

**U.S. Korea Security Alliance in Transition:
A U.S. Perspective***

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Introduction

The US-ROK security relationship is in transition. It is a transition that started some time ago, in 1989 to be precise, with the end of the Cold War. What we are experiencing today is simply the latest, and perhaps most public manifestation, of a process that has been gathering momentum since the early days of the first Bush Administration.

Today, the issue of evolution seems to be receiving more attention than ever before. But 15 years ago, when it seemed that all Communist regimes were destined to collapse soon and the US Congress was looking for a post-Cold war budgetary reduction in defense expenditures, otherwise known as the peace dividend, there was a great deal of talk about an evolution of the alliance. It was an evolution based on the assumption that the collapse of North Korea was just around the corner, and an evolution based on the assumption that the ROK was militarily and politically capable of assuming more of a leading role of its own defense.

This was a central judgment, because a more capable ROK Army would permit changes in how the US elected to contribute to the defense of South Korea. In this instance it would allow a reduction in the US military presence in Korea. In 1989, US security policy makers were persuaded that, in relative terms, the ROK military was in the ascendancy, while the capability of the Korean People's Army (KPA) was ebbing. The ROK Army was considered strong enough to deal with a North Korean invasion. As a result the main US contribution would be immediate air and naval involvement, with subsequent ground force reinforcement from the United States.¹ America's comparative advantage in terms of military capability was air and sea power. That was true in 1989 and it remains true today.

Another evolution began early in the post-Cold war era. It was an evolution in the security arrangements in Northeast Asia. U.S.

* *This article reflects the personal views of the author and not those of the CNA Corporation.*

long-range planners and strategists seriously considered the implications of an end to the confrontation on the Korean peninsula. They were encouraged, for example, by the December 1991 North-South Reconciliation and Non-Aggression Agreement,² and by repeated judgments by respected observers that North Korea was on its last legs.³

They began to work on ending the “stovepipes” that typified the US-ROK Alliance and the US-Japanese Alliance. The goal was to bring America's two Northeast Asian alliance partners, Japan and South Korea, closer together into some sort of a “virtual” trilateral arrangement: a structure that would allow the two Northeast Asian democracies to work in harmony with the US in the pursuit of regional stability, while forming a hedge against an assertive China. The goal was, and remains, a tripartite understanding that looked to the future rather than dwelling on the past.⁴

This particular evolutionary trend has waxed and waned over the decade and a half. The virtual alliance has, in effect, been held hostage to the history of Japanese imperialism. The past has been difficult to put aside. Efforts to build a sustainable trilateral relationship have been marked by a “two steps forward, one step back” phenomena. Real progress on political rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo has reportedly been undercut by nationalist outrage triggered by either Japanese history textbooks, arguments over Tokdo/Takeshima (a small island in the Eastern Sea/Sea of Japan), or pre-election posturing in one country or another.⁵

Not surprisingly, the one thing that has facilitated the longest period of Korean-Japanese cooperation has been the issue of North Korean nuclear weapons and long-rang missiles. It has been easier for Tokyo and Seoul to get together to be against something than to work together on a common vision of the future.⁶

Meanwhile, the other evolutionary trend, the reduction of US Army presence has, until recently, been held hostage to issues revolving around North Korea's nuclear weapons program. When North Korean nuclear ambitions first became an issue in 1991-92, US security policy focus shifted from trying to rationalize the conventional force posture on the peninsula to one of attempting to halt North Korea's drive for nuclear weapons. Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, in November 1991, “froze” any further reductions in the US military presence because of concerns that the US was sending conflicting messages: withdrawing troops at the very time

the US was trying to make North Korea live up to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty inspection obligations.⁷

But before this “freeze” took effect some 7,000 US forces had been withdrawn, and the golf course at Yongson had been returned to the ROK government. Further plans to remove the US forces from the center of Seoul, however, ground to a halt because of indifference in both capitals and the cost of the move. Finally, some 13 years later, on July 22, 2004, the Department of Defense announced that a US-ROK agreement had been reached to relocate the 8,000 US service personnel in the Seoul metropolitan area out of town to the vicinity of the Osan Air Base by 2008—18 years after it was first tabled as an issue to be solved. (One can only wonder why 8,000 people, about one-third of all US forces in Korea, are needed in downtown Seoul.)⁸

The point is that force adjustments and new command arrangements that are the topics of on-going conversations have actually been discussed and debated during much of the last 12-15 years. American initiatives that urge the ROK to assume more of a leading role in its own defense, and the episodic progress toward a trilateral relationship that embraces Japan, are not new issues; except, perhaps, to the people currently wrestling with them. North Korea is central to both, as it is to the third and more recent evolutionary theme—the changing perception by the people of South Korea of the threat that North Korea poses to the South.

Since 1998, when Kim Dae Jung announced his “Sunshine” policy toward North Korea, attitudes and perceptions among the people of South Korea regarding the danger posed by Pyongyang have been evolving.⁹ The essential objective of the “Sunshine” policy is to improve the relationship between North and South Korea through reconciliation and cooperation. Seoul stopped pursuing the collapse and subsequent absorption of the North as declaratory policy. Kim’s successor, Roh Moo-hyun, has pursued his variant of this policy now characterized simply as engagement.

