence of U.S. forces in South Korea created a power vacuum that the militarily more powerful DPRK took advantage in 1950. Rather than allow communist North Korea conquer their former protectorate, the United States intervened. After the Korean War, the United States and the ROK formalized their alliance by signing of the October 1, 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. In the treaty, the United States committed to protect the ROK from external

attack, and the ROK consented to allow U.S. forces in its territory based on mutual agreement between the two parties. The treaty remains in place, and is the foundation of the alliance.

#### **4. Historical Trends**

The relationship between South Korea and the United States has undergone many transformations since the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty. It is difficult to compare South Korea under Syngman Rhee to its modern day reality, or even to compare President Park Chung Hee's (1961-1979) ROK to that of the current president, his daughter Park Geun-hye. In a matter of decades, South Korea changed from a poor authoritarian country to a rich liberal democratic one. In addition to the major changes within the ROK itself, the world system has changed from the bipolar Cold War to a current unipolar world where the United States is the only superpower. This change has led to the ROK developing relationships with former Cold War adversaries like the People's Republic of China and Russia, but has not essentially changed the adversarial relationship with the DPRK.

Despite these changes, the core purpose of deterring aggressive North Korean action or invasion against the South has remained the same. Also, many underlying trends have remained constant since the beginning of the alliance, and understanding these trends is necessary to understanding the current day alliance and planning for its future. Three of the most important historical trends in the U.S.-ROK alliance include ROK fears of abandonment, anti-American sentiment in the ROK, and U.S. restraint of the ROK. This next section will look at each of these three trends in depth, and look at the events that have shaped these three trends, and why they are still relevant to the alliance today.

#### **ROK's Abandonment Fears**

Throughout the history of the alliance, South Korea has faced abandonment fears stemming from the possibility that their great power sponsor would remove its troops from the Korean peninsula and end or weaken the alliance. South Korea's fear is a reasonable reflection of historical events. In 1950, Kim Il Sung's decision to invade South Korea depended on his belief that the United States would not come to Seoul's rescue. Even today, South Korean fears of abandonment persist despite the current strength of the alliance. The United States is a global actor with a variety of interests that make it difficult to maintain focus on any one relationship, no matter the importance. Since the involvement of the United States covers the globe, it often has to react to unplanned circumstances that take attention away from declared policies and long-term strategies. Two times that ROK abandonment fears were especially acute were during the Nixon and Carter administrations.

a) The Nixon Doctrine and the Opening to China

On November 3, 1969, on a stopover in Guam and during the Vietnam War, President Nixon delivered the three points of the Nixon Doctrine. The three points were:

- “First, the United States will keep all of its treaty commitments.
- Second, we shall provide a shield if a nuclear power threatens the freedom of a nation allied with us or of a nation whose survival we consider vital to our security.
- Third, in cases involving other types of aggression, we shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense.<sup>13</sup>”

Of the three points in the Nixon Doctrine, point three was the most important, because it signaled that the United States was shifting the primary security burden to its Asian allies. Nixon added in the same speech “Asia if for Asians... We must avoid the kind of policy that will make countries in Asia so dependent upon us that we are dragged into conflicts such as the one we have in Vietnam.”<sup>14</sup> More than just a speech, this policy resulted in the reduction of U.S. Military personnel in Asia from 727,300 in 1969 to 284,000 in 1971 and in South Korea from 63,000 to 43,000.<sup>15</sup> Then South Korean President Park Chung Hee saw this military withdrawal as sign of U.S. disengagement, telling his aide Kim Seong Jin that it was “a message to the Korean people that we won’t rescue you if North Korea invades again.”<sup>16</sup>

The withdrawals were not the only reason for President Park’s concerns at the time. In the years before the Nixon Doctrine, during the Lyndon Johnson administration, the United States had reacted passively to several North Korean provocations directed at both South Korean and U.S. personnel. One prominent example was the January 21, 1968 attack by North Korean commandos against the Blue House aimed at assassinating President Park. This state directed attack and attempted assassination against the head of an allied state resulted in no meaningful U.S. counteraction except to warn President Park not to retaliate against North Korea.<sup>17</sup> Even when North Korea acted against U.S. citizens, it refused to retaliate forcefully against North Korea. The most famous example of this is North Korea’s capture of the *USS Pueblo* two days after the Blue House attack. The *USS Pueblo* was a U.S. naval intelligence ship that North Korea captured while it was sailing in international waters. During the capture, North Korean forces killed one U.S. sailor, and in captivity, and even tortured, the remaining crew of 82 for 355 days. In spite of this, instead of retaliating, the United States issued an apology to the DPRK to ensure the crew could return home.<sup>18</sup> For South Korea, the lack of U.S. reaction to North Korea’s

provocations caused doubts about the seriousness of the U.S. security guarantee, and signaled to the North Koreans that the alliance was weak.

President Nixon gave South Korea even more reason for concern during his *détente* with communist China. During the Korean War, the U.S. intervened because they saw North Korea's invasion as a part of larger communist aggression, which justified spending U.S. lives and resources to turn it back. It was a major policy change to go from fighting Chinese communist "volunteer forces" in 1950 to sending secret delegations to Beijing to discuss possibilities of cooperation, and one that caused unease in Seoul about U.S. commitments to standing up to communist forces on the Korean peninsula. This threatened the relevance of the anti-communist U.S.-ROK alliance, as well as opened the possibility that the PRC would ask for concessions harmful to the ROK's security, such as Chinese Premier Chou Enlai's request to Henry Kissinger to remove all U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula.<sup>19</sup>

The Nixon administration's handling of the ROK during these years led President Park to later write, "this series of developments contained an almost unprecedented peril to our people's survival."<sup>20</sup> During the early 1970s, this fear of abandonment had real consequences, such as President Park's decision to pursue a clandestine nuclear weapons program, including negotiating with France to buy the technology necessary to create plutonium for a nuclear weapon. The ROK only quit the nuclear program after the U.S. discovered it in 1976.<sup>21</sup> Another outcome was President Park's *Yusin* reforms, which he started in 1972 and included the imposition of martial law, dissolution of the National Assembly and the banning of all antigovernment activity. This policy led to abuses such as jailing and torture of political dissidents and opposition figures. One of the reasons given for the *Yusin* reforms was the fear of U.S. unreliability and external threats that necessitated tighter domestic control.<sup>22</sup>

South Korea is a small country, and during Nixon's presidency was still relatively poor and weak. However, despite this, during the Vietnam War, the ROK proved their commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance by sending 312,853 soldiers to fight alongside U.S. forces, more than any other U.S. ally did.<sup>23</sup> It is understandable that strategic interests dictate U.S. foreign policy, rather than a sense of warm feelings towards South Korea, especially South Korea under the rule of an authoritarian leader like Park Chung Hee. However, this neglect can have serious implications negatively affect U.S. strategy in East Asia. If President Park had been successful in building a nuclear weapon, it would have effected security calculations of every other power in the region, and would have harmed the overall goal of U.S. nuclear nonproliferation. President Nixon's options in Asia were constrained by the failure of U.S. strategy in Vietnam, so the removal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula as well as the caution demonstrated in response to North Korean provocations were arguably prudent responses to reality. However, the lack of attention towards a partner that had fought and died alongside the United States in Vietnam was shortsighted and weakened the U.S.-ROK relationship during President Park's time in office.

#### b) President Carter and the Threat of Total Withdrawal

President Nixon created his policies based on a reaction to the failed Vietnam War and they affected all U.S. allies in Asia. In addition, Nixon did not call for a total withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. President Carter (1977-1981) took a different approach towards South Korea by calling for the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. President Carter used the call to withdraw as part of his presidential campaign, and his desire to withdraw American troops came from, at least partially, his repulsion towards the human rights record of ROK President Park.

Similar to the Nixon Administration, President Carter neglected ROK concerns and interests when developing his plan to withdraw troops from South Korea. In this case, President Carter developed his plan without consulting the ROK, and even, through Vice President Mondale, notified Japan of his intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Korea one month earlier than notifying the ROK.<sup>24</sup> This lack of consultation deeply angered President Park, and even resulted in a tense meeting in 1979 when Carter came to visit South Korea for a summit. During a meeting at the summit, Park lectured Carter for forty-five minutes about why pulling all the troops out of South Korea was ill advised, despite Carter's staffers telling him earlier that Carter did not wish to speak about the troop withdrawal issue at the summit, deeply angering Carter.<sup>25</sup>

One reason why Seoul is so concerned by the prospect of a complete U.S. troop withdrawal was the importance of the tripwire function U.S. troops play on the Korean peninsula. If there are U.S. troops in South Korea, than North Korea would kill them in any invasion. If North Korea kills U.S. troops, than it will ensure that the United States will become involved in fighting North Korea and pushing them out of South Korea again. If President Carter had successfully withdrawn all U.S. troops from the ROK, it would have removed the tripwire function, signaling to the DPRK that U.S. support was no longer guaranteed. While Carter insisted that the U.S. would maintain its treaty obligations, would provide air coverage, and would help the ROK build up their forces, after the Vietnam War, it was unlikely that the U.S. people were willing to support another large-scale ground war in mainland Asia.

