

The US-ROK Alliance: An American View

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Introduction

The United States and the ROK have had a very close association for more than fifty years, but in recent years that relationship has experienced considerable stress and strain. Many analysts now express great concern about its future prospects.¹ In fact, it is getting more difficult to defend the continued existence of the alliance. The strains are manifest and multiple. The two governments have been living with them for some time, with neither willing to make the strenuous efforts required to either reverse the deterioration or abandon the alliance as incompatible with their contemporary security concerns and perspectives. So the alliance is limping along. As is the security situation on the Korean peninsula that the alliance has existed to deal with – it is limping along as well.

Alliances are, of course, agreements to cooperate with respect to some designated military matters, usually in conducting military actions pertaining rather directly to the security of the parties.² The sphere of US-ROK military cooperation is slowly shrinking, both currently and in their plans for the future. The *political* component of the alliance is in bad shape, and in fact allied political relations are the crux of the trouble. The alliance is in serious difficulty; the parties seem to have lost their way.

Normally, a defensive alliance offers insurance that can be drawn upon with the coming of hard times. Like any form of insurance it is not free. There are various costs the parties must be willing to bear. They do so presumably because they believe they have certain common, overlapping, or parallel interests which the alliance can serve. However, they will not see eye-to-eye on all the details and therefore alliance cooperation is rarely complete and never without complaints. Therefore, the current or anticipated services the alliance can provide must be regarded by the parties as valuable enough to more than offset the costs.

Ideally, this is true all the time – not just in a hypothetical security contingency. Ideally the parties see more benefits than costs in their *current* association, not just in the event that trouble comes via a serious security threat. That continuing current contribution helps keep the alliance stable and sustainable in the face of periodic challenges to its viability.

This has been true of the US-ROK alliance. For most of its existence it has been basically and broadly acceptable and both parties have almost always felt that it was advantageous, that they were better off with it than without it. This has allowed them to put up with the substantial burdens and costs associated with the alliance, which have included a number of important and stressful challenges to their political-security relationship. As a result the alliance has been relatively healthy for decades, which is no mean achievement.

- To sustain support for an alliance it helps if one or more of the following apply:
- The partners have common, overlapping, or parallel interests involved;
- The partners have their images and credibility tied up in sustaining it;
- Within the partners there are strong domestic political forces favoring it;
- The partners can uphold the alliance at little cost;
- The partners share common perspectives on key matters, particularly a common threat perspective.

When these conditions apply the partners can count on each other's interests, domestic politics, and good feelings to do much to sustain the alliance, and they can be less concerned about entrapment or abandonment.

Today the US-ROK alliance is not healthy. Neither government currently regards the alliance as highly advantageous despite much rhetoric to the contrary. There are plenty of outside observers and governmental analysts who do, but neither administration is really comfortable now with the alliance as it stands. This discomfort is not, in itself, necessarily important – alliances are often uncomfortable for one or both

parties. While the perceived benefits have dropped, so have many of the costs of the alliance. Under these circumstances it might well be expected to just slowly fade in salience, becoming steadily less important but worth retaining as a hedge against a very serious, security contingency – particularly a war. It would provide insurance of diminished importance on everyday matters but still welcome in a real catastrophe.

Alas, while some of the burdens of the alliance are shrinking, others are not. The alliance is itself a rising source of irritation in US-ROK relations. The *political* costs it poses are rising. It seems, as a result, to be unraveling in slow motion. Virtually all of the changes in it that have taken place recently, and those in prospect, are damaging its ultimate prospects. Most of the proposals for fixing the alliance hold out few realistic prospects of success.

Background

In the history of international politics alliances have rarely taken the shape of the US alliances with its Cold War associates. The classic *realist* view is that alliances are temporary, agreed on accommodations based on intersecting national interests, and that as those intersections shift or decay the parties that will eventually, often soon, go their separate ways. To begin with, alliances are uncomfortable because they intrinsically constrain freedom of action to some extent, one reason they are readily shifted or dissolved. As a result allies regard each other with uneasiness, fearing they will be abandoned particularly on the eve of or in the midst of a conflict, crisis, or war, or that they will be unwillingly drawn in by the ally's decisions and actions, i.e. the fear of abandonment and of entrapment. Alliance attachments are also shot through with burden-sharing conflicts, partly from each member's effort to shift more of the burdens to the other.

Early in the Cold War the US set out to develop alliances of a very different sort – in fact, in many instances it rejected alliances of the traditional realist sort. The justification was that traditional alliances represented an out-of-date version of international politics, a component of an inappropriate way of continuing to conduct international politics. Changing the nature

of its alliances was one of the ways the US attempted to change international politics after World War II. Traditional international politics was applied in dealing with the enemies of the free world; *within* the free world a different sort of international politics was to be conducted. The alliances that emerged were gradually shaped by pressures from the US with this in mind, resulting in a more *liberalist* approach that included the following features:

- 1) The alliances were considered multilevel *associations*, not simply arrangements for military cooperation, bolstered by and in turn permitting important nonmilitary activities like reconstruction, development, trade, and cultural interactions.
- 2) They were to utilize an unusual level of military cooperation, such as a single command, American forces stationed indefinitely on allied territory, shared intelligence, shared military planning, regular joint exercises and training, etc. The allies concluded that the threats they faced could turn violent on short notice, with attacks on such a scale that grave damage would result if there was no immediately effective military response.
- 3) They were meant to last indefinitely, as relationships of *community* not simply of military cooperation. The interests involved were profound, not temporary.

While some US alliances were not designed and operated in this fashion, to varying degrees it applied in NATO, the alliances with Japan, the ROK, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand, and among the members of the Rio Pact.