Over the past six years, an unanticipated artifact of this policy has been to down play the oppressive nature the North Korean regime and wretched way it treats its people in order not to offend Pyongyang, causing a rupture in dialogue, thus cause a set back in the engagement policy. While turning a “blind eye” to North Korea’s many faults has kept Pyongyang at the table, it has caused a skewed picture of North Korea to be presented to the people of South Korea. When combined with South Korean public outrage

toward the US over the accidental death of two young school girls by a US Army vehicle in 2001, South Korean attitudes and opinions about the North as a threatening regime have become more benign, while anti-US sentiment has risen. Fear of North Korea is no longer a commonly-shared attitude; many younger South Koreans with no memories of the war or other North Korean outrages over the last 50 years question the need for an alliance with the U.S. to protect them from their North Korea “cousins.”¹⁰

This additional change by a largely younger segment of the ROK population has the potential of being of central strategic significance to the future of the alliance because it questions that core-rationale for the alliance.

It is the Threat!

While there may be doubts in Seoul as to whether North Korea poses any real threat, there remains little doubt about that in official Washington. The reason there is a US-ROK security alliance is because governments in Seoul and Washington have, for 50 years, been unsure whether North Korea would try once again to reunite the Korean peninsula by invading the South. It is this central concern—“the threat” in the jargon of strategists and security analysts—that has provided the necessary glue of a shared strategic interest that has held the alliance together for over half a century.

Since its June 1950 surprise invasion of South Korea, North Korea has been considered an “enemy” and a likely military foe of the United States. In America, being an “official” enemy means, among other things, that the nation in question is the object of deliberate war planning, is the focus of deterrent deployments of US forces, is used publicly to argue for certain size and capabilities in the armed forces, is commented upon in the most negative terms in open Congressional testimony, and becomes the object of intense sustained intelligence scrutiny.

Because North Korea is an “official” enemy, it is not considered undiplomatic to refer to it as such, or to hold open hearings on Capitol Hill discussing the probabilities and implications of war with North Korea. Over time North Korea has come to hold a unique place in the pantheon of American enemies. When US officials conduct a tour de horizon of where the US might be forced to fight—a sort of security danger equivalent to the FBI’s “10 most wanted list”—Pyongyang is consistently in the top three. It is startling to realize that North Korea has been on this list longer

than any other country—54 years and counting. North Korea has the dubious distinction of being America's longest running enemy.¹¹

Not only is it an official enemy, but also since 2002 it has been publicly characterized as an "evil" regime. While it may not have been diplomatic for President Bush to describe the Kim regime in this way, the accuracy of his characterization is not in question. The Kims, father and son, have been unrelenting in their military preparations and almost without exception have placed military readiness as the first priority of government, and, as a result, have been willing to tolerate incredible poverty and starvation among their population. As one of Europe's leading Korean analysts recently said of Pyongyang, there has never been a worse government in Korean history. There is no nastier regime in the world today.¹²

It is important to remember that it is North Korea's conventional military capabilities—not just its nuclear weapons—that pose a major strategic threat to the South. In fact, it is the North's ability to hold Seoul hostage with conventional artillery, rockets and ballistic missiles that is a main reason the US has rejected the use of force in the on-going debate over North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Today it is nuclear weapons that are the most immediate focus of Washington. Nonetheless, the overall Bush policy toward North Korea, has been characterized as the "comprehensive approach," because it also includes a requirement to address North Korea's conventional deployments close to the DMZ. This is a key difference between the Bush and Clinton Administrations. The Clinton policy, known as the "Perry Process," single-mindedly focused on nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. The Bush team judged it a mistake to overlook conventional North Korean deployments which, in effect, have contributed to the reluctance of Seoul and Washington to countenance military strikes against North Korea. In other words, North Korea's conventional posture successfully deters Washington from attacking.¹³

The Bush Administration wanted to talk "comprehensively" when Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly visited Pyongyang in October of 2002. Pyongyang effectively changed the subject.¹⁴ They caused the focus to return, specifically, to nuclear weapons by admitting that they were working on an enriched uranium program. This meant that North Korea was violating three different agreements it had made regarding nuclear weapons—the Agreed

Framework, the December 2001 non-nuclear accord with Seoul, and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.¹⁵ Although the subsequent policy focus has remained on nuclear weapons, it is important to realize that the issue of North Korea's conventional forces, which still could attack or invade South Korea remains very much on the minds of military officials who are responsible for the defense of the ROK.¹⁶

As the Commander of US forces in the Pacific Ocean area (Commander, Pacific Command), Admiral Thomas Fargo made clear in his March 2004 Annual Posture Statement before Congress that Korea's conventional forces and nuclear weapons are interrelated. Fargo testified that, "Of course our partnership is focused on the most immediate threat to the security of the South Korean people—North Korea (DPRK). Although the likelihood of war on the peninsula remains low, the stakes posed by a North Korean conventional threat remain high, and are even higher if North Korea continues its pursuit of nuclear programs. The DPRK maintains more than 70 percent of its forces within 100 kilometers of the DMZ, and the Kim regime persists in its 'military first' policy, keeping its large force fed, equipped and trained while average citizens face deprivation and starvation."¹⁷

From the point of view of the US the North Korean threat to invade or attack South Korea has been at the very core of the rationale and justification for the alliance.

Or is it?