Ultimately, despite Carter's absolutist goals, during his time in office he only withdrew about 3,000 U.S. troops from the ROK.<sup>26</sup> Carter predicated his withdrawal plan on the belief that South Korea would be able to defend itself from another DPRK invasion. Ultimately, it was the discovery that this assumption was false that prevented the withdrawal from taking place. During

the Nixon administration and the first part of the Carter presidency, the U.S. intelligence community had predicted that ROK and DPRK forces had reached a rough parity so that neither side would be able to successfully invade the other. Part of this judgment was based on how little attention U.S. intelligence officials paid to North Korea during the Vietnam War, as well as the difficulty in obtaining good intelligence from a closed state such as North Korea.<sup>27</sup> This assessment changed due to the work of John Armstrong, an Army officer who was assigned to analysis intelligence about North Korea during this time. Armstrong discovered that North Korea's military was far stronger than had been previously assumed. Armstrong's work influenced Army generals, members of Carter's own bureaucracy, and Congressmen, who then put pressure on Carter to reconsider the withdrawal.<sup>28</sup> Three weeks after Carter's trip to Seoul, his National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski announced that the U.S. would postpone further troop withdrawals until 1981, and would depend on "credible indications that a satisfactory military balance has been restored."<sup>29</sup> The deadline was made meaningless when Carter lost the election for his second term and Ronald Reagan became president.

#### c) Modern Day Fear of Abandonment

After President Carter, no other U.S. president has attempted to withdraw all the U.S. ground troops from South Korea. However, this does not mean that the ROK fear of abandonment has disappeared, or that it is not possible for the U.S. to change their alliance policy in ways that affect ROK security. One recent example of this is Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's announcement in 2003 that he intended to withdraw or relocate U.S. forces in 2013, believing them to be an outdated remnant of the Cold War. The reasoning that Rumsfeld offered was similar to that of President Carter, with Rumsfeld pointing out that since South Korea had a power economy and a better-equipped military, Seoul had "all the capability in the



world of providing the kind of up-front deterrent that's needed."<sup>30</sup> The Iraq War was highly unpopular in South Korea, however the threat of the U.S downgrading alliance ties was enough to convince the South Korean government to send ROK forces to Iraq when the United States requested it.<sup>31</sup> However, as the Nixon Doctrine demonstrated, ROK participation in U.S. wars does not guarantee strong ally relationships and a downgrading of the alliance may still occur. For example, in 2004, the U.S. moved 3,600 U.S. troops from South Korea to Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

For the United States, it is important to be aware of abandonment fears of its allies. Awareness of these fears does not mean that U.S. strategy should be held hostage to them, but like in all relationships communication is important. Rather than consult with the ROK, President Nixon and Carter made plans that had serious implications for ROK security unilaterally and even let other parties know before South Korea. ROK feelings of insecurity can result in outcomes that are not in the United States best interest, such as President Park Chung Hee's secret plan to build a nuclear weapon. For the ROK, it is important to realize that the U.S.-ROK alliance is not an iron clad guarantee, but a relationship that the ROK needs to tend carefully. President Carter was clear that Americans found President Park Chung Hee's human rights violations repugnant and that this divergence in the U.S. and ROK government's values was a cause in the planned troop withdrawal. While currently, the ROK is a liberal democratic country that is closely aligned to the United States, maintaining close relations should remain a priority and should not be taken for granted. However, no matter how much communication and relationship building the United States and the ROK commit to, as the weaker partner in the relationship it is likely that the ROK's abandonment fear will play an important role in the alliance as long as it exists.

### **ROK Anti-Americanism**

In an Asan Institute poll from 2014, 93.3% of South Koreans polled said the alliance was necessary, and 66% percent were in favor of continuing the alliance even if Korea unifies.<sup>33</sup> However, ROK opinion of the United States is mercurial— in a 2002 survey, 44% of South Koreans had a negative view of the United States, a number higher than any other Western or Asian country.<sup>34</sup> Much of this anti-Americanism is rooted in the U.S. Military's role in South Korea. There are historical causes of this anti-Americanism such as misperceptions surrounding the U.S. Military's role in the Kwangju massacre in 1980. There have also been several more recent sensational instances where individual U.S. soldiers have killed or harmed South Korean civilians provoking anger and questions about the Status of Forces Agreement that allows the United States to try American perpetrators in U.S. Military Courts.

a) The Kwangju Massacre

The ROK was under authoritarian rule for much of its early history, until the 1987 election of President Roh Tae-woo. Despite this, the U.S. maintained their alliance with the ROK. During the authoritarian period, many Korean college students started to perceive the United States as more interested in fighting communism than protecting freedom or democracy. The locus of this perception is the Kwangju Massacre and U.S. support of ROK President Chun Doo-hwan. Chun came into power in December 1979 through a military coup. Starting on May 18, 1980, there were large pro-democracy protests in the city of Kwangju. The ROK military used paratroopers to put down the protests, resulting in as many as 2,000 civilian casualties.<sup>35</sup>

The Chun administration made the decision to use the military, but it was widely assumed that the United States approved the move because the Korean military was under operational control of the U.S. Military Command. Under this arrangement, the U.S. Military Command

was supposed to approve any movement of South Korean troops. The United States was slow to attempt to correct these misperceptions, waiting until 1989 to release a white paper detailing the lack of American complicity in the massacre.<sup>36</sup> Adding to anger against the United States was President Reagan's decision to invite President Chun to the United States in 1981. Again, this visit caused misperceptions of U.S. support for the massacre and for ROK authoritarianism, but in reality, the summit meeting between the two presidents was based on a secret deal to induce President Chun to spare the life of prominent dissident and future president Kim Dae-jung.<sup>37</sup> The misperceptions of U.S. support for President Chun and the killing of Korean civilians in Kwangju still persist in Korea, and form a historical backdrop for anti-Americanism.

In the aftermath of the Kwangju massacre, the 1980s were a high point of anti-Americanism in South Korea. A segment of ROK society believed in the narrative that the United States was a ruthless hegemon. They based their view of the United States on historic incidents where they thought that the United States acted selfishly to protect its interests in the region rather than protecting Korea. There are many historical issues that support this view point, such as the United States not preventing Japanese imperialism in 1910 despite the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation, U.S. involvement in the division of the Korean Peninsula after WWII, and U.S. support for authoritarian ROK leaders who suppressed dissent from the left and used violence to maintain power.<sup>38</sup> It is important to acknowledge that this narrative is not based on fiction, but on a biased reading of actual history. Because of its basis in fact, this view is powerful, and requires the U.S. to own up to its mistakes, but also for the ROK to realize that the United States, despite acting on its perceived national interests, has contributed to the security and well-being of the ROK through the sacrifices of the Korean War, and through development aid.

b) Status of Force Agreement and perception of Criminality

Several events that are more recent have also contributed to feelings of intense hostility towards the United States and its military. On June 13, 2002, a U.S. tank on route to a U.S. base ran over and killed two 14-year-old Korean girls. After a U.S. military court acquitted the two tank drivers, there were massive anti-American protests. The Korean Justice Ministry had requested to try the two men responsible for the deaths civilian court but were turned down due to the U.S. military's concern it would set an unwelcome precedent, and that there would not be a fair trial because of the high emotions surrounding the case. Many of the protests afterwards occurred outside U.S. military bases and the US embassy in Seoul, and some even featured firebombs and vandalism.<sup>39</sup> In 2003, the anti-American sentiment surrounding the death of the two girls ran so high that a group of three Korean men stabbed Lt. Col. Steven Boylan while saying "G.I. get out, G.I. go home."<sup>40</sup>

Another source of anger has been the cases of rapes and murder committed by US forces in South Korea. One example is Private. Kenneth L. Markle III, who was arrested for killing and torturing a South Korean bar worker. When authorities found the woman's body, they discovered that Pvt. Markle had desecrated it with a coke bottle and an umbrella. This incident caused anti-American riots, and resulted in Private Markle being the first U.S. troop tried in a Korean court instead of a U.S. military court; however, U.S. officials later commuted his sentence to 15 years instead of the original life in prison.<sup>41</sup>

In 2011, American soldiers committed three high profile crimes including two rapes and an assault on a 70-year-old woman. In the aftermath of these three events, many South Koreans again called for the American troops to leave the country. The most notorious of the three cases

involved Pfc. Kevin Flippin, who sexually assaulted an 18-year-old Korean woman for three hours. In this case, the military turned Flippin over to South Korean courts, who received a ten-year sentence for his crimes.<sup>42</sup> U.S. officials claim that the rate of crime committed by U.S. forces in Korea is actually low for the number of soldiers present. These crimes will remain a sensitive issue as long as the U.S. military stays in South Korea, but the United States has shown an increasing willingness to allow South Korea to try its service members for crimes committed off-duty. The South Korean media has a tendency to exaggerate rates of criminality within the American forces that needlessly causes resentment and damages the alliance, while ignoring U.S. Military attempts to reduce crime, such as imposing curfews on soldiers stationed in Korea.<sup>43</sup> While the United States should condemn individual barbaric acts, and U.S. service members should not receive special judicial treatment, if the alliance is to remain strong the ROK should not portray these rare instances as representative of U.S. forces in Korea.