This had a number of important effects. The fear of abandonment, while never extinguished, was more readily contained. Alliance credibility and the reassurance of allies, as well as deterrence of opponents, were enhanced. Next, this involved an unusual loss of autonomy. The parties tolerated an atypical level of mutual interference in each other's affairs. American allies accepted the presence of US forces and, often, either a joint command run by Americans or a heavy American element in their own military planning. American leadership included pressure on allies to conform to what the US decided

the alliances needed in defense spending, military forces, contacts with the probable enemy, etc. In turn, the US had to attend to allies' needs and concerns, including their domestic political imperatives, in determining its policies on common problems not just in security but on other matters. The US, like its allies, had to be concerned about entrapment in conflicts in which it saw itself having little stake, for the sake of retaining the elaborate community that had been constructed and for sustaining US credibility in general.

Basically all this was handled competently. The alliances were battered repeatedly by frictions and disagreements yet they survived year after year. The breakdowns/dissolutions came mainly with radical regime shifts – as in Iran in 1954 or Cuba in 1959 – that involved a sharp political reorientation of one party.³ Some analysts mistakenly ascribed this continuity to the fact that the threat was relatively unchanged for decades; as long as it lingered there was no overriding reason for the alliances to disappear either. Others eventually began to see the alliances as resting, instead, on ongoing elements of a more liberalist character.⁴ One was democracy; over time democracy spread and developed within the alliances. Nondemocratic members became democratic; members with limited democracy became more democratic. Another was economic; over time member economic interactions typically grew prodigiously, particularly between each ally and the US, stimulating and then reflecting rapid economic growth that allowed many allies to close economic gaps with their leading counterparts.

Realist analysts such as John Mearsheimer had little to offer to explain why and how the American alliances and close security associations (such as US-Israel or US-China) during the Cold War did not disappear after 1990. The US-China association became a good deal cooler, but for the most part the other alliances and associations did not. However, while liberalist analysts offer good explanations for this, they now have a hard time explaining why, in some cases more recently, the alliances have come under serious strain. A case in point is the subject of this paper.

*A Brief History of the US-ROK Alliance*⁵

When it was initiated, and for a considerable period after that, the alliance was quite realist in character, featuring all the elements a realist analysis would expect. The parties had little in common prior to the war that created the alliance. Then it emerged out of a seemingly temporary intersection of interests. It then operated on the existence of overlapping interests. For the ROK the alliance was the key to its survival; for the US it reflected the importance of Korea strategically for Japan's security, which the US saw as of paramount importance, and the fact that Korea had symbolic importance for the US image and the credibility of American deterrence in general.⁶ Seoul was opposed to the armistice the US signed to end the Korean War that left Korea divided, and from then on it worried about abandonment. This worry was exacerbated by the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine and the parallel withdrawal of some US forces. Of course the ROK was very anxious about Carter's plan to withdraw all US forces. Later it would be quite unhappy about the Nunn-Lugar plan to shrink those forces.

The US always worried about entrapment, even before creation of the alliance when it deliberately limited military aid to the ROK to defensive equipment lest the ROK provoke a war with the North. After the war the Eisenhower administration made plain its unwillingness to support ROK adventurism toward the North as one condition for entering the alliance. Fear of entrapment was one motivation for development of the Combined Forces Command (CFC).⁷ The South developed entrapment fears of its own due to US-China conflicts over Taiwan, US requests that the ROK participate in the Vietnam War, and ultimately in 1994 when the Clinton administration contemplated attacking the North.

It is not necessary to rehearse the many burden-sharing conflicts during those years – over the size of the Korean subsidies for US forces, US insistence that the ROK buy American weapons, American complaints the Koreans were not doing enough on defense, and so on. On several occasions the US objected to Korean meddling in its domestic politics, while Koreans assumed from the start that the US consistently interfered in their political system. Over the years Korean

complaints grew about the CFC, citing typical nationalist feelings about lack of independence.

The history of the alliance is, however, one of slow steady movement toward a more liberalist relationship, something more like a community of shared norms and similar domestic arrangements. To begin with the alliance has been very intimate as alliances go. The allies have developed a very high degree of military cooperation, including shared intelligence, considerable commonality in weapons, very frequent meetings of top officials and military officers, joint training that includes elaborate annual exercises, a vast range of communication links, the CFC, and significant US forces stationed in the ROK. There has always been a high level of political consultation and cooperation as well, on the military matters and on a wide range of other subjects.

ROK growth, modernization, and democratization shrank the differences between the allies and brought on a gradual expansion of the ROK role and responsibilities in the alliance. Interactions between the two societies have grown immensely in a wide range of activities. This includes an elaborate and potent web of interpersonal relations among officers, diplomats, political official, academics, and businessmen, including the movement of numerous Koreans to the US and a fair number of Americans taking up residence in Korea. Thus the alliance has been bolstered by a huge web of personal relationships, just like those in the US alliances with Europe and Japan. Analysts have put steadily more emphasis on all this evidence of a growing community, as have officials, in discussing the health and future prospects of the alliance.

However, this process has not gone as far down that road as the US-European and US-Japan alliance/community relationships. The remaining economic gap is larger, and democratization came later in the alliance and has not developed as completely. The cultural gap remains significant as well. We might well ask if the alliance has ever attained a fully liberalist character, fully embodied what the US had in mind in its early postwar thinking about alliances. If not, this may help explain the puzzling aspect of the relationship mentioned at the outset: as the allies have become more alike the strains in the alliance have

grown. Analysts often note that rising democratization of the ROK has contributed to more political attacks on both the alliance and the US.

The Changing Nature of US Alliances

Currently most US alliances are in a state of flux. Before looking further at the US-ROK alliance, it is important to get an overview of what has been happening with the others. That makes it easier to sort out more clearly the distinctive difficulties in the US-ROK relationship.

Above all, the alliances during the Cold War were for the US to provide protection for the allies, to and then facilitate that. For the most important alliances the threat against which protection was needed, particularly in the American view, was connected to the Soviet Union and the communist world in some fashion. Exceptions included Israel, and eventually Egypt, and with Israel the US traced a good deal of what made Israel's neighbors threatening to the influence and Middle East meddling of the Soviet Union.