In the United States, the last 18 months have witnessed an upsurge in the number of conferences and projects that are examining the rapid social and political transformation taking place in South Korea, one that is putting strains on the relationship.¹⁸ American experts recognize that with the recent success of the URI Party in the April 2004 National Assembly elections, younger, more progressive political leadership is coming to prominence and influence. This is a political fact Washington policy makers are prepared to accommodate. What really has American officials concerned, however, is the diverging perceptions of both the nature of the Pyongyang regime and the threat its conventional military still poses to the security of South Korea. US experts fear that this difference over North Korea has the most serious potential to damage the foundations of the alliance.

Clearly, the Bush Administration has over the past three-and-half-years taken a much tougher stance toward North Korea, publicly calling attention to its human rights abuses while permitting a semi-official debate to be waged in the press on whether or not the Administration should seek regime change. President Bush himself, from the very early days of the Administration when Kim Dae Jung visited in February 2001 has expressed personal distaste for Kim Jong-Il and his regime. As Bob Woodward wrote, quoting Bush, “I loath Kim Jong-Il. I’ve got a visceral reaction to this guy, because he is starving his people. And I have seen the intelligence of these prison camps—they’re huge—that he uses to break up families, and to torture people”¹⁹

Not surprisingly, Seoul’s policy of “sunshine” or engagement was viewed with some concern, since it was perceived as propping up a despicable regime, especially as time passes and it became clear that Seoul was allowing itself to be manipulated by Pyongyang. It has concerned Washington that Seoul has been pursuing better ties with Pyongyang, almost as an end in themselves, ignoring continued security threats, appalling human rights record and blatant criminality of the North Korean regime.²⁰

This attitude has not been lost on South Korea policy makers, and more importantly, the South Korean press. Public sentiment in a democracy can have an impact on policy development. The South Korea media has had a role in shaping negative public perceptions about the nature of the Bush Administration (unilateral, preemptive, dangerous, unconcerned about the implications for Korea of US policy, etc.). When combined with the anti-US demonstrations over the deaths of the two schoolgirls, increased negative perceptions of the US peaked in 2002-03 with demonstrations and other blatant anti-American activities throughout South Korea.²¹

It appears to this author that this anti-American sentiment is also a reaction to the studied ambivalence early in the Bush Administration about whether it should facilitate the collapse of the Pyongyang regime rather than negotiate over differences. Not only was this a direct contradiction of Washington’s public support for the “sunshine” policy, it also raised the specter of a disastrous economic impact on the ROK if the North actually did collapse. This lack of internal discipline within the Bush Administration on the North Korea issue had the unhappy effect of undermining the oft-repeated statements from the President that the Administration

was seeking a diplomatic solution and did not intend to attack North Korea or seek regime change.²²

The upshot of this growing negative sentiment toward the United States seems to be that in South Korea the US has fallen in esteem, while North Korea has risen. It is almost a zero-sum phenomenon. This is a serious problem for the future of the alliance. A number of US experts agree that negative sentiment toward the United States is a strategic challenge that needs to be addressed because negative sentiment could severely threaten how the alliance is able to execute its twin missions of deterring North Korea and maintaining regional stability.²³

Adding a New Rationale for the Alliance—Preventing Regional Instability

While the threat from North Korea remains the central rationale for the Alliance, since the Bush Administration took office, it is not the only rationale. Since December 2002 a new US initiative known as the Future of The Alliance initiative, or FOTA, has been the object of US Department of Defense (DOD) and ROK Ministry of Defense (MOD) discussions. Its charter is to develop options and make recommendations on how to adapt the alliance to changing circumstances regionally as well as globally. The FOTA process has produced US-ROK agreement to: (1) relocate US forces from the Seoul metropolitan area; (2) provide a more regional role for US forces; (3) share greater information to coordinate force improvement plans; (4) agree to terms of reference for a command relations study; and, (5) begin to transfer appropriate missions from the US military to ROK forces. The FOTA process also did the preliminary staff work on the decisions to consolidate US forces into two hubs of enduring installations. An air-oriented central base—or hub as it is called—focused on Osan Air Base, and a sea-oriented “hub” in the southeast near Pusan.²⁴

One of the primary objectives of this initiative is to make changes that reduce the impact of the US presence in Korea on the lives of the Korean people. Another objective is to change the threat focus from North Korea alone to include the preservation of regional stability. From DOD’s perspective, permitting US forces to be limited to the single mission of deterrence in a cluster of bases along the DMZ in Korea was akin to having been frozen in time since the 1950s. Everywhere else in the world the US military is being transformed to become more “expeditionary,” that is, being

able to move promptly from one locale to another. In Korea however, the US forces are not able to do that.²⁵

Now, as a general proposition, military forces are interchangeable, in that they can be shifted between missions. However, reality imposes real restraints. Primary mission tasking commands the bulk of training time and readiness focus. In Korea, for example, established lines of communication, in-place logistics support, and administrative arrangements that include integration of ROK-US staffs manifest a single-minded preparation for war in Korea. It would be very time-consuming today to make ready and employ US forces in Korea on an off-peninsula regional basis, even if all political and policy-level impediments and treaty obligations could be overcome.