### c) Ongoing importance of Anti-American Sentiments

Now ROK perceptions of the United States and the U.S.-ROK alliance are strongly positive, but as the history has shown, this can easily change. Wide varieties of incidents in the past have provoked rampant anti-Americanism, and it is unlikely that there will be no future controversial incidents involving U.S. service members. In addition, even when the overall perception of the United States is positive in South Korea, there exists the possibility of individual acts of violence against Americans by South Korean citizens. One prominent recent example is the March 5, 2015 knife attack against U.S. ambassador to South Korea, Mark Lippert. Kim Ki-Jong, a South Korean activist, attacked Ambassador Lippert while screaming that the two Koreas should be united, and he later claimed his act was a protest against U.S.-ROK joint military exercises.<sup>44</sup> In the aftermath of the attack, Ambassador Lippert took great

efforts to show the strength of the alliance, even after the attack against him, sending a twitter message soon after the incident saying "Doing well and in great spirits... Will be back ASAP to advance US-ROK alliance!"<sup>45</sup> In South Korea, most Koreans reacted by showing tremendous support for Ambassador Lippert and the U.S.-ROK relationship, and ROK President Park visited Lippert in the hospital. However, a counter-narrative saw the outpouring of support for Lippert and the U.S. as crass political move by conservative ROK politicians to attack critics as "pro-North Korean," and to increase domestic support for the U.S.-ROK alliance.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that a vicious attack against a U.S. ambassador did not threaten the U.S.-ROK alliance is a testament to its strength, but it would be naïve to assume that incidents in the future would not. If Kim Ki-Jong had killed Lippert in his attack, it is hard to imagine that the outcome would have been the same, or that it would not have negatively affected the alliance.

Ambassador Lippert's positive response in the aftermath of the attack is a great testament to his personal character and the power of his diplomacy. To maintain the strength of the alliance in the future, it will require adroit diplomacy, such as that shown by Lippert, or by President Park in the aftermath of the attack. It will also require a strong narrative for both the U.S. and ROK public that allows people of both nations to understand each other and to see the alliance as mutually beneficial rather than as a form of exploitation or parasitism. This narrative should focus on shared interests as well as shared democratic and social values, and should come from both official and unofficial sources in the United States and in the ROK.

### **Restraining the ROK**

The first priority of the U.S. alliance is to deter North Korea from invading South Korea again. The second priority of the alliance less advertised and less known; it is to restrain South

Korea from provoking a war with North Korea.<sup>47</sup> This trend dates back to the founding of the ROK, before the Korean War and the beginning of the modern alliance. Despite providing support for Syngman Rhee, the first elected President of the ROK, the United States was uncomfortable with many of his policies and worried about his interest in unifying the Korean peninsula through force. The United States had good reason for worry; before the Korean War President Rhee had overseen several border skirmishes with North Korea, some of which involved large scale fighting between the opposing sides. The desire to prevent Rhee from carrying out his stated reunification intentions was at least partially responsible for the United States supplying far less military equipment to the ROK than the USSR did to the DPRK.<sup>48</sup>

One mechanism that the United States designed and maintained from the start of the alliance to prevent unilateral ROK action was operational control (OPCON) of the South Korean forces. This has a practical, war fighting purpose, of making coalition battles easier to plan and fight between the two allies, but it was also intended to prevent the ROK from taking unilateral military action.<sup>49</sup> To underscore this point, the United States made it clear to President Rhee that if he engaged in unilateral military action against North Korea it would be unsupported by UN command troops or assets, The United States would not provide any support, material or otherwise, for the operation, and that U.S. economic aid would cease immediately.<sup>50</sup> This pattern of restraint has continued since the formation of the alliance, and has created tensions between the two allies and undermined ROK ability to deter North Korea provocations. However, the policy has been successful in preventing another wide-scale conflict that would risk drawing the United States into another Korean war.

a) Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan Era

On January 21, 1968, a group of North Korean commandos stormed the ROK Presidential Blue House in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate President Park Chung-hee and U.S. Ambassador William J. Porter. As previously mentioned, the United States did not respond forcefully to this major provocation, however in addition to this lack of response the United States, through Ambassador Porter, warned President Park that any ROK retribution would meet with strong U.S. opposition.<sup>51</sup> A similar pattern occurred two days after the assassination attempt when North Korea seized the *USS Pueblo* from international waters. Again, the United States declined to retaliate, and denied requests from President Park for air strikes against North Korea. In addition, to prevent President Park from taking any unitary action in the aftermath of these two major provocations, the United States sent Deputy Secretary of Defense Cyrus Vance to Seoul. Later, Vance recalled the purpose of his mission as ensuring “that President Park should be under no illusion as to the seriousness of any such action; and that if such a step were taken without full consultation with the United States the whole relationships [sic] between our countries would have to be reevaluated.”<sup>52</sup>

On October 9, 1983, the North Koreans unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan during a state visit to Burma. In the attempted assassination, a bomb went off killing several high-ranking ROK officials. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, some military officers in the ROK wanted to respond forcefully to the DPRK provocation. The United States, even though they affirmed that they had no doubt that North Korea was behind the attack, sent Ambassador Richard Walker to talk with President Chun and make a strong case against retaliation. A month later, after there had been no ROK or U.S. retaliation, President Reagan told Chung “We and the whole world admired your restraint in the face of the provocations in Rangoon.”<sup>53</sup>



For much of the Cold War, the United States had a legitimate fear of the ROK dragging them into another war in Korea. President Rhee was vocal about his desire to reunite the Korean peninsula, and during the Korean War took actions designed to prolong the conflict. President Park wanted to respond to North Korean provocations forcefully, but it was at this time that the United States was already engaged in a disastrous land war in Vietnam. The amount of restraint shown by the United States, and imposed on the ROK during the Cold War is incredible. It is clear that several of the incidents, such as assassination attempts against ROK heads of state, described in this section are acts of war committed by the DPRK against the ROK and the United States, and in different circumstances would have justified significant retribution. This pattern has resulted in the U.S. treating the DPRK as a special case, ignoring provocation after provocation, and negating the ROK's ability to use force to deter North Korea.

#### b) Implications for the Future

Now that the Cold War has ended, and the ROK has developed a strong liberal democracy, this dynamic is not as potent as it once was. One sign of this is the 1994 transfer of peacetime OPCON from the United States to South Korea, and the expressed willingness of the United States to transfer wartime OPCON as well. However, now that South Korea is a democracy, there is a possibility that public opinion could make it harder for a South Korean president to back down and not retaliate in the face of a flagrant enough DPRK provocation. This has already started to take place in a limited manner after the 2010 North Korean sinking of the ROK *Cheonan* warship and the bombing of the ROK Yeonpyeong Island. In the aftermath of these attacks, ROK Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin stated that the military is developing “an active deterrence and will build an attack system to swiftly neutralize North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, while significantly improving our military's capability of surveillance and

reconnaissance.”<sup>54</sup> In recent years, there has been increased tension between South Korea and North Korea over the disputed maritime boundary known as the Northern Limit Line that has resulted in both sides shooting live shells into the other’s waters.<sup>55</sup>

After the Korean War, it was clear that it was not enough to restrain one side of the divided peninsula. After the terrible costs of the War, the United State’s credibility was on the line in Korea, but the three previous years of fighting had resulted in a stalemate where neither the communist nor U.S. forces could hold ground past 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. Because of this grinding experience, the United States settled on a status quo strategy that involved deterring North Korea and restraining South Korea. This strategy has prevented any large-scale conflict in Korea since 1953, achieving its preeminent goal. This strategy has come with significant costs, and has been far more effective at restraining the ROK than at deterring DPRK hostility. This alliance formulation has caused distrust, and has given the DPRK free reign to carry out limited provocations without worry of actual reprisal. This dynamic is likely to continue as long as the alliance and the North Korean threat, and indeed in 2010 after North Korea sank the *Cheonan* United States leaders were quick to condemn the attack, but also quick to urge both sides to show restraint as well.<sup>56</sup>

## **5. Current State of the Alliance**

The U.S.-ROK built their alliance on the logic of the Cold War and kept it in place with authoritarian leaders in South Korea. The shift away from these two key realities has led many on both sides to seek to change the fundamentals of the alliance. South Korea’s growing strength is leading to questions about the necessity of its current dependence on the United States for security. The ROK and the U.S. share similar concerns about North Korea, but there are key

differences in priorities. Also, South Korea has differing economic and foreign relations interests in East Asia as it becomes more of an important global actor. In the United States, these changes are causing some resentment over the high price of maintaining the troop presence in Korea, as well as the view that the ROK is not contributing enough to the alliance.