In turn, protecting the allies fit American priorities. The central American foreign policy objective was to prevent the spread of communism, including resisting its spread even when not sponsored and promoted by the Soviet bloc. In particular this included resisting communist expansion by force, something that definitely applied to the ROK, and the alliance was rooted in the early years of the containment policy, in the Korean War, and in the strategic location of Korea vis-à-vis China and Japan. Thus defending the ROK served the primary national security interests of both parties, just like virtually all the other alliances the US developed.

After 1990 analysts and governments began suggesting the alliances would undergo significant changes, even disappear, because the strategic rationale for them had disappeared.⁸ It was anticipated that the US would largely eliminate its military presence abroad, that the allies would become much less dependent on the US and thus less comfortable with American leadership that the perceived interests and priorities of the allies and the US would begin to diverge. All this has, in fact,

occurred but more slowly than expected and often in unanticipated ways.

Of particular interest is that the US has gradually concluded that in most instances the alliances are no longer vital for protecting the allies. Most of the allies no longer face threats that would likely require American military intervention to defeat. They are intrinsically safer even though their actual military power has, in many cases, declined. The US and its allies constitute the world's most powerful group of countries; in particular, they have far more military power than any other actual or potential group. In terms of security most of the alliances concern hypothetical rather than real threats of major attack; they offer insurance against the hypothetical return of serious threats. That makes their military component less important. The military power, if it is to be important, must be assigned other things to do. Meanwhile, the nonmilitary element of the alliances – the aspects that have made the alliances extensive communities – has been enhanced in importance, in particular the political component.

Specifically, the US is strongly inclined to ask its allies for support militarily *of US activities*. Just as during the Cold War, Washington sees the allied military strength as potentially an important contribution to central American security goals. Previously, the allies mainly supported US security interests by doing a good deal to help defend themselves. Now, they should be doing a good deal to help the US cope with its responsibilities and activities as the hegemonic manager of global, and often regional, security. Often this involves military steps of little immediate relevance to defense of the allies; they reflect American contemporary security concerns. Washington is often particularly interested in allied *political* support of its actions as hegemonic security manager.

This makes perfectly good sense to Washington. Everyone has a major stake in continued regional and global security, so the countries most able to help with that mission militarily and in other ways should be ready to do so, and the US is far better prepared than any other country to supply the requisite leadership. The US feels its allies should be providing support, militarily when necessarily and certainly politically.⁹ That is

now, for the US, what the alliances are really for. Hence the US has been eager to see NATO develop out-of-area responsibilities and activities, more so than during the Cold War. It has been eager to have help from allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia in places far from their homelands. It is constantly suggesting that its allies spend more on defense, on upgrading their military capabilities, and prepare themselves better for a broad range of contingencies.

There are significant consequences of this for the future of those alliances. First, the prime American security preoccupations no longer neatly gel with what is of most importance to its allies. Second, the military capabilities the US is particularly interested in refining – huge power projection assets on a global scale, an orientation toward fighting and winning conventional and increasingly insurgent wars, the most advanced technology, related training and strategy – are not necessarily of great interest to the allies. With them trailing behind, serious military cooperation in various security contingencies is much more difficult. Thus the US has become more interested in conducting major operations alone or with only a few other participants. Third, American forces are increasingly designed so that small units bring huge, highly accurate firepower to bear. As a result those units are expected to be highly flexible as to where they can go and how they can fight. The US forces stationed in Europe – or in Japan or Korea – are no longer to be designed mainly to defend the countries where they are located. Security crises, including attacks on the allies, will increasingly be met by drawing on forces almost anywhere to go to the location of the problem on short notice and bring the necessary power to bear.¹⁰ All three of these consequences have provided fertile grounds for tensions and frictions in the alliances in the past decade.

The US-ROK Alliance in Particular

The impact of these developments has been apparent in the US-ROK alliance for some time now but it has not been handled as well as in the other alliances. The most clear cut reason is that, unlike the other allies, the threat that gave rise to the US-ROK

alliance is still in place to some extent and the ROK has devised a different approach for dealing with it.

Though the threat from the North remains, the most significant, and most mischievous, for the alliance, there has been a marked decline in the relative conventional military power of North Korea.¹¹ That has sharply reduced each side's need to work closely with the other militarily. It is widely understood that as the revolution in military affairs has affected American forces, and with major improvements made in South Korean forces,¹² the central capability of North Korean forces – rather than launching another Korean war - has been reduced to putting up a costly defense in a war and inflicting considerable damage on the ROK through artillery and rockets and on Japan via rockets. Their mission now is essentially deterrence by defense and retaliation. There is little evidence the North could make major gains by attacking or could block determined attacks by the allies. For some time the US and ROK have confidently planned to defeat and eliminate that regime in the event of a major war. A standard explanation for the North Korean preoccupation with nuclear weapons is that they are meant to compensate for this growing conventional military deficiency.

It used to be said that Korea was the one place where the classic military aspects of the Cold War survived: a communist government with huge forces poised for a devastating attack on allied forces that would be initially inferior. US and ROK forces were to put up a stout defense while the huge additional (American) forces needed for halting and defeating the attack (and eliminating the government behind it) arrived from Japan, elsewhere in the Pacific, and the US. That war would be fought by the CFC headed by an American officer because the US would be supplying the key modern forces for winning the war.

Now the US is well into complicated steps to move US forces away from the demilitarized zone, leaving the ROK far more responsible for dealing with any invasion or responding to any shelling from the North. The US is transferring primary responsibility for many missions to the ROK, leading Seoul to pursue a major modernization of ROK forces over the next decade. This makes no sense unless the ROK is, in relative terms, much more powerful militarily vis-à-vis the threat than it

was in the past. It also reflects the anticipated results from the huge funds the US is now pouring into further improvements in its forces in Korea and ROK forces. The allies are spending and modernizing themselves into ever greater superiority - the North can respond only marginally to such a massive improvement program.