In comparison, forces that are more “expeditionary” and are responsible for missions throughout all of East Asia, beyond but not excluding Korea, must have flexibility in administrative and support arrangements. In addition to the continuing mission of deterring North Korea, US forces would be able to respond elsewhere in East Asia or, as we see today, be assigned to the rotation of Army forces into Iraq. To generalize, these forces, which will be concentrated in the two hubs south of the Han, must:

- ∇ Be available for the defense of Korea, but also be “untethered” so they can respond quickly throughout East Asia, or globally if need be.
- ∇ Have the political or policy freedom from the ROK that permits them to use bases for contingencies not directly associated with the defense of the host country.
- ∇ Be agile enough to carry out a wide range of tasks anywhere in the region. This agility is a combination of the characteristics of the forces themselves as well as their training and command arrangements.

These are attributes that US forces in Japan have. The unstated objective for the transformation of the US presence in Korea is to make Korea more like Japan in terms of how US forces are employed.

Neither Washington nor Seoul has defined precisely what sort of regional instability the evolving alliance is expected to face. But Washington certainly has one big consideration in the back of its mind—the strategic implications of the rise of China. The Secretary of Defense’s Annual report to the President and Congress, while not naming China specifically, argues that Asia is “gradually emerging

as a region susceptible to large-scale military competition.” The report goes on to conclude that maintaining a stable balance in Asia will be a complex task and holds that a “military competitor with a formidable resource base will emerge.” Aside from Japan, no other East Asian country but China fits the “formidable resources base” profile—and Japan, of course, is an ally not a competitor.

The report goes on to say that US defense strategy will focus on promoting security cooperation with friends and allies in order to create a “favorable balance of military power” to improve deterrence and prevent aggression and coercion. This is precisely what the FOTA initiative hopes to achieve—over the long haul the US-ROK Alliance should contribute to a favorable balance of military power in East Asia.²⁶

In sum, the rationale for the Alliance is evolving from a single-minded focus on North Korea to one that does not neglect North Korea but also takes a longer view of what could destabilize the region by being responsible for dealing with the euphemistic threat of “instability.” From Washington’s point of view, that has almost become a code word for China. Asia and the world have not faced an economically vibrant, politically united and militarily competent China for several centuries. Therefore, if the Alliance is going to look into the future as opposed to merely dwelling in the present, it is not unreasonable that it hedge against a potentially assertive and pugnacious China. This will be a difficult issue for Seoul, and one that over the long term could pose even greater challenges to the viability of the alliance.

Deterring North Korea

Many in South Korea, and in the United States for that matter, doubt that North Korea has any intention of invading the South. They assume Kim Jong-Il has long since given up forceful reunification as a national objective. US and ROK officials charged with defense responsibilities do not, however, have the luxury of basing planning on perceptions of “intentions.” They must also consider North Korean capabilities and not fall into the trap of thinking they can accurately predict what Kim Jong-Il has in mind, or might attempt. Dealing with North Korean capabilities has required judgments regarding the appropriate mix and of military force in South Korea. Over the past 50 years, the size and composition of the US military presence in Korea has been based on some rather straightforward, but complex calculations. Specifically:

- ∇ The posture, capabilities and readiness of the North Korean military
- ∇ The posture, capabilities and readiness of the ROK military
- ∇ The expense to the United States
- ∇ The domestic politics of both South Korea and the United States

One of the key issues in thinking through any sort of force adjustments in Korea is how allied adjustments are perceived in Pyongyang. In a perceptive paper on North Korea's military strategy, a long-time US analyst of North Korea writes:

Pyongyang must know that it lacks any military superiority over the United States, which guarantees the defense of South Korea through the security treaty. . . . However, it is not so certain that Kim Jong-Il judges the South Korean military forces alone as superior to the KPA. North Korea's continued insistence that the question of reunification can be settled only among Koreans. . . .the withdrawal of all foreign forces is essential to that process, suggests that Pyongyang would prefer to deal militarily with the South Korean army alone.²⁷

In attempting to reach the proper judgments regarding what deters and what does not, US strategists must keep in mind that the issue is not whether the US and ROK would prevail in a war against the North—they most certainly would. The key issue is to prevent war from ever happening by ensuring that the North never thinks that has any chance of success. Because North Korea's military strategy remains an offensive strategy designed to achieve reunification by force, any actions that undercut perceptions of deterrence have the possibility of raising the prospect of war.²⁸

The goal today is to make changes in the US posture that do not destabilize. Since the ROK has the most to lose if deterrence fails, none of these changes are likely to be executed until the ROK government is convinced that deterrence is not threatened. This apparently is the case. DOD has assured the ROK government that reductions in the ground combat power will be offset by some \$11 billion dollars in new capability.²⁹ While the US Army presence will go down, the Department of Defense insists that deterrence will actually be increased by the addition of new capabilities in Korea and in the region (especially Guam). While it is not entirely clear what these capabilities are, this is something that has been studied for some time. As long ago as 1990, DOD was persuaded that the combination of the ROK Army and ROK Air Force and the US Air

Force and Navy in the region would be adequate to deter another Northern invasion.

Some US observers of the Korean scene are concerned about DOD's actions and suggest that they somehow pulled the wool over Seoul's eyes on this issue because of the desperate search for more troops to send to Iraq. This assessment seems unfair on several counts.

First, it suggests a degree of irresponsibility in the US military establishment that is simply not warranted. Second, the last thing the Bush Administration wants is another shooting war on its hands. It is not in the interest of the US to make war in Korea more likely. Finally, the relatively small size of the US ground presence in Korea for the last 15 years has made the Army contribution a minor factor in the overall ground combat potential south of the DMZ. The argument that these forces are necessary as a "tripwire" is nonsense. What this argument really means is that it is necessary for American soldiers to be killed by North Koreans to guarantee that the US would fight if North Korea attacked. American credibility and trust in American security guarantees throughout Asia, and probably the world, would be destroyed if it stood aside in the face of a North attack on a long time ally.