Relations between the United States and South Korea were at a low point during ROK President Roh Moo-Hyun and U.S. President George W. Bush's time in office. Many of South Korean President Roh's (2003-2008) positions and comments presented a turn away from the traditional alliance. During his presidential campaign, he said that during any potential conflict between America and North Korea, "we will not side with North Korea or the United States," and suggested that if a conflict broke out South Korea could act as a mediator and ask for concessions from both sides. This continued throughout his presidency, in 2007, Roh told visiting American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates that the "biggest security threats in Asia were the U.S. and Japan."<sup>57</sup> Aside from his comments, Roh also sought to assert South Korean sovereignty by returning OPCON to the ROK army.

During the Presidency of George W. Bush, there was a fundamental disagreement of how to approach the North Korean threat. Bush personally despised Kim Jong-Il and was loath to engage with North Korea, but the two South Korean Presidents in power during his term, Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-Hyun, made engaging with North Korea central to their presidencies. When President Kim Dae-Jung came to Washington D.C. to visit President Bush, Bush referred to Kim Dae-Jung as "this man" in an official joint statement, angering the Korean public who saw it as a sign of disrespect.<sup>58</sup> Many South Koreans also disapproved of President Bush labeling North Korea part of the "Axis of Evil" as it directly conflicted with the current South Korean Sunshine Policy. During this time period, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld openly

contemplated reducing troop levels in South Korea, as well as instituting a policy of strategic flexibility that would enable American troops to deploy from Korea to conflict zones like the then current war in Iraq.<sup>59</sup>

The current South Korean president, Park Geun-hye has a more positive perception of the U.S.-ROK alliance. President Park has been maintaining the close cooperation with the United States on North Korean issues started by her predecessor, President Lee Myung-Bak.<sup>60</sup> However, even with a more conservative president and closer coordination, there will remain differences in U.S.-ROK priorities in the region. South Korea depends on the United States, but it has to be careful to balance that relationship with the economic importance of its largest trading partner, China.<sup>61</sup> In addition, South Korea cannot view North Korea solely in terms of its nuclear program or security issues. One initiative started by President Park is her “Trustpolitik.” Although the policy promises to remain tough in the face of North Korean provocations, it also focuses on increased engagement with North Korea, such as offering the possibility of talks with the current Kim Jong-Un regime, increased South Korean investment in North Korea, and continued humanitarian aid to the North Korean population.<sup>62</sup>

President Obama has emphasized the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Last year, while celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military alliance, Presidents Park and Obama released a joint statement that called the partnership an “anchor for stability, security, and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, in the Asia-Pacific region, and increasingly around the world.”<sup>63</sup> For President Obama, South Korea is an important part of his strategic “Rebalance” to Asia. President Obama has visited South Korea four times, more than any other US President, and President Park and Obama visited the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command together in

April 2014.<sup>64</sup> The U.S. also plans to send an additional 800 American soldiers to South Korea at a time when the U.S. government is significantly drawing down overall American troop levels.<sup>65</sup>

## **6. Current Issues in the Alliance**

The following section will address some of the most important issues currently facing the alliance. Many of these issues reflect changes caused by the end of the Cold War and the ROK's democratic transition and amazing economic growth. Despite these changes, the North Korean threat has remained the most important issue throughout the alliance's existence. While the threat has remained, North Korea no longer has the conventional advantage over the more technologically sophisticated south and relies on asymmetric capabilities such as its nuclear program, large Special Forces and new techniques like cyber attacks. Other issues show tensions as the relationship shifts from a client-patron one to a more equal partnership. These include finding a way to transfer wartime Operational Control of the ROK military from U.S. to ROK control, a shift in U.S. base size and location in South Korea, and difficulties funding the partnership during U.S. austerity as well as agreeing to how to split the costs of the alliance. The evolution has not only caused tension, but has also created new opportunities for cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula, such as peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations. Each of the following issues will require changes and compromises from both to maintain a strong foundation for the alliance in the future.

### **a) North Korea: Current Threat Profile**

Although the alliance has changed substantially since its Cold War origins, it is still grounded in protecting the ROK from DPRK attacks or invasion. While most U.S. Cold War adversaries have abandoned communism, or in the case of the PRC an ideological commitment to conflict with imperial powers, North Korea has not changed its ideology or hostile stance to the outside world. Even while

North Korean citizens suffer from hunger and privation, the Kim regime spends an estimated 22.9% of their GDP on defense, the highest percentage in the world.<sup>66</sup> In addition, despite North Korea's relatively small size, it has one of the largest military forces in the world, with an estimated 1,190,000 troops in 2012 as compared to the 639,000 ROK troops.<sup>67</sup> While it is true that many North Korean troops are less well nourished, trained, or equipped than their ROK or U.S. counterparts, North Korea maintains a 100,000+ large detachment of Special Operations forces trained to infiltrate into South Korea, attack strategic infrastructure, carry out assassinations, and potentially act as a delivery mechanism for a biological or chemical attack against the ROK.<sup>68</sup> Making the DPRK threat more acute, the DPRK has positioned most of its forces and artillery south of Pyongyang and in close proximity to the DMZ, meaning that a DPRK attack could occur with little warning.<sup>69</sup>

Beyond conventional forces, North Korea's missile and nuclear program is a major threat to South Korea, as well as Japan and others in the region. According to the Nautilus Institute, an artillery attack against Seoul would likely result in 3,000 deaths in the first few minutes, and up to 30,000 deaths in a short amount of time, along with massive damage to infrastructure.<sup>70</sup> Aside from the short-range missile threat, North Korea possesses medium range missiles, such as the Nodong missile, that can hit all of South Korea and most of Japan.<sup>71</sup> Importantly, the Nodong missile is believed to be able to carry a small nuclear weapon. The nuclear threat is the most prominent reason for worldwide concern about North Korea, which currently is believed to have between six and eight nuclear weapons. This problem directly affects the United States. In 2015, Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, the current U.S. commander in South Korea told the Senate Armed Service Committee that he believes that North Korea has the capability to place a nuclear warhead on a long-range missile that could hit the United States.<sup>72</sup> The sophistication of North Korean nuclear weapons capabilities has been increasing. North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006 resulted in a yield of less than 1,000 tons of TNT, however by the third test in 2013 was estimated to have a yield of 6-40 Kilotons.<sup>73</sup> Beyond nuclear weapons, Joseph Bermudez Jr. estimates North Korea to have between 2,500-5,000 tons of chemical weapons agents such as chlorine and mustard gas, hydrogen cyanide, and sarin.<sup>74</sup>

Expert estimates vary about the effectiveness of the DPRK military, however given the short distance between the front line DMZ forces and the 25 million plus residents of Seoul, as well as the numerous asymmetric capabilities that the DPRK possess, the DPRK has the potential to wreak devastating human and economic damage on South Korea. Since the end of the Korean War and the signing of the armistice in 1953, a state of mutual deterrence has existed, but this state has depended on the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, despite this deterrence, the DPRK has proven willing to commit violent provocations resulting in U.S. and South Korean casualties. The two most recent examples of this tendency is the 2010 North Korean sinking of the Cheonan that killed 46 ROK seamen, and the 2010 North Korean shelling of the ROK Yeonpyeong Island that killed four ROK citizens as well as wounding an additional three civilians and fifteen soldiers.<sup>75</sup> Many North Korean provocations do not result in physical damage, but are intended to register displeasure with the U.S.-ROK alliance and to increase tension on the Korean Peninsula and the region, such as firing missiles into coastal waters during joint U.S.-ROK military exercises, or most recently firing two short range missiles off of its western coast two days before U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited Seoul.<sup>76</sup> While some dismiss U.S. East Asian alliances as a holdover from the Cold War, in the case of the U.S.-ROK alliance it is clear that the original purpose has not lost meaning, because even as ROK capabilities have grown, the DPRK still has manifest hostile intent and large conventional and asymmetrical capabilities that are more than a paper tiger threat to South Korea and the region.<sup>77</sup>