Next, the US is shrinking its forces in Korea because the smaller American units today and in the future have greater potency than the departing ones did and because the ROK is much more able to defend itself. The US has also entered into negotiations to turn leadership of the CFC over to the ROK, as Seoul has strongly requested. This is another indication that the US anticipates it will not play a critical role in a future war, particularly in view of its antipathy to having its forces serve under foreign commanders. Finally, the US is shifting the orientation of its forces in Korea toward missions throughout the region, as opposed to being designed only to defend the South.¹³

These changes have not come because of anything like a true détente. North Korea has done nothing on purpose to look less threatening. It has not altered its threatening deployments nor changed its military-first policy. It has not abandoned threatening rhetoric and its belligerent manner. The changes reflect instead how its conventional military strength has been significantly discounted by the allies. Its internal weaknesses are now greater cause for concern than its threat to attack. The main fear in the South appears to be that the state could collapse or will linger on in a perilous condition as a serious drag on regional economic progress and cooperation.

Thus Washington's approach to North Korea is now dominated not by the military threat it poses to South Korea but the threat its nuclear weapons program, plus its sales of missiles and transfers of nuclear weapons-related technology, may well pose to regional and global security. The US assesses the North Korean situation more as global security manager than ROK ally.

As suggested above, alongside all this has come a sharp adjustment in the American government's view as to what the alliance is good for and a parallel shift in the ROK government's assessment of how necessary the alliance is for protecting the

South. With the military threat less pressing, the US wants the alliance to serve other interests – the US is less necessary to keep the ROK safe and the ROK ought to be able to not only defend itself but to support other American security concerns. It should be willing to do this because American regional and global security concerns shape the general security environment within which the ROK will operate.

Similarly the US wants its alliance with the ROK, like its other alliances, to lend important political and economic support to American security management more broadly. It wants allied support in upholding its hegemonic responsibilities and ambitions. But in an important sense, the US really sees itself as leading a *Western* hegemony. The Korean contributions will be to the broad Western management of the international system.

Alongside this shift in US conceptions of the alliance, the South Korean government has significantly reduced the role assigned to the alliance in its foreign and national security policies. It is now practicing a GRIT¹⁴ approach to the North, offering considerable aid and other interaction and generally refusing to reverse these measures even if the North does not reciprocate or engages in provocations. This attempt to construct a permanent reconciliation between North and South via promotion of much greater levels of cooperation between them has been the basic national security policy of the ROK for a number of years, not the alliance. The ultimate object is to slowly make the DPRK a viable state and society through getting it to open up to the world and particularly the ROK and having this lead to the promotion of domestic reform. Drawing the two Koreas together in this will is to lead to the evolution of unification over time.

Since reconciliation with the North is expected to eliminate any military threat from Pyongyang, and eventually result in unification, Seoul expects strong support for its policy from its ally. After all, sharply improving what everyone agrees is one of the most dangerous security situations in the world should certainly be in the interest of the United States as a security manager. Removing the disruptive behavior of the North would allow progress toward a multilateral peace regime for the area, make the ROK a far more attractive place for foreign investment,

and remove some of the handicaps it now faces in its effort to become a hub for economic, cultural and political affairs in Northeast Asia.

Thus the security priorities of the allies have diverged. The US has been determined to halt North Korean nuclear proliferation and missile sales, and in the current crisis the Bush Administration was initially seeking to get the North to carry that out before even negotiating about improving its relations with the US and others. South Korea has been quite willing to improve relations with the North and negotiate on a wide variety of matters whether there is any improvement in the North's policies and actions on nuclear proliferation matters or not. Improving relations with the North has generally been viewed by the US as a price to pay for ending Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, i.e. as a bargaining chip, while for the ROK government it has intrinsic value that is more important than any immediate progress on the nuclear weapons issue. There is strong sentiment in the American government in favor of forcing a regime change – the US does not see the collapse of the North as a grave disaster, putting it at odds with both the ROK and China, and it remains, in principle, willing to use force to prevent the North from having nuclear weapons if necessary, which Seoul describes as completely unnecessary and unacceptable.

Allies can't be expected to have identical interests and priorities, so such a divergence is not necessarily a serious problem. Allies often disagree about the nature and magnitude of the security threats they must deal with, and certainly about many details of their security cooperation. The US and its European allies often disagreed about the threat from the Soviet Bloc and how best to deal with it, as well as on the details of burden sharing, defense budgets, etc. Allies can readily disagree about strategy and tactics, so US-ROK strains over the priority to place on negotiations and cooperation with the North also need threaten the alliance. Sometimes such differences can even be exploited, in good-cop/bad-cop fashion, to experiment with alternative policies without the disturbing risks often faced in choosing only one. What is important in these common situations is that the alliance partners agree on exploiting the disagreements for common benefit, like being prepared to

abandon one's primary strategy if the ally's approach appears to be working better, or being ready to abandon a preferred strategy if it threatens to dissolve the alliance. In other words, the alliance has to continue being more important than anything else.

But the importance of the US-ROK alliance has been steadily shrinking. It is often said that the Washington – Seoul frictions are limited, that they share important values, perspectives, and goals and thus continue working well together on the North Korean problem. That is not true. Each party regards the primary strategy of the other as not only unlikely to work but as *interfering* with its own objectives and strategy. The US has come to see South Korean aid to the North, concessions to the North, and dogged pursuit of an expanded relationship with it not only as unlikely to work but as interfering with the American campaign against nuclear proliferation. The ROK aid, along with China's, has allowed North Korea to resist American insistence that it give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for serious aid. Since there is a strong suspicion in Washington that the North is unlikely to ever give up its nuclear weapons program, that the regime sees nuclear weapons as the key to its survival, conciliating it will not induce it to change its ways and will simply make the proliferation problem worse. The North is using the US-ROK dispute primarily to make further progress on nuclear weapons and widen the gap between the allies. It will continue exploiting the South Korean strategy to undermine the American strategy because that is working so well.