It is US air power that is the largest factor in the deterrence equation. The capability demonstrated by US air power over the last 16 years of post-Cold War combat operations to devastate ground forces, in the open and on the move, is the single-most important contribution the US military brings to the deterrent equation. If rumors are to be believed, it was the fear of US air strikes that drove Kim Jong-Il into hiding on the Chinese border two years ago.

But it is important that the perception of deterrence, as it has been applied in Korea, is not undermined. The basis of deterrence on the Korean peninsula is overwhelming superiority, at least in certain key areas such as air power, of the ROK and US militaries. This visible superiority has as its fundamental principle the fact that no rational calculation of the military balance by North Korea could ever lead them to conclude that they could successfully reunite Korea by invasion and conquest.

Furthermore, deterrence in Korea also rests on the publicly-espoused "promise" by a succession on US officials, including Presidents, that if North Korea were to invade, they would not only be repelled, but their country would be devastated and their regime

destroyed. In other words, they would pay a very heavy price for unleashing what would be a costly and bloody war. This is what might be termed the “assured destruction” element of today’s deterrence policy. Not only could Pyongyang not win, but it would lose everything by trying to win. Both Seoul and Washington have to be comfortable that this will remain the case in the future after the changes to US presence are made.³⁰

The Long Term Importance of a Virtual Trilateral Alliance Among the US, Korea, and Japan.

What ought to be a “natural” strategic relationship between two geographically proximate Northeast Asian liberal democracies with a long term common ally in the United States remains problematic—largely, but not entirely, because of history. The history of Japanese colonization in the first 45 years of the 20th Century continues to bedevil trilateral cooperation. Korea and Japan have more in common with one another in terms of political outlook, economic interdependence, common alliance partners, dependence on the high seas for export-driven economic growth, and for the vital materials and energy to sustain that growth than they do with either of their huge Eurasian neighbors.

But issues based on the past always seem to intrude. As Victor Cha wrote in *Comparative Connections* in July 2001, “The 2001 textbook controversy destined the Kim-Obuchi Summit to the historical trash heap of initiatives dating back to those of Kim Young-Sam and Hashimoto in the 1990s, Chun Doo-hwan and Nakasone Yasuhiro in the 1980s, and Park Chung-hee and Sato Eisaku in the 1970s. Talk of a ‘new era’ of relations, sooner or later, succumbs to the demons of history.”³¹ Whenever the “demons of history” gain the upper hand, the episodic ROK-Japan military to military relationship is normally the first to suffer. This is too bad because the Korean and Japanese military establishments complement one another very well.

Military modernization trends currently under way in Korea will contribute to making Korea more able to participate in trilateral military cooperation than it has been in the past. The ROK military has been overwhelmingly Army-dominated and ground force-oriented, given the ROK Army requirement of repelling another North Korean attack. Not only is this logical, it reflected a good sharing of roles and missions with the US who could bring air and naval power to the alliance. However, over the past 10 years or so,

it has become increasingly evident that Seoul has also been worried about long-term regional security as well as North Korea. This has translated into more funding for a ROK Navy anti-submarine capability including a small submarine force, P-3 patrol planes, and modern destroyer-size combatants. For the ROK Air Force it has meant replacing F-4s and F-5s with F-16s and the F-15K. As a result, ROK military asymmetries vis-à-vis Japan are being narrowed, making it easier for ROK Naval and Air forces to collaborate on a more equal footing. The result, as stated earlier, will be ROK and Japanese armed forces that complement each other well.

The two navies have a shared focus on coastal defense, SLOC defense, and anti-submarine warfare. Today the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force is larger and more capable: its missions now include out of region deployments in defense of sea-lanes and in support of the US-Japanese alliance. Meanwhile, the ROK navy is proceeding with a clear vision toward a future that will reshape its role from dealing with coastal defense and the North Korean Navy and making it very similar to the JMSDF in terms of capability, if not size.

The two air forces share common US aircraft, have very similar air defense missions, and have operated in close coordination with the US Air Force. The JASDF does not yet have a strike mission; the ROK Air Force does. Both are well equipped, well trained, and, in general, defensively-oriented. In terms of fighter aircraft, the ROK Air Force is larger (about 468 fighters), but with more old generation F-4 and F-5’s than the JASDF (about 270 fighters).³² Each country shares overlapping air defense surveillance zones and is used to deal with complex air traffic. Because of their mutual association with USAF, both air forces share many common doctrinal and tactical procedures, including, importantly, use of English.

The biggest disparity between the two militaries is in ground forces. Japan’s self defense ground force is relatively small (11 divisions/148,000). It has only recently begun to orient itself away from defending Japan from an invasion of the northern home island of Hokkaido. The ROK army is many times larger (22 divisions/560,000 troops), is conscript based, has a very large reserve component and has the mission of repelling a North Korean invasion.³³

There have been some successes in trilateral cooperation at the political level, most notable the Trilateral Coordination Group (TCOG) instituted to coordinate the policies of Washington, Seoul and Tokyo in dealing with North Korea. This trilateral process survived the transition from the Clinton to the Bush Administration. Over the last 18 months, as the Six-Party process has gathered momentum, the TCOG has evolved from a large formal gathering, with attendant fanfare including press releases, to smaller, more substantively-focused gatherings that meet on an ad-hoc basis.³⁴ The point being that it continues to function, continuing a pattern of tri-lateral cooperation.