#### b) Wartime Operational Control

One continuing source of uncertainty and tension in the U.S.-ROK alliance is the issue of wartime operational control (OPCON). Until 1994, U.S.-ROK combined Forces Command maintained both peacetime and wartime OPCON, but since then ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff have peacetime OPCON of ROK forces. South Korean wartime OPCON is under the authority of the US-ROK Combined Forces Command, which a four star U.S. General always leads. South Korea is the only country that does not have wartime OPCON of its own forces. There have been

several requests for a transfer of OPCON back to South Korea, first starting in the 2000s under the presidency of Roh Moo Hyun, but South Korea has consistently postponed the transfer due to fears it would weaken the alliance, or that North Korea would escalate its provocations.<sup>78</sup> The most recent OPCON transfer deadline was December 2015, but the current ROK President, Park Geun-hye, has formally requested that the transfer be postponed past 2015, in part because of ongoing DPRK provocations including the 2013 nuclear test.<sup>79</sup>

Some in the United States view the issue of OPCON as a sign of continued South Korean dependence. Last July, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee Senator Carl Levin made this statement about Korea, “It is a sovereign nation, and sovereign nations should be responsible for their own national defense in time of war.”<sup>80</sup> In the ROK, support for the current OPCON situation breaks down along ideological lines, with the political left supporting the transfer, and conservative politicians opposing it. President Roh was a progressive and saw the issue as a matter of sovereignty, and it fit in with his continuation of the Sunshine policy towards North Korea. The next president, Lee Myung-bak, was more conservative and postponed the transfer.<sup>81</sup> The main reason for the continual postponement of OPCON transfer is the fear that it will lead to the United States disengaging from the Korean peninsula leaving South Korea open to North Korean military actions. This is a reasonable concern, especially as America is reducing its overall troop levels to the lowest point since WWII.

The transfer of OPCON should be a deliberate process not undertaken for purely political reasons, but it is unreasonable for the status quo to continue in perpetuity. There are operational considerations that need to be taken into account before a transfer, such as the concern that the ROK command is not yet ready to fight a coalition battle should North Korea invade.<sup>82</sup> In the short term, the United States needs to address ROK operational concerns, but North Korea’s



propaganda benefits from the U.S. military presence in South Korea, and by portraying South Korea as an American puppet. In South Korea, as the United States cedes more control to Seoul, it can counteract the anti-American narrative that the United States is only using Korea for its own ends. Also, as Seoul gains more responsibility for its defense there will be a greater motivation to lessen dependence on America and contribute more to the protection of its own country easing the burden on American soldiers and tax payers.

For both the United States and South Korea, the transition has risks, such as the United States potentially being less able to restrain ROK forces in the face of DPRK provocations and for the ROK the transition triggers abandonment fears in the face of a rising China and an unchanged DPRK. Despite these risks, the U.S.-ROK alliance has greatly changed since the Korean War, and its command structure should reflect these changes, rather than maintaining an uneasy status quo that will weaken- rather than strengthen- the long-term health of U.S.-ROK relations.

c) Basing

U.S. military bases have been a long-standing source of tension and controversy. The main military base in Korea, Yongsan Garrison, is located in some of the country's most valuable real estate in downtown Seoul. Many Koreans consider the area surrounding Yongsan to be a dirty and dangerous place. There are also concerns about human trafficking, with many Filipino women being employed in bars surrounding U.S. bases, as well as some evidence that both the U.S. and ROK government has a history of ignoring or facilitating the 'camp towns' full of brothels surrounding the bases.<sup>83</sup>

In 2003, Presidents Bush and Roh came to an agreement to relocate the U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula away from Yongsan garrison and to move the scattered forces to bases south of Seoul.<sup>84</sup> Under the plan, The United States will reduce the number of their military installations from more than 100 to less than 50, including forward deployed locations near the DMZ. The biggest project of the relocation is the expansion of Camp Humphreys Army Garrison. The United States plans to complete relocation by 2016, and when completed will turn Camp Humphreys into the largest U.S. Army garrison in Asia. The relocation is one of the largest building projects ever undertaken by the U.S. military, with anticipated total costs of \$10-\$13 billion. Once the construction is finished, the base will station about 36,000 Americans, made up of 17,000 US troops, family members and support staff.<sup>85</sup> For the soldiers, the new larger bases that the United States is building in Korea will lead to a higher quality of life due to new infrastructure. The more remote locations of the new bases will also lessen the burden of the U.S. forces on the local population and reduce the chances of soldiers committing criminal acts against ROK citizens that increase tensions in the relationship. However, these bases will also be less vulnerable to any DPRK artillery attack, reducing the current tripwire quality that current, more forward positioned U.S. bases maintain. As a part of this new restructuring plan, U.S. forces in the new bases would also be more available for contingencies outside of Korea.<sup>86</sup> These changes have the potential to cause abandonment fears, but spending billions of dollars to turn Camp Humphrey into the largest American garrison in Asia, hardly a sign that the United States will be leaving in the near future.<sup>87</sup>

#### d) Burden Sharing and Reassuring Allies during Austerity

President Obama has made the Strategic Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific a cornerstone of his foreign policy. Under this policy, the United States would increase resources to the Asia-

Pacific region, including South Korea. However, around the same time that the Strategic Rebalance policy was being introduced Congress passed the Budget Control Act of 2011. The Budget Control Act mandates cuts across U.S. government spending, known as sequestration, including cutting defense budgets. Congress members designed the mechanism of sequestration to present legislators with a bitter pill to overcome domestic partisan disagreements about passing a budget that included tax hikes and spending cuts, but attempts at compromise failed and deep percentage driven cuts that congress has mandated.<sup>88</sup> The arbitrary nature of the sequestration has reduced the ability of the U.S. Department of Defense to plan resource allocation strategically. In addition, ongoing contingencies in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe that require U.S. attention and resources have exacerbated this problem.

As the United States reduces its military budget by \$487 billion in planned cuts over the next ten years on top of a potential additional \$500 billion in cuts mandated by sequestration, South Korea will have to assume more responsibility for its own defense.<sup>89</sup> For the ROK, the reduction of the size of the U.S. Army to its lowest level since the end of WWII is of particular concern because any major North Korean contingency would require a massive ground force to stabilize the peninsula. South Korean analysts see the troop cuts, as well as U.S. reluctance to become involved in operations in places like Syria, as signs that South Korea needs to increase its ground force capabilities.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, the ROK has announced a 5.3% increase in defense spending for 2015, which is the highest rate of defense growth since 2011.<sup>91</sup>

U.S. defense austerity will continue to play a role in burden sharing agreements, known as Special Measures Agreements (SMA). SMA talks have occurred between the two allies every five years since 1991, when the ROK first started paying some of the costs of U.S. personnel and bases. The most recent SMA agreement was signed in 2014 and will last until 2018. In this new

agreement, South Korea will raise its contributions by 6%, for a total of \$867 billion in 2014, and increase the amount of payment annually based on inflation. In addition to increased burden sharing, the ROK will gain greater control and transparency about how its funds are spent.<sup>92</sup> Despite the increase, U.S. non-personnel spending for U.S. Forces in Korea have far outpaced ROK contributions, from 2008-2012, ROK contributions increased by \$42 million, but U.S. costs increased by \$500 million.<sup>93</sup>

The negotiations of the SMA in 2014 were tense, and after the agreements was signed some ROK lawmakers called the agreement humiliating, and voiced concerns that the U.S. would use ROK funds for basing relocation in violation of a 2004 agreement not to do so.<sup>94</sup> During the negotiations, there were anti-American protests in South Korea, and anger about the lack of transparency about how the United States used ROK taxpayer money. Another source of contention was that during the negotiations, the United States still had a surplus of 500 billion unused won worth of ROK contributions.<sup>95</sup> However, the current SMA mandates that the USFK must make an annual report on the use of ROK funds to the National Assembly, and must seek approval from the Ministry of National Defense for every contract in which ROK funds are used.<sup>96</sup> If the United States meets this obligation, it should go a long way towards reassuring South Korean citizens that the United States is using their funds in a responsible manner.