And from the ROK perspective the American approach or lack of one, to North Korea is the chief obstacle to the ROK's being able to get the North to open up further, become a normal state, and thus be less of a threat to collapse and a military burden to its neighbors. In its deep insecurity the North is naturally preoccupied with the US – it knows the ROK poses no threat to attack. Thus from the perspective of the ROK the fierce antipathy between the US and the North is what drives the North's preoccupation with nuclear weapons and cramps the South's effort to draw the North into a normal relationship. That in turn keeps the South from using a greatly improved security situation on the peninsula as the platform for expanding the

South's economic position and political stature in the region and the world, in part by allowing big cuts in ROK military expenditures, and facilitating other steps that can prevent the nation from shrinking in status with the rise of China and recovery of Japan.

Associated with this sharp conflict, not just divergence, in strategies is a gap in the image of North Korea.¹⁵ To many in the South, North Korea is a weak and backward country of compatriots, run by an incompetent elite and a regime desperately hanging on. It is more a nuisance and impediment than a truly dangerous threat, so a confrontational stance is unnecessary and counterproductive. Its nuclear weapons are unacceptable but are mainly the result of the grave threat the regime believes the US poses. To the American government North Korea is run by criminals who cheat on agreements, are totally irresponsible in flouting international conventions, are guilty of immense human rights violations, and cannot be trusted with weapons of mass destruction. North Korea is the antithesis of democracy, the spreading of which has become the central plank in the American grand strategy. Thus the intra-alliance disagreement goes much deeper than quarreling over tactics or even strategies to a clash about the nature of the North Korean regime and thus about the kind of treatment it deserves.

The gravity of it is reflected in the fact that each side is espousing policies that cannot be construed as assisting in the realization of the other's – suggesting that it views the ally's primary objective as not that important. And each is doing so while not being unable to realistically explain how its own objectives will be realized! The US clearly prefers not to negotiate directly with the North, not to make the North a highly attractive offer of quid-pro-quo incentives for a gradual dismantling of the North's nuclear weapons program (it wants much of the dismantling done first), and thus favors maximum pressure on the North by further isolating it with the use of force on the table as a option. It is hard to see how this could work other than by bringing about the collapse of the regime – that's essentially what it would take to achieve success. This would disrupt the ROK's national strategy. But the US preference as to how to deal with the North is not acceptable to China, Russia,

and the ROK, and in some ways not even Japan, so it can never be implemented in a way the US would like. And as long as it is not implemented and the situation remains as it is, the North Korean nuclear weapons program will continue and the nuclear weapons problem will escalate.

As for the ROK, its strategy offers little prospect of being able to bring the North to give up nuclear weapons. The strategy enables the North to extract enough benefits to continue to survive and to resist pressures to give up its nuclear weapons program, so the ROK can offer no realistic explanation as to how it is contributing to ending the North's threat to the nuclear nonproliferation regime. It would be nice if the ROK was at least making great strides toward a true reconciliation so that the North will become a more normal country and society and the South can proceed more effectively on its larger strategy. But the reconciliation has made minimal progress economically and politically, and no progress at all on the human rights situation. The North basically controls the rate of improvements in their relations for purposes of advancing its own agenda, and is curtailing the leverage the South might achieve with its aid, investments and trade there by accepting considerable aid, investments and trade from China.

Without a unity in threat perception the alliance lacks a true political focus. Seoul is insisting that the alliance endorse its peninsula goals when those goals suggest that the alliance is no longer a true military necessity. Since its pursuit of those goals has led it to downplay the importance of nuclear nonproliferation, at this point the alliance is, in the American view, no longer a serious contribution to American security either. Meanwhile, the US has taken a hard line stance that implies force may have to be used when the primary costs of doing so would most gravely affect the South and put it in an untenable position psychologically by abetting the killing of compatriots.

The problem is even greater. In the absence of any profound meeting of the minds between the US and ROK administrations, the ROK's primary recourse in seeking to make its strategy for nonproliferation and reconciliation work has come to be its rapidly improving relationship with China. So ROK-China

relations have blossomed diplomatically, in trade, and via ROK investments and technology transfers to China. In the six-party talks and the dispute that gives rise to them, the ROK position is far closer to China's than to the American view. The ROK currently seems to consider China as more important for its long term strategy for the peninsula than the US. On what basis, then, would the ROK support the US in a future US-China confrontation? And if it would not, and the US is reorienting the missions of its forces in Korea to be ready for a possible confrontation or crisis elsewhere but particularly for a crisis with China over Taiwan, then the alliance is really a time bomb in US-ROK relations. If the US-China relationship sharply deteriorates the US expectation of support from the ROK and the ROK's tepid or negative response will destroy it. An indirect indication of this is the fact that ROK relations with Japan have also deteriorated significantly just as the US-Japan security relationship is being markedly strengthened. The US sees its deepening security cooperation with Japan as crucial to its entire regional security management, so the ROK's public quarrels with and antipathy toward Japan line it up, once again, far more with China than the US and suggest the alliance is a vestigial element.¹⁶ How Seoul expects to maintain significant influence with Beijing if it has poor relations with Japan, can gain no real leverage by a closer association with Russia, and is significantly at odds with the US is unclear. If the ROK-Japan conflict is not significantly eased, steps by the US to enhance Japan's weight in the region and globally will come to be seen as threatening to Korea.

In turn, the US approach to the North Korean problem has clearly exasperated both Beijing and Seoul, and gets no support from Moscow. All three are facing the prospect of another nuclear power in the region indefinitely because, in their view, the US will not make the kind of effort necessary to prevent it. The US has not figured out how to gain the leverage and cooperation needed for either enticing the North to abandon its nuclear weapons program or forcing it to do so, and has no plan for enhancing its influence in the area if the North Korean problem lingers. This is problematic since American economic influence can only shrink in the years to come as its central role

in the continuing rapid economic development of East Asia steadily declines with the rise of China. Its cultural influence has also faded. Demonstrating its political incompetence to contribute to support the national interests of either its friends or associates is likely to spread the idea that it is no longer central to the future of the region. It is being unilaterally incompetent, with corrosive implications for its influence.