Longstanding trilateral policy planning talks also continue. This is a venue in which the long-range planners of the respective foreign ministries meet to address long-term issues. Because establishing a policy-planning venue is a US State Department creation that was pressed upon the Korean and Japanese foreign ministries, the degree of impact and influence these talks produce waxes and wanes. But, importantly, they continue. While the primary focus of the political level trilateral meetings is North Korea, longer range commonly shared interests are also addressed. Although the North Korean threat may exist for some time, it is hard to imagine another 50 years of ROK-US forces postured to deter a North Korean invasion. Once the threat of invasion is verifiably remote or is actually non-existent, the North Korean threat-driven impetus for trilateral security cooperation will evaporate, thus occasioning a major strategic reevaluation by all three countries.

As a hedge against this inevitability, the US must remain a catalyst for long-range alliance discussions. A good example is the US willingness to consider an eventual evolution of the Six-Party process into some sort of regional collaborative security mechanism. The Six-Party process has been a triumph of Bush Asian diplomacy, brought to fruition despite considerable skepticism. There is no reason why tripartite US-ROK-Japan relations cannot be equally successful, and happily coexist alongside the Six-Party process.

To this observer, the real key to long-term stability in Northeast Asia is the US-Korean-Japanese strategic triangle. The best way to ensure that Northeast Asia remains stable is for the United States and its two closest allies in Asia to become a strategically-coherent entity. The strategic rationale that should

motivate policy makers in all three Capitals encompasses three objectives.

First, the rise of China as an economically vibrant, politically coherent, and increasingly formidable military power is historically unprecedented in the modern era. There is no modern historical memory to help us think about the future. Assuming China continues to grow economically, this wealth is inevitably going to enable a more impressive military. But economic development does not inevitably translate into a more pluralistic representative government. Although this is the implied strategic logic of all three Capitals as they actively encourage and support Chinese economic development, such an outcome is by no means certain. China's future is by definition uncertain and its security policy processes are not transparent. Will China be a satisfied "status-quo" power? A trilateral "virtual" alliance is a way for all three parties to hedge against the uncertainty this lack of transparency produces.

Second, it is not in the long-term security interest of either Japan or Korea to be military intimidated because they are located in the shadow of China. Both Seoul and Tokyo certainly wish for freedom of action to make decisions that they believe to be in their national interest without having to obtain Beijing's blessings first. A trilateral "virtual" alliance does not threaten Chinese sovereignty or territorial integrity, but it does preserve Korean and Japanese sovereignty while providing flexibility and freedom from intimidation.

Third, the virtual alliance is a hedge against the natural inclinations of both Japan and Korea when left to their own devices. Because history remains such a potent catalyst for nationalism in Korea and Japan, without a "virtual" alliance it is not difficult to foresee a gradual move of either a reunited Korea, or two Korean states at peace, into a Chinese orbit that is impelled by an anti-Japanese rationale. This would probably be the death knell for the US-ROK alliance. This is not in the interests of the United States, nor it is likely to make East Asia a more stable geopolitical environment. The best way for the United States to sustain its stability-inducing military presence in East Asia, over the long term, is for its forces to be stationed in both Korea and Japan.

What Should be Done to Strengthen the Alliance?

As a member of the working group CSIS/Yonsei University that studies this issue during 2003 and the first part of 2004, I find it difficult to improve on the recommendations offered in the group's report, published in June of 2004.³⁵ The recommendations are too lengthy to be reproduced here, so several of the most important will be paraphrased.

- ▽ The United States should upgrade the quality of the bi-lateral alliance and should engage in a process of real consultation with counterparts in the ROK to demonstrate true respect for changes in the nature of the relationship. The point here is to understand that when South Korean's call for a more equal and balanced relationship, that is a cry for respect rather than a demand for real parity. It requires legitimate consultation and a realization that public opinion in Asian democracies is just as important as public opinion in the US in influencing policy. Further, South Korea must be treated exactly the same way as the US deals with Japan. The South Koreans watch the US relationship with Japan very closely and are quick to infer slights.

- ▽ The United States must recognize that public opinion in Korea has shifted with regard to North Korea and make sure that US policies that seek to end North Korea's nuclear weapons program are closely coordinated with Seoul's approach to engagement. Washington has taken into account the fact that Seoul's engagement policy has public support in Korea and is unlikely to change unless North Korea does something that shocks and frightens the population of the ROK. It is important that Washington continue to work with Seoul in making sure that the people of South Korea are receiving an accurate picture of the North Korean regime. Since North Korea unashamedly addresses its "military first" policy, the implications of that policy for the people of North Korea and the threat it poses to the South ought to be presented clearly by ROK authorities, and, hopefully, ROK journalists.

- ▽ The two countries should reinvigorate the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) process for handling bilateral disputes over the effect and responsibilities of the US military presence in South Korea. The sense is that ROK NGO's,

local governments, and citizens have little understanding of SOFA procedures. As a result, they are often baffled regarding processes and procedures that appear to provide unfair treatment for Americans with legal problems in Korea. This could help mitigate the accumulated, even-driven grievances that many South Koreans harbor against the United States.