The contentious nature of burden sharing agreements is likely to continue. In the United States, especially during financially troubled times and austerity, congressmen have questioned why a rich country such as South Korea does not contribute more to the alliance.<sup>97</sup> In South Korea politicians on the left claim that the ROK is already paying more than their fair share of the burden, and dispute U.S. figures for ROK contributions. For example, current U.S. calculations of ROK burdens do not take into account potential rental revenue that the ROK

foregoes by allowing U.S. use of bases, or environmental costs imposed on local communities by U.S. bases.<sup>98</sup> Since both sides are democracies that have to respond to citizen concerns over how tax money is spent, it is rational for the ROK to press for greater control and transparency for the funds they provide. However, other countries, such as Japan, provide more funding for U.S. basing and burdens and U.S. forces in Korea face a greater opportunity cost than U.S. troops based elsewhere in that they do not regularly deploy outside of the ROK.<sup>99</sup> If the United States still faces significant funding limitations under the Budget Control act when the current SMA expires in 2018, than the next SMA negotiation is likely to be contentious with the United States pressing for even higher ROK contributions. However, in order to address these issues it is possible to extend things like payment in kind, or to count a percentage of ROK money spent on U.S. weapons systems as going toward their defense obligation. This would allow both sides to present the agreement as a domestic win, and would allow the ROK to increase investment in U.S. goods while further developing their defense capabilities, which is a win-win.

#### e) New Areas of Cooperation

While the U.S.-ROK alliance remains focused on security challenges on the Korean Peninsula, new areas for cooperation are developing. The ROK has supported several U.S. overseas engagements throughout its history, including sending personnel to support the U.S. mission in during the Vietnam War, and more recently in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Two areas in which the ROK are becoming more active include peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations. In both of these, the ROK is helping provide for a international common good, supporting U.S. priorities, and acting independently of the alliance structure. These trends are part of the “Global Korea” foreign policy first articulated by President Lee Myung-bak, intended to increase South Korea’s participation and influence in international governance.<sup>100</sup>

The ROK first participated in peacekeeping missions in 1993, sending an engineering unit to Somalia. Currently it has 614 personnel deployed in peacekeeping missions<sup>101</sup>, and since 1993 has deployed around 11,000 personnel to 17 different countries.<sup>102</sup> To facilitate participation in peacekeeping operations (PKO), the Ministry of National Defense (MND) has a 3,000 personnel strong unit dedicated to overseas deployment, and in 2004, the MND established a PKO Center at the Korea National Defense University to provide pre-deployment education and research about ROK participation in PKOs.<sup>103</sup> While ROK participation in PKOs is under the aegis of the United Nations instead of the U.S.-ROK alliance, the United States has a strong interest in global stability, and as a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, it has a stake in the success of U.N. peacekeeping.

Since 2009, the ROK has deployed the *Cheonghae* Unit for anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, near Somalia. In those six years, the *Cheonghae* Unit has rescued 31 ships and escorted more than 11,000.<sup>104</sup> In addition to providing valuable support for ships sailing through dangerous waters, the ROK Navy has gained coalition experience through its membership in Combined Naval Task Force 151 (CTF-151), a multi-national task force dedicated to combating piracy in the region.<sup>105</sup> South Korea, along with the United States and 18 other nations, is also a member of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery (ReCAAP). ReCAAP is a multilateral agreement that fosters information sharing, capacity building and cooperative arrangements aimed at combating piracy in South East Asia.<sup>106</sup> In its counter piracy activity, the ROK Navy contributes to its national interest, but in helping provide a public good that the United States cares deeply about (freedom of navigation) this activity can only be good for the U.S.-ROK alliance and the ROK's greater influence in the world.

The “Global Korea” concept and greater ROK participation in international institutions reflects a change in the alliance from a client-patron arrangement to a more equal partnership. It is important for this partnership to continue finding ways to strengthen their cooperation beyond deterring the North Korean threat. Future areas of cooperation could include a wide range of global security threats such as humanitarian relief, reconstruction missions, counter proliferation, space and cyberspace.<sup>107</sup> Officials from both countries are realizing the importance of expanding the alliance. In October 2014 during the “2+2” meeting between U.S. and ROK defense and foreign affairs executives issued a joint statement, stating that “Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to further develop the Alliance into a global partnership that is more than just the linchpin of peace and stability in Northeast Asia. With a common understanding of the Alliance’s global capabilities, the Ministers committed to building on those capabilities to actively address emerging challenges to peace and security around the world.”<sup>108</sup> This recognition is vital for the alliance to have a long-term future beyond simply deterring the North Korean threat, and reflects the potential for a continually evolving force for stability in the world.

## **7. Does the Alliance have a Post-unification Future?**

The North Korean threat is the foundational principle of the current U.S.-ROK alliance. Ever since the end of the Cold War, many scholars have predicted the end of North Korea, and North Korea has regressed while South Korea has experienced miraculous growth.<sup>109</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider when or if North Korea will collapse, or to consider a reunification under DPRK control, but since a reunified Korea would have a transformational effect on the alliance, planning for different possible reunification scenarios need to start now. If the reunification happens in the aftermath of a collapse of North Korea, than the United States military will likely have to play a limited, but vital, role in the immediate aftermath. Beyond the

immediate aftermath, and no matter how the unification occurs, the viewpoints and perspectives of the ROK, the United States, Japan, and China will all play an important role in the future of the alliance, and in the security framework of East Asia.

a) ROK Viewpoint

Korean viewpoints of the U.S.-ROK alliance will be a determinative factor in whether the ROK will remain in the alliance after any Korean reunification scenario. Public perception of the United States in South Korea is currently highly positive. This is a highly encouraging sign but it would be a mistake to assume that this support will continue into perpetuity. South Korean public opinion of the United States is mercurial- as recently as 2003 only 46% of South Koreans had a favorable view of the United States.<sup>110</sup> There are a variety of variables that have the potential to affect post-unification Korean perceptions of the U.S.-ROK alliance, including how reunification takes place, ROK demographics, ROK politics, and ROK economics. However, the most important factor is the role former DPRK citizens play in a unified Korea and their perceptions of the alliance.

Possibilities for Korean reunification are commonly presented as a binary between a hard and a soft landing. Soft landing thinking envisions North Korea undertaking China-like economic reforms and renouncing militarism, and gradually opening up to South Korea and the idea of unification.<sup>111</sup> This type of reunification scenario is clearly preferable to the United States and South Korea, but is currently unlikely. Current North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un has not shown signs of serious reform in either foreign or domestic policy, and as a young man, could stay in power for decades. However, if North Korea does decide to embrace reform and to unify Korea through negotiation, one possible condition for the reunification may be the removal of



U.S. troops from Korea, which would echo a constant DRPK demand. This demand would likely be even strong if these negotiations occurred in a multi-lateral framework that included China, which would be unlikely to want U.S troops across their border with Korea. It is beyond doubt that many in Korea, and the region, would see giving up the U.S.-ROK alliance in exchange for a peaceful reunification as a small price to pay.

A hard landing reunification poses serious problems, and ROK leaders have sought to prevent it though aid to Pyongyang.<sup>112</sup> If North Korea collapses, then there will be a range of short-term problems, such as securing North Korean nuclear sites, preventing factional fighting amongst the North Korean military, and providing emergency humanitarian relief to hungry North Korean citizens. There would also be serious long-term problems, including costs of \$80 billion+ per year for the first ten years to integrate the North Koreans into the Republic of Korea.<sup>113</sup> Because of these costs, the ROK would need the help of the United States and the international community to overcome the burdens of a hard landing. In addition, dealing with internal matters would likely become an overwhelming challenge for ROK leaders during the first few years of unification. During this time, maintaining the alliance and a close relationship with the United States would provide a critical source of stability and assistance.<sup>114</sup>

Another important variable that will affect the future of the alliance is the political makeup of the ROK. In the ROK, politicians and parties identified as being liberal are more critical of the military alliance and the relationship with the United States than those identified as being conservative are. This dynamic helps explain the differing views, opinions and policies of liberal Presidents Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-Hyun versus those of conservative Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. This dualistic view is over simplified, even though President Roh had a tense relationship with Washington D.C. he took the politically unpopular decision to

send ROK personnel to support the U.S. led coalition in Iraq, but in general holds true. In the 2014 Asan Institute's survey, self-identified liberals were 19% more likely than self identified conservatives to view the U.S. alliance as unfair.<sup>115</sup> Those on the left tend to take a more reconciliatory view towards North Korea, favoring engagement over hostility, and view aspects of the U.S. alliance as violations of sovereignty. ROK concern over sovereignty can be partially disarmed by taking actions such as transferring wartime OPCON over to South Korea as soon as possible and consolidating U.S. bases to remove U.S. troops from population centers, but as long as U.S. troops and bases are on Korean soil this tension will likely remain.