This has larger dimensions. There is an increased regionalization of international politics under way. As in Europe, there is now more attention being paid in Northeast Asia to regional security management for its own sake and not as part of larger global concerns and global management. The US is out of step with this in its approach to the alliance. It is still eager to play an important role in East Asian security but is impatient with what it sees as the parochial perspective of South Korea and with Seoul's reluctance to stress the global perspective in its regional and peninsula strategy. However, Seoul's preoccupation with the local and regional is much the same as Europe's preoccupation with stabilizing and integrating the remaining areas of the continent into the EU as the paramount project for national and regional security. It is a preoccupation that is hardly surprising and easy to justify in many ways.

In addition, the strained alliance relationship is encouraging, and in turn reinforcing, other difficulties in the allies' relationship. Frictions over the presence of US forces are much higher than in the past. US complaints about trade issues, and Korean complaints as well, are more sensitive, less tolerated now. Payments for the US military presence are more resented, as is the anti-American sentiment that is now so readily voiced. Public opinion polls in the ROK on the US are not reassuring and more than matched by impatience with the Seoul government in many Washington circles. The side costs and burdens of the alliance have become harder to bear.

Earlier I listed conditions that help sustain an alliance. Using that list it is clear that the partners have some common, overlapping, or parallel interests but fewer than before; some of their most important interests are now antagonistic. They no longer have their images and credibility as closely associated with the alliance as they were; there is some willingness to treat

the alliance as of only marginal value. There is more domestic political criticism in each ally of the other, with the US leading in some ROK polls as the main threat to ROK security and strong resentment in some quarters in Washington over the Roh administration's basic approach to the US-ROK relationship. As a result the costs of upholding the alliance have risen for each party because the value of the alliance is under considerable scrutiny. Perhaps most important is that the parties now lack a common perspective on the threat that makes the alliance necessary and, not surprisingly, disagree about the course the alliance should pursue.

Does the North Korean nuclear test fundamentally alter this situation? Apparently not immediately. The reaction of the ROK has been that this is no reason to suspend most of the North-South cooperation, and does not justify changing the basic ROK strategy toward the North.¹⁷ It has not endorsed the UN sanctions with any enthusiasm and is clearly concerned about being drawn into any military actions to enforce some of them. The US has continued to move forward with its plans to turn over the CFC to Seoul sooner than South Koreans wish, to pull all its troops off the demilitarized zone and its military headquarters out of Seoul, to reduce its forces in the ROK, and to anticipate using them elsewhere than the peninsula.

On the other hand, the nuclear test heightened reservations in the ROK about the overall strategy of appeasing and cooperating with Pyongyang, eroding support for the Roh government even further, raising the possibility of a shift in that strategy in anticipation of or after the next presidential election. The test has also led to much greater international pressure on Pyongyang from the other parties in the six party talks and from the UN – it is much more isolated. The test also moved the US to make a more forthright offer of benefits to the North in exchange for steps toward unraveling its nuclear weapons program. This contributed to the revival of the talks, and a successful conclusion of them could gradually lead to the US being much less concerned about the proliferation threat posed by the North and about the ROK's conciliatory policies. The test also disturbed many people in South Korea and bolstered support for

continuation of the alliance. Can all this be exploited to put the alliance back on course?

What Is Needed

If the US is going to focus so heavily on its responsibilities as a global security (and beyond) manager, which is how it has approached the North Korean nuclear weapons program, it will need a large web of healthy alliances. It is wrong to identify global security necessities, develop a US approach to meeting them, and then approach the allies for support. The first two steps must be taken in conjunction with the allies and others to get consistent cooperation in the third step. It is also vital to keep the alliances relevant to regional and local concerns of the allies and others; they will inevitably put those concerns ahead of the larger ones the US pursues. This is one benefit of the US having successfully turned NATO toward expanding its membership and also into out-of-area efforts within Europe, contributing to direct European concerns and keeping the alliance relevant to them. As the US cannot achieve its global goals in Northeast Asia without allied help, it must seek out similar adjustments. When it needs allied support in meeting global security contingencies it had better have earned their respect and support via its activities in their parts of the world. In short, the US must sustain a collection of regional/neighborhood-focused alliances to garner global-level backing on nuclear proliferation, global human rights, the promotion of democracy, or terrorism. That is the most effective basis for sustaining the necessary leadership it wants to provide.

The US has not been very amenable to adapting in this way. On Korea that has taken the form of the past two administrations being ready to contemplate, even prepare for, using force against North Korea without clearing this with the ROK and Japan. It has insisted in developing a “war” on terrorism and using a very expansive conception of what the war is about, both of which lack wide support among American allies and raise their fears of entrapment. It has resisted allied and other suggestions that it give negotiations a serious try in dealing with North Korea

But the US-ROK alliance is not going to be “balanced” in any true sense, contrary to standard rhetoric in South Korea

about how to fix it. The idea is that the alliance will be more balanced and modernized – reflecting the ROK’s greater strength and modern capabilities. In fact, the ROK currently wants nothing like a balanced alliance. It wants the alliance (and thus the US) to play a minor role in determining the future of the peninsula in comparison to the ROK, and it wants its forces to dominate the planning for and conduct of a war with the North if that becomes necessary. The Roh administration’s standard phrase - building a “self-reliant national defense posture” – implies the ROK will soon not need much help from the US. On the other hand, it disapproves of the larger regional and global agenda the US has in mind for the alliance – it wants no balancing of those burdens and responsibilities either, leaving them primarily to the US. Thus sending troops to Iraq was done only out of a dire necessity to placate the Americans. It was not popular, was done only after much delay, and led to no serious Korean contribution to the security situation in Iraq. What the government and others mean by a more “balanced” alliance is that they play a dominant role in it regarding their particular security needs. This is typical of US allies. Virtually none are ready and able to consistently make a major contribution to security management on a large scale.