- ▽ Both the ROK and the United States must develop, articulate, and publicly affirm a new vision for the alliance partnership, a vision that hopefully is sweeping enough to account for an eventual inclusion of a virtual tripartite alliance with Japan. The US-ROK Joint Statement of May 14, 2003, which followed the Washing, D.C., Bush-Roh summit, laid out several sound principles for a future alliance that include "bilateral cooperation on international security challenges beyond the Korean peninsula" and include the war on terror. This statement was careful to make the point that the consolidation of US forces around key hubs would take close account of the political, economic and security developments on the peninsula as well as in Northeast Asia. The statement also highlighted the "importance of bilateral cooperation across a broad range of global issues," such as efforts to improve the environment, combat crime and infectious diseases.³⁶

The importance of such a joint vision, that has been repeatedly articulated, fleshed out and then acted upon, is that it will signal a renewed investment in the bilateral relationship and would, hopefully arrest the drift and politicking that have eroded mutual respect toward one another.

This vision must also be bold enough to think through the implications for the alliance of an eventual situation of peaceful coexistence, a situation where the North Korean threat-based rationale that remains the primary *raison d'être* for today's alliance effectively disappears. At the 2000 inter-Korean summit none of the North/South-agreed topics for future discussion dealt directly with the long-standing DPRK demand to remove US forces from the peninsula. But the issue of US forces was raised. As President Kim Dae Jung subsequently revealed, he advised Kim Jong-Il of his views about the importance of a continued US troop presence, not

only for stability on the peninsula, but in the Northeast Asia as a whole.³⁷ Kim's Jong-Il allegedly expressed "understanding" of President Kim's views. At the time many in Korea and the US were skeptical about this purported shift in North Korean thinking on this issue. The point here is not about whether North Korea really held that view or not, but rather it is a good example of the sort of long range thinking that must take place to prepare the way for a future when there is a reduced threat environment on the peninsula.

The US has indicated on a number of occasions that it would prefer to retain US forces in Korea even after a political settlement between the two is reached. From the US perspective the key issues have always been, first, whether the ROK government would welcome a US presence after rapprochement, and, second, would Seoul be able to successfully accomplish a negotiated North-South reconciliation without giving ground on US presence. Clearly, the plans to relocate south of Seoul are a necessary step that prepares for the future.

It is important to remember that none of the planned relocation steps are going to happen quickly. New facilities have to be built. Just getting out of Seoul will take until December 2008. Consider, if the Six-Party process is successful, by 2008 an end to the armistice, a Korean War Peace Treaty and a situation of peaceful coexistence could be well in hand.

Concluding Thoughts

The United States thinks the alliance with the ROK is important. Over the long haul it wants to maintain a military presence in Northeast Asia that is balanced between Korean and Japan. It wants to be able to use operating bases in both countries to move forces to trouble spots around the region, and, for that matter, around the world. Eventually, it wants a single commander located in the region to be responsible for all US forces in Northeast Asia. That will probably not take place until North Korea no longer poses a threat to South Korea.

The US continues to believe that its bilateral alliances and military presence have brought stability to the region. In turn, this stability has created an atmosphere conducive to economic development and the concomitant spread of democracy. The United States believes that this security architecture is not a relic of the Cold War, as Beijing frequently claims, but will continue to be the

basis for future prosperity and stability in East Asia. While the future may hold the prospect of more multi-lateral understandings and security cooperation, Washington believes these understandings will rest on a bi-lateral foundation. That is why the US-ROK Alliance has a role to play in the long-term future of East Asia as part of the foundation. And these reasons are why, whether or not John Kerry wins the election in November 2004, overall US strategy toward Asia will not change appreciably. The basics of post-Cold War US Asian policy have differed very little no matter which party has held the White House, because they have been focused on overarching US interests—access to Asia, stability in the region, close treaty relationships, the spread of democracy and non-proliferation.

In a departure from the Bush Administration, Kerry has said he would be willing to talk bi-laterally with Pyongyang. However, it is unlikely that he would abandon the Six-Party process, because it has utility for eventual multi-lateralism in East Asia. This is an issue the Democrats have always felt more comfortable in addressing than Republican Asianists.

Endnotes:

¹ "A Strategic Framework for the Asia Pacific Rim," *Department of Defense Report to Congress*, April 1990, p. 9

² Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Massachusetts, 1997, pp. 261-262.

³ Michael McDevitt, "The Post Korean Unification Security Landscape and US Security Policy in Northeast Asia," in *Korea's Future and the Great Powers*, edited by Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, University of Washington Press, 2001, p. 253.

⁴ Ralph Cossa, ed., "US-Korea-Japan Relations: Building Toward a Virtual Alliance," *The CSIS Press*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 1999, inter alia.

⁵ Victor D. Cha, "Japan's Grand Strategy on the Korean Peninsula: Optimistic Realism," in *Planning for a Peaceful Korea*, ed. Henry D. Sokolski, a project report published by the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, February 2001, pp. 227-232.

⁶ I am referring to the Trilateral Coordination Group, or TCOG, that was initiated during the so-called Perry process during the Clinton administration. The Six-Party Talks in which Korea and Japan play key roles have succeeded this group.

⁷ "A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim: Looking Toward the 21st Century," *A Report to Congress*, April 1992, Department of Defense, Washington, D.C. p. 30.