ROK demographics will also affect political outcomes in the future, as the younger generation grows older and takes power their attitudes and beliefs will determine the dominate political and cultural values. For example, the so-called 386 generation of South Koreans born in the 1960s were active in the democratization movement and had memories of the U.S. supporting authoritarians like President Chun Doo-hwan responsible for severe human rights violations and corruption. This generation is more liberal and critical of American policies than others and supported leaders like Presidents Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-hyun who were willing to challenge Washington. Age is a strong predictor of view on the alliance: 85.9% of South Koreans in their 30s view the alliance as unfair as compared to 30.4% of those who are 60 years and older.<sup>116</sup> While the younger Koreans tend to have a more negative view of American than older ones, Koreans born after the 386 generation are not as strongly affected by the Korean struggle for democracy and are more pragmatic and less ideological.<sup>117</sup>

Probably the most understudied and least understood aspect of the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance is what effect the more than 20 million North Koreans would have on ROK democracy post-unification. If, and when, these new ROK citizens are given the chance to vote,

they could put in power a government that is hostile to the alliance, but since knowing North Korean's true attitudes is currently very difficult it makes predicting that future opaque. The current regime exposes North Koreans to anti-American propaganda from birth, so if these beliefs are ingrained and they form a voting bloc hostile toward the United States it could have serious repercussions for the future of the alliance system. A lot will depend on how the ROK integrates North Korea post-unification. It is hard to predict how North Koreans will react to unification and how long it would take before the ROK could build basic institutions in North Korea to enable true unification as opposed to mere territorial integration. It is likely that true unification under a single form of democratic governance and free movement of the population would take decades. Korean society, goals and strategic viewpoints will likely change in unpredictable ways that have the potential to fundamentally change the current alliance structure.

#### b) United States Viewpoint

The United States recognizes the increasing strategic and economic importance of East Asia in its Strategic Rebalance to Asia policy. The U.S.-ROK alliance's primary role is for the United States to protect South Korea from North Korea, but even after Korean unification, the United States will still have vital interests on the peninsula and the region. Already, South Korea is the United State's sixth largest goods trading partner, and the U.S. government estimates the new FTA will result in billions more worth of bilateral trade annually.<sup>118</sup> Any reunification scenario will be extremely expensive for the ROK and will likely depend on lots of U.S. aid, but reunification also presents economic opportunities for the United States. For example, in 2012, Seoul estimated that there is \$6 trillion worth of mineral deposits in North Korea.<sup>119</sup> Korea is important to the United States strategically as well. Currently there is significant regional tension from factors like China's rise, the growing militarization of Japan, and territorial disputes. Any

of these tensions could lead to a conflict that would affect America's interests and roles in Asia. Korea, as well as Japan, plays a major role as a strong ally that host U.S. forces and bases in key geo-political locations.

While South Korea is an important ally, there are increasing questions about whether South Korea is paying a fair share for the U.S. presence. In fiscal year 2012, the Committee on Armed Services estimated non-personnel U.S. costs in South Korea to be \$1.1 billion dollars. In coming years there will also be considerable American expenses involved with moving U.S. forces from current bases in Seoul and near the DMZ to bases further south. In 2014, Seoul agreed to cover \$867 million of US military costs in Korea, an increase of 5.8% of the previous year, but that is still only about 40% of the total costs associated with the American military presence. Current estimates for the cost of Korean reunification are One Trillion USD, or higher, over a decade, and would probably require significant American aid.<sup>120</sup> Any ROK efforts to increase the contributions to the cost of the American presence in Korea would strengthen the alliance, as would having plans and funds for reunification that lessen the potential burden for the United States.

American perceptions of Korea and Korean people are an important factor in whether there will be political support to continue the alliance after the North Korean threat is gone. According to the most recent Gallup opinion poll, 64% of Americans have a positive view of South Korea, and only 29% have a negative view. For comparison, this is lower than Japan, which has an 80% positive rating from Americans, but higher than China, which only has a 43% positive rating.<sup>121</sup> American's also have a positive view of the U.S.-ROK alliance, according to the 2012 Chicago Council survey, 60% of Americans support long term U.S. bases in South Korea, a higher level of support than for bases in Japan, Germany and Australia. Another

encouraging finding from the same survey was that 65% of Americans consider South Korea to be “mostly partners,” and 49% of Americans saw South Koreans sharing similar values- an increase from only 35% in 2008.<sup>122</sup> While these findings show the general positive feelings Americans have of South Korea, many Americans are strikingly ignorant about one of our closest allies. The 2010 Chicago Council survey found that 40% of Americans think that South Korea is not a democracy and 71% of Americans not realizing that South Korea is one of America’s top ten trading partners.<sup>123</sup> Both U.S. and ROK policymakers and diplomats need to do more to ensure that American awareness of the ROK increases to ensure that when the alliance faces adversity Americans will be able to relate to Koreans. In terms of values, South Koreans and Americans are strikingly similar, but unless both sides create more awareness, this is less of a benefit than it should be.

One unstated reason that the U.S.-ROK alliance will continue to be important post unification is to counter a rising China that is seeking more control over East Asia and the South China Sea. If the U.S. lessens their alliance with the ROK, than there is a great chance that the ROK will align with China. For most of Korean history, Korea was a tributary state of China, and regarded China as an elder brother country. In addition, currently, China is South Korea’s biggest trading partner, trading more with China than it trades with both the United States and Japan combined.<sup>124</sup> China is actively courting South Korea. Chinese President Xi Jinping has developed good relations with ROK President Park, and is taking advantage of mutual distrust of Japan. Many countries in the region, such as Japan, Singapore, and the Philippines are counting on U.S. support to deter Chinese expansion and territorial aggression in the Pacific. In order to present a credible deterrence to China, the United States needs to maintain a presence in the Pacific, and currently Korea is its only presence on the Asia mainland, and provides a key buffer

between China and Japan. A unified Korea has the potential to greatly affect the balance of power in the Pacific, and affect the calculations of all other countries in the region. Without a credible American deterrence, the chance of conflict in the Pacific rises sharply.

### c) Japan's Perspective

Japan's difficult relationship with both Koreas will affect its views of any post unification U.S.-ROK alliance. In both South and North Korea, strong feelings of ill-will, and even outright hostility, are part of the legacy of Japan's colonial history. For Tokyo, the vision of a unified Korea, possibly with nuclear weapons, as a dagger pointed towards Japan is a nightmare scenario, especially if in the aftermath of unification Seoul aligns with Beijing instead of Washington.<sup>125</sup> For this reason, Japan has a strong incentive to wish for the continued strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance after any reunification scenario. The President of Japan's National Defense University, Masashi Nishihara, articulated this view, saying, "Japan seeks a united Korea that is friendly to Tokyo and Washington, that is economically viable and politically open, and will allow token U.S. presence to remain."<sup>126</sup> Beyond fear of a unified Korea aligned hostile to Japan, or aligned with China, the possibility of a nuclear powered Korea is a major concern. If a unified Korea inherited North Korea's nuclear weapons, or developed new capabilities, Japan would be strongly incentivized to develop its own nuclear deterrent rather than become the only power in the region without one. If Korea remained under the nuclear umbrella of the United States, it would have less incentive to maintain any nuclear weapon capability, and the U.S. would likely not tolerate Seoul having nuclear weapons and remaining an ally.

While it is clearly in Japan's best interest for the U.S.-ROK alliance to continue post unification, it is possible that a united Korea could align more closely with Japan even if the

U.S.-ROK alliance ended. As Victor Cha notes in his book *Alignment Despite Antagonism* the ROK and Japan are ‘quasi-allies’ whose cooperation waxes and wanes based on perceived levels of U.S. support. In this argument, Japan and the ROK cooperate most closely when U.S. commitment to the region is least secure. If this mechanism continues to work post unification, it would mean that Seoul and Tokyo relations would improve.<sup>127</sup> Another interesting possibility is that in the aftermath of unification, historical memories of China’s involvement in the Korean War, or in maintaining the dictatorial Kim regime, might be more potent in Seoul once they share a long land border with Beijing.

In the aftermath of unification, Japan, along with the United States, will be able to play an important supportive role by providing both short-term humanitarian aid and longer-term development aid. For Tokyo, supporting Korea during this process could be a way to overcome its colonial legacy and build a new one based on helping rebuild northern Korea.<sup>128</sup> Rather than waiting for Korean unification, Japan should work at strengthening its relationship with South Korea. This would be a difficult prescription to fulfill, and would require South Korean efforts as well. However, it would be in Japan’s best interest to try to leave its WWII and colonial legacy in the past, rather than exacerbate historical tensions for domestic political reasons. Japan and South Korea, as two strong liberal democratic states with extensive trade relations, are natural partners. It is in Japan’s best interest to form a stronger trilateral tie between both the United States and the ROK now, so that this framework can remain in place even without the North Korean threat.

#### d) Chinese Perspective

No matter how Korean unification happens, China will play an indispensable role. China is the DPRK's only strong ally, and is currently propping up the regime with subsidies and aid. According to Nicholas Eberstadt China has provided North Korea, since the 1990s, with 90 percent of their energy imports and according to other estimates provides 45% of the DPRK's food imports.<sup>129</sup> Chinese does not support North Korea out of deep friendship but on calculations of strategic interest. If Korea unifies, how China reacts to having a democratic U.S. ally across the Yalu River will potentially shape the dynamics of East Asia.