Needed are arrangements to deal with the gap between the American global focus and the South Korean local focus. As it stands, each can view the other as a lukewarm ally at best, not because the alliance would not react properly and effectively to a North Korean attack but because that reaction is not central now to meeting its foreign policy and national security needs. Each is unwilling to adapt to the other’s perspective. Other than rhetorically, the ROK will not endorse and support the US policy on North Korean nuclear weapons, the US will not endorse and support the ROK policy of engagement with North Korea. Getting one’s way seems to have become more important than the survival and future of the alliance.

A workable rehabilitation would require steps neither is likely to take. Will the ROK drop its objections to BMD and seek to join in BMD deployment, indicating it regards North Korean missiles as a real threat? Will the ROK develop a quid-pro-quo approach to aid and other inducements to the North,

moving from GRIT to Tit-for-Tat. Will it endorse in principle the idea that nonproliferation is so important that force can be used to prevent it, and be prepared for this eventuality in the North Korean case? Finally, will it work to secure an important role in regional security management under the aegis of the US? Even if this requires a confrontation with China? Each seems improbable.

By the same token will the US strongly associate itself with an engagement policy toward North Korea? Will it, in particular, support a policy of pressing ahead with concessions and negotiations despite North Korean provocations? Will it think globally yet accept the fact that support for its policies will always have to be obtained despite reluctance by various allies, and that asserting a unilateralist determination will not do the job? Thus, as it often did during the Cold War, will it put the long term benefits of coalition building and alliance maintenance ahead of its short term need for dealing with a particular problem? Simply asking the questions in this way suggests how unlikely a positive answer is.

Conclusion

Thus the US-ROK alliance is getting steadily harder to defend. Both parties repeatedly say it remains strong, that support for it is unwavering, that the alliance is a bulwark of security. Yet each is in pursuit of objectives and employing policies that are putting the alliance at risk. And each is pursuing steps that make good sense from its perspective, have strong support at home, grow naturally out of each's standard security concerns and responsibilities. The US faced a similar situation with the emergence of *ostpolitik* in the early 1970s, and developed similar feelings that an ally was undermining solidarity, weakening the policy of containment, etc. by pushing ahead on its own. In the end it came to terms with that situation by adopting its own policy of *détente*. It seems unlikely to do that now as long as the current President is in office.

As for the ROK, it is facing the same problem as other US allies when it comes to the shifting purposes of the alliances, which is that the US needs and expects its allies to prepare to contribute militarily to global and regional security management.

So far its allies are mainly prepared to do so in peacekeeping and post-fighting military/peacebuilding/reconstruction missions, although many have at least moved to make their forces lighter, more flexible, and more able to be sent almost anywhere. And in Afghanistan, NATO has moved to take over leadership in a real combat situation. Several countries have agreed to serve as hubs for American forces, key nodes in the overall Pentagon arrangements to move American forces almost anywhere very fast. Korea stands out as one ally not interested in participating in all this, not only militarily but politically. If the military aspects of the alliances are now relatively less important to the US and the political dimension is getting more important, then the alliance may not play a major role in plans for the security of the ROK in the future.

As for the US objective of canceling the North Korean nuclear program, thus far its efforts have simply made that problem worse. It seems to have assumed that in six-party talks the other participants would put enormous pressure on the DPRK to come to terms, and was quite unprepared for having most of the pressure put on the US instead. In the view of many observers, the US now is prepared to do without the negotiations indefinitely, letting the problem fester because it cannot accept a true negotiation, has little confidence the North will ever really accept a good agreement or uphold it, cannot get enough support for sanctions, cannot get support for using force, and is in such disarray in Iraq and Afghanistan that it cannot credibly threaten to use force unilaterally. The only consolation is that North Korea's situation is not getting better either.

The grand objective of the ROK, beyond drawing out the North Koreans and successfully ending the nuclear weapons crisis, is a security management regime for Northeast Asia. Judging by the way the six party talks have gone, this is implausible. The talks have exacerbated US-ROK frictions, have not prevented rising ROK-Japan frictions, have increased US frustration with China and vice-versa, and have secured almost no cooperation from the DPRK. They now provide a brilliant example of how and why a very necessary security management regime is out of reach politically. On what basis, looking at the

record, would a proposed regime look attractive to the US, or Japan, or China?

Will the alliance survive? Probably, especially if there are no objections to an on-paper version. After all, the US has an implicit alliance with every democratic government anyway, because the official US national strategy treats democracy as the true road to security. Whether the alliance remains probably means little in terms of how the US would respond if the ROK were attacked. On the other hand the alliance is problematic for the US because it limits US leverage on the North. Thus the close political-military cooperation of the past seems likely to continue declining. As long as China is of rising importance to ROK prosperity and the chances of unification, and if Japan emerges in ways Korea continues to fear, Korea will very likely continue tilting toward China, making a truly close relationship with the US hard to sustain. From the US point of view the ROK could end up as a minor ally. As for the ROK the logic of its policy, given the North's supposed fear of US intentions, is to reduce the alliance to a minor role on the peninsula as Koreans finally take control of their destiny. The area where the Cold War threat structure persisted longest may well be the place where a US Cold War alliance was hardest to adapt effectively to the post-Cold War world.

Notes:

¹ Examples: Nae-young Lee, "South Korea & the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Public Opinion About ROK-U.S. Relations, Korea Economic Institute, ed., *Challenges Posed by the DPRK for the Alliance and the Region* (Washington, D.C.: Korea Economic Institute, 2005); Scott Snyder, "Alliance and Alienation: Managing Diminished Expectations for U.S.-ROK Relations," *Comparative Connections*, (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, Center for Strategic and International Studies); David E. Sanger, "U.S. to Roll Out Tepid Welcome for President of South Korea," *International Herald Tribune* September 14, 2006; Stephen Bosworth, "U.S. Interests in a Changing Asia," *PACNET Newsletter*, September 6, 2006. Available at pacnet@hawaii.biz.rr.com; L. Gordon Flake, "Testimony of L. Gordon Flake Before the House Committee on International Relations," September 27, 2006 Distributed by the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, Washington, D.C.; Joseph

A. B. Winder, "The Korea-U.S. FTA: Prospects and Implications for the Bilateral Strategic Relationship," *Northwest Asia Peace and Security Network Policy Forum Online* January 9, 2007. Available at: <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/llistinfo/napsnet>; Balbina Hwang, "The U.S.-Korea Alliance on the Rocks: Shaken, Not Stirred," *Heritage Lecture #970* Heritage Foundation, September 16, 2006.; John Feffer, "U.S.-ROK Relations: A Conflict of Apples and Oranges?," *Korean Policy Review* 2 No. 8 (August 2006).