⁸ DOD News Release Number 706-04, "Agreement Reached on Moving U.S. Forces in Korea," July 23, 2004. www.defenselink.mil/releases/2004.

⁹ Anthony Faiola, "As Tensions Subside Between Two Koreas, U.S. Strives to Adjust," *Washington Post*, Sunday, July 25, 2004.

¹⁰ Derek Mitchell, ed., "Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the US-ROK Alliance," *A CSIS Working Group Report*, June 2004. CSIS, Washington, D.C., p. 107.

¹¹ This section is drawn from my paper, "Engagement with North Korea: Implications for the United States," found in the *National Intelligence Council Conference* report on North Korea's Engagement: Perspectives, Outlook and Implications of May 2001.

¹² My notes from KEI workshop, "South Korean Progressivism: Real Reform or Reaction," June 9, 2004. See also Jack Rendler, "The Last Worst Place on Earth: Human Rights in North Korea," in Sokolski *op cit.*, pp. 113-128.

¹³ Michael McDevitt, "Engagement with North Korea: Implications for the United States in North Korea's Engagement: Perspectives, Outlook and Implications." A conference report published by the National Intelligence Council and the Library of Congress (CR 2001-01 of May 2001), p. 101; and William J. Perry, "Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations," October 22, 1999. www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012_northkorea_rpt.html.

¹⁴ In remarks made at a conference on the issue of North Korea, Assistant Secretary James Kelly said, "I was to tell them that we had intended to propose bilateral negotiations on our entire range of concerns with North Korea, including missile proliferation, chemical and biological weapons, conventional forces, terrorism and human rights." James Kelly, "Ensuring a Korean Peninsula Free of Nuclear Weapons," transcript of remarks February 17, 2004, www.natutilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/multilateralTalks/Kelly.

¹⁵ Subsequently North Korean officials have recanted, now denying an HEU program. They are now only willing to talk about their now unfrozen enriched uranium program.

¹⁶ Kelly, February 17, 2003 speech *op cit.*, it a clear account of this meeting and the North Korean admission. A good earlier account of the October 2002 visit and meeting is by Ralph Cossa in *Comparative Connections*, 4th Quarter 2002, a quarterly E-journal edited by Brad Glosserman and Eun jung Cahil Che, published by Pacific Forum/CSIS, pp. 37-40. www.pacforum@hawaii.rr.com; and James Kelly, "Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Programs," Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., July 15, 2004. statelists@state.gov.

¹⁷ Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, "Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee Regarding U.S. Pacific Command Posture," March 31, 2004, p. 28. www.pacom.mil/speeches/sst2004/040331.

¹⁸ I have participated in at least three. The most comprehensive written reports on this issue has been the effort co-sponsored by CSIS and Yonsei University. The report of this conference was edited by Derek Mitchell, "Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK

Alliance," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., June 2004. www.csis.org.

¹⁹ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2002, p. 340.

²⁰ Aidan Foster-Carter, *Comparative Connections Fourth Quarter FY-03*, Pacific Forum/CSIS, p. 104. www.pacforum@hawaii.rr.com

²¹ See Scott Snyder, "The Role of the Media and the U.S.-ROK Relationship," pp. 73-81, in Mitchell, *Strategy and Sentiment*, *op cit.*

²² Based on not for attribution commentary by various senior officials of the Bush Administration during workshops I attended in the 2000-02 timeframe and a steady stream of newspaper reports. For official statements that indicated regime change was not an option the Administration was pursuing, see, for example, James Kelly, "President Bush's trip to Asia: Outlook and Policy Prospects," remarks at the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., March 18, 2002. www.state.gov/p/eap/ris/rm/2002/8820pf.htm.

²³ Mitchell, *Strategy and Sentiment*, *op cit.*, pp. 111-112.

²⁴ Fargo, Posture Statement, pp. 24-30.

²⁵ Douglas Feith, "Transforming the U.S. Global Defense posture," A presentation at CSIS, Washington, D.C., December 3, 2003. In talking about the global posture review that DOD had been working on, Feith emphasized that forces would "project power into theaters that may be distant from their bases." P. 4.

²⁶ Donald Rumsfeld, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., August 19, 2002, pp. 11-12.

²⁷ Homer Hodge, "North Korea's Military Strategy," *Parameters of the Army War College*, pp. 68-81, Spring 2003, found in the DPRK briefing Book, The Nautilus Institute. www.natutilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/military/

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁹ Background roundtable to discuss U.S. forces deploying from Republic of Korea to Iraq, a DOD News Transcript of Senior Defense and Military Officials, May 17, 2004. www.defenselink.mil/transcripts/2004/tr20040517-0762.html.

³⁰ *Ibid.* This issue is discussed in this wide-ranging press roundtable.

³¹ Victor Cha, "Japan-Korea Relations: Questions, Questions, and More Questions," *Comparative Connections*, Second Quarter 2001, p. 111.

³² The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2001-2002*, Oxford University Press, London, October 2001, pp. 193-197.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Discussions with US officials.

³⁵ Mitchell, *Strategy and Sentiment*, pp. 114-119.

³⁶ George Bush and Roh Moo-hyun, "Joint Statement Between the United States of America and the Republic of Korea: Common Values, Principles, and Strategy," The White House, May 14, 2003. www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/05/print/320030514-17.html.

³⁷ "President Kim Reaffirms Kim Jong-Il's Approval of U.S. Troops Here," *Korea Times*, August 17, 2000.