The biggest concern revolves around the time immediately after unification. If reunification happens after a collapse of North Korea, as opposed to a 'soft landing' unification that happens through political dialogue, it is unclear how China would react. Currently there are signs that China has come to accept U.S. troops in Korea as a stabilizing force on the peninsula, but there is very little chance that this understanding would last if Korea unified and the source of potential chaos and violence disappeared. China believes, reasonably so, that a major purpose of American troops is to contain them, but the North Korean situation provides a plausible deniability context for the United States. Beijing will see any American troops remaining in a unified Korea as American expansionism and attempts at containment. After a unification of the Korean Peninsula, it will be harder to explain the necessity of maintaining tens of thousands of American troops in the Pacific without directly mentioning China. Other plausible threats like piracy simply would not require such a large presence.<sup>130</sup>

The view that China would be hostile towards a unified Korea that remains a strong American ally- especially one that has American troops- is widely believed, including by this author, however there has been some shadow play regarding Beijing's true feelings. It is an open secret that despite the strong alliance between the DPRK and the PRC, and the DPRK's



dependence, there are troubles in the relationship. China is increasingly growing to consider Pyongyang dangerous and difficult to control. In 2010 leaked diplomatic cables that showed Chinese officials telling their international counterparts that Beijing could live with a unified Korea. According to the leak, Chinese officials told Chung Yung-woo, the then the ROK Vice-Foreign Minister, that North Korea “now had little value to China as a buffer state,” and that a unified Korea would be acceptable as long as U.S. troops stayed in southern Korea.<sup>131</sup> It is unclear how widespread these sentiments are in Beijing or even in wider China, also Chinese actions show that they still value maintaining the DPRK as a buffer and are actively propping up the regime to ensure that it does not fail. If China no longer valued North Korea as a buffer state, then its large amounts of subsidized trade, or the building of an oil pipeline between the two countries that sends more than 500,000 tons of oil per year, would not make sense.<sup>132</sup>

China has been trying to move South Korea from the U.S. sphere of influence to a Chinese one. Many observers are interpreting President Xi Jinping’s July visit to Seoul as a way to weaken the American alliance system. China has been moving closer to Seoul, and this was the first time a Chinese President has visited South Korea before North Korea. One way that Beijing is trying to draw Seoul in is through economic integration; South Korea trades with China more than the combined totals of the U.S. and Japanese trade and has grown by more than 35% over the last two decades.<sup>133</sup> President Xi’s trip emphasized economic ties with Seoul, underscored by the nearly 300 Chinese entrepreneurs that came as a part of the diplomatic mission. One major step forward in financial integration that resulted as part of the trip was the new agreement that would make South Korean Won directly tradable with Chinese Yuan, previously the Won was only directly tradable with the U.S. dollar. This furthers Chinese efforts to replace the dollar as the global trade currency. In 2013, 90% of ROK import and export trade

was conducted with China in U.S. dollars, but now that Won and Yuan are directly convertible this increase integration and decrease the dependence on U.S. currency.<sup>134</sup>

Without North Korea, or in the immediate aftermath of a North Korean collapse, the chances of conflict between the United States and the PRC possibly will rise if the two giants end up touching on two different sides of the Yalu River, leaving Korea forever a shrimp between two whales. According to prominent Offensive Realist thinker John Mearsheimer, as China continues to grow economically and militarily it will seek to establish a regional hegemony in Asia Pacific and push the United States out. Following this framework, smaller states like Korea, Japan and others will join with America to balance against rising China, but this will increase the chances of conflict. Under this scenario, maintaining current American alliances will be a threat to China and vital to America for maintaining its current role.<sup>135</sup>

Because of this potential for conflict, planning, discussion, and transparency about intentions should start now. China's unwillingness to discuss these issues openly is understandable, but there should be efforts to bring them up discretely with the Chinese while openly stating the United States' friendly intentions in East Asia and in Korea. This effort should not only be bilateral between the United States and China, but should also include South Korea, and emphasis should be placed on the ways that China can benefit from having a more stable and prosperous neighbor.

e) Preparing for the Future

Korean unification can be a source of chaos or a source of peace and stability. Reunification will dramatically alter the balance of power in the region, and depending on how reunification is achieved, could create a zone of instability near the Chinese border. Many factors

could affect the current alliance, such as perceptions of other regional powers like China and Japan, changes in ROK society and needs, and changes in U.S. perceptions of the alliance. The best way to keep the alliance strong is through planning and transparency. The United States has made a significant investment in terms of treasure and personnel on the Korean peninsula, in order to continue benefiting from this in the future, flexibility and farsightedness are necessary. For the ROK there will be pressure to turn away from the alliance in the future from outside powers that feel threatened by it, and by nationalists within Korea. The more closely the United States and South Korea work together now on this planning process, the more likely the alliance will be ready to adapt to changing circumstances. Transparency is also important to show other regional powers that the alliance is not meant to threaten them, and to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings as things change. This planning process should also include Japan. As the United States' other strong ally in the region, efforts to help the ROK and Japan reconcile will only help cement the U.S. security system in East Asia. If current tensions continue, or grow, between Japan and Korea it will make it easier for outside powers use the disunity for their own gain and weaken the U.S. alliance system. U.S. and ROK citizens are growing closer together in terms of security, economics, and liberal values, but neither country should take the current closeness for granted, but instead carefully watch and maintain it.

## **8. Conclusion**

In many ways, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter's recent trip to South Korea, in April 2015, was a microcosm of the past and the future of the alliance. North Korea played their role as a hostile force that provokes the U.S. and the ROK by firing two short-range surface-to-surface missiles into their waters two days before Secretary Carter arrived in Seoul. In response to the provocation, Carter reiterated the importance of the alliance in keeping peace on the

peninsula, saying, “It’s a reminder of how dangerous things are on the Korean Peninsula and how a highly ready force in support of a very strong ally . . . is necessary to keep the peace.”<sup>136</sup> Once he arrived, most Koreans welcomed Carter warmly, but some protested his visit, and clashed with police, out of concern about the possibility the United States would position a ballistic missile defense system in the ROK, and threaten relations with Beijing.<sup>137</sup> Carter met with South Korea’s National Security Advisor Director Kim Kwan-jin, confirmed the strength of the alliance, and both agreed to further postpone considerations about the transfer of OPCON.<sup>138</sup> In his meeting with South Korean Minister of Defense Han Min-koo, Carter discussed how the alliance had taken on a wide range of new roles outside the Korean peninsula. Carter mentioned how both countries have “worked together [with South Korea] to counter [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant], combat Ebola and help rebuild Afghanistan,” and thanked the ROK for “all it’s doing to ensure peace and security around the world.”<sup>139</sup>

Secretary Carter’s trip demonstrates how the U.S.-ROK alliance is caught between its past and its future. The Cold War calculus that justified risking U.S. lives to defend South Korea from the global communist threat is gone, but the principal antagonist remains just north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel with the same strategy of brinkmanship that it relied on throughout the Cold War. Now, however, that same antagonist has nuclear weapons. North Korea’s presence in East Asia is not purely a source of instability, but is also an important part of the status quo that has maintained U.S. alliances in the region. It is an open secret that the United States security community is concerned about the rise of China and the potential for conflict. Similar sentiments can now be found throughout most East and South East Asian capitals. However, the United States and regional countries are increasingly depending on China for economic reasons. North Korea’s continuing threatening behavior

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provides a compelling reason to maintain the U.S. alliance structure, but absent the North Korean threat, U.S. and regional balancing against China will become more transparent.

For the alliance to continue into the future, it must expand past old parameters. The ROK, with U.S. support, is rich enough to provide a credible deterrent to North Korean aggression and take on greater responsibilities within the alliance and the international system. South Korea is no longer a junior partner, but should strive for a more equal footing with its superpower ally. This includes paying its fair share of defense burdens and taking on operational control for its own forces. The United States should respect ROK desires for transparency in the alliance, especially in regards to taxpayer funds provided to USFK. History has shown that when the United States makes decisions without consulting the ROK, such as during the Nixon or Carter administrations, it breeds distrust and abandonment fears. Beyond the alliance structure itself, ROK's new "Global Korea" paradigm is important for evolving the U.S.-ROK relationship beyond the Korean peninsula. This more global outlook will be key if Korea unifies, without it, it would be much harder to address Chinese concerns about the true intent in any continuing alliance. As Victor Cha notes, in order to ensure the future of the alliance, the focus needs to be on its intrinsic value rather than its strategic value for specific contingencies.<sup>140</sup> An alliance that lived up to that would be grounded in shared interests in stability and democracy that could be sustained even if the current core organizing principle disappeared.

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