² Alliances can be defensive or offensive in orientation; sometimes an offensive alliance is more for aggrandizement than security of the parties.

³ In comparison, the Soviet alliance system which was also meant to be quite nontraditional and lodge alliance ties within elaborate community relationships, operated more like traditional alliances: departures by various states, some military tensions and even minor military clashes among the allies, and several invasions among them. And these developments emerged after the parties traded charges of regime changes even though there was no real shift in the nature of the regimes involved except in Hungary in 1956.

⁴ See, for example, Robert B. McCalla, "NATO's Persistence After the Cold War," *International Organization* 50 No. 3 (Summer 1996) 445-475.

⁵ For extensive or brief overviews of the alliance's history see Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley, 1997); Samuel Kim, *The Two Koreas and the Great Powers* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Balbina Hwang, "The U.S.-Korea Alliance on the Rocks: Shaken, Not Stirred," *Heritage Lecture #970* Heritage Foundation, September 16, 2006.

⁶ Terrence Roehrig, *From Deterrence to Engagement: The U.S. Defense Commitment to South Korea* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2006)

⁷ See Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, Mass: Addison Wesley, 1997)

⁸ Barry Buzan, *From International to World Security? English School Theory and the Social Structure of Globalization* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 247.

⁹ Scott Snyder, “A Comparison of U.S. and South Korean National Security Strategies: Implications for Alliance Coordination Toward North Korea,” Philip W. Yun and Gi-Wook Shin, eds., *North Korea: 2005 and Beyond* (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University) 149-165.

¹⁰ On US shifts in force design and strategy see: Hans Binnendijk, *Transforming America’s Military* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press 2002); Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America 2005* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2005); Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006); John Feffer, “U.S.-ROK Relations: A Conflict of Apples and Oranges?” *Korean Policy Review* 2 No. 8 (August 2006).

¹¹ Taik-young Hamm, “The Self-Reliant National Defense of South Korea and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Policy Forum Online*, June 19, 2006. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0649hamm.html>

¹² ROK defense budgets are rising sharply. The ROK is shrinking its forces as it buys more advanced equipment, reconnaissance aircraft, ballistic missile defenses, etc. so as to modernizing while saving in personnel costs. It is now focused on improvements needed in taking over leadership of the Combined Forces Command and conducting the alliance military missions the US is transferring to ROK forces.

¹³ On these changes see: Chung-in Moon, “Misunderstandings on the Transfer of Wartime Operational Control,” *Korea Policy Review* (September 2006) as reproduced in Nautilus Policy forum Online. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0671Moon.html>; International Institute for Strategic Studies, “America’s Alliances in East Asia,” *Strategic Comments* 11 Issue 3 London: International Institute for Strategic Studies (May 2005); Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., “Force Restructuring in the ROK-US Military Alliance: Challenges and Implications,” Paper delivers at 21st Annual Conference of the Council on US-Korean Security Studies, October 2005; Taik-young Hamm, “The Self-Reliant National Defense of South Korea and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Policy Forum Online*, June 19, 2006. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/fora/security/0649hamm.html>; Chang-hee Nam, “Relocating the U.S. Forces in South Korea: Strained Alliance, Emerging Partnership in the Changing Defense Posture,” *Asian Survey* 46 No. 4 (July/August) 615-631.

¹⁴ Graduated Reduction in Tension is a strategy for conflict management and reduction in which a nice step is taken toward the opponent that cannot be readily withdrawn and for which no quid pro quo is required, followed by a second similar step, and then a third, etc. The idea is to eventually alter the opponent’s suspicions and hostility and induce it to reciprocate, thereby changing the level of hostility in the conflict and opening the door to further relaxations, and eventual resolution, of it.

¹⁵ Scott Snyder, “A Comparison of U.S. and South Korean National Security Strategies: Implications for Alliance Coordination Toward North Korea,” in Philip W. Yun and Gi-wook Shin, eds., *North Korea: 2005 and Beyond*. (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, Stanford University, 2006) 149-165.

¹⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, “Japan’s Strategic Realignment,” *Strategic Comments* 11 Issue 9 London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2005; Schoff, James L., “Political Fences and Bad Neighbors: North Korean Policy Making In Japan and Implications for the United States,” *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Policy Forum Online*, June 22, 2006. Available at: <http://www.nautilus.org/napsnet/sr/2006/0650Schoff.pdf>.

¹⁷ Examples of this attitude: “South Korea Says It Will Continue Projects in the North,” *New York Times* October 19, 2006, in *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report* October 19. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>; “PM Begs to Differ With Japan, U.S. Over North Korea,” *Chosun Ilbo*, in the Associated Press, August 10, 2006. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report* August 13. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>; “Roh Cautious Over Inter-Korean Projects,” *Korea Times* October 12, 2006. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report*, October 13, 2006. Available at: <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>; “South Korean President Expresses Reservations Over More North Korean Sanctions,” *Associated Press* August 10, 2006. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report* August 10, 2006. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>; “South Korea Imposes Only Mild Penalties on Pyongyang,” *Wall Street Journal* November 14, 2006. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report* November 14, 2006. Available at: <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>; “2007 Budget for North Korean Projects Mostly Unchanged,” *ChosunIlbo* November 15.

In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report* November 15, 2006. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>; “Unification Minister Calls For Increased Assistance to North Korea,” *Yonhap News Agency*, January 2, 2007. In *Northeast Asia Peace and Security Daily Report* January 2, 2007. Available at <http://www.nautilus.org/mailman/listinfo/napsnet>