

The Korea-U.S. Alliance in the Obama Era

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ABSTRACT

Where does the U.S.-ROK alliance, which is once again on a firm footing, go from here? Is a strengthened bilateral alliance the only path to follow? Or is there wisdom for both the United States and the ROK in complementing bilateralism with multilateralism, serious engagement of North Korea, and a wider range of international relationships generally? This article urges the latter course, with emphasis on the usefulness of continuing close ROK-China relations, rather than forging a fuller strategic partnership. The central argument is that the vitality of the U.S.-ROK alliance no longer depends only on the quality of their partnership, or on deterrence of North Korea. The new strategic challenge is to embed the Korean peninsula conflict in a regional security framework—a dialogue mechanism already agreed upon at the Six Party Talks—and that requires above all a good working relationship with China by all parties. A multilateral regional security mechanism would be a fitting strategic complement to sustained engagement with North Korea, which the Obama administration has yet to undertake. Serious engagement with North Korea would have to proceed from an understanding of its basic international objectives: regime survival, quest for international legitimacy, and self-determined development. These goals lend themselves to a U.S. policy, in close association with South Korea, of patient search for common ground, relying on diplomacy rather than threats or sanctions.

Keywords: U.S.-ROK alliance, Obama administration policy, North Korean nuclear weapons, China foreign policy, engagement, U.S. defense policy

Introduction

Assessing the South Korea-U.S. alliance today requires making choices in two areas, one conceptual and the other temporal. Conceptually, the choice is between focusing on bilateral or multilateral relations, and between alliance-based security or common security. Is this a time for buttressing the alliance and making it central to Korean peninsula security, or for revising the alliance in line with multilateral trends in East Asia and emerging prospects for a common-security approach to security issues? The actual political and strategic situation in East Asia complicates the choice of strategies. As will be proposed below, I see the situation optimistically: new governments are in power in several countries, including South Korea, Japan, and the United States; U.S.-China relations are fairly upbeat; and tensions between other countries in East Asia have eased. Do these circumstances argue for or against significant U.S. policy changes in relations with South Korea? This article will seek to make the case for important modifications of U.S. policy, mainly in the direction of multilateralism and common security.

U.S.-South Korea relations since the Korean War have exhibited many of the problems typical of those between a great-power patron and a junior-partner client. These include different values and policies, such as over human rights, Korean unification, and democratization; and different priorities, such as nuclear proliferation or denuclearization when dealing with North Korea. The patron tends to take liberties with the client's internal affairs, such as U.S. intervention in South Korea's domestic politics and presumptions of impunity in the running of military bases. This behavior is matched by the client's efforts, occasionally successful; to manipulate the patron's political and military support to serve its own narrow ends, as was notable during the years of dictatorship. Aggressive South Korean lobbying and other less savory activities in the United States in past years are another aspect of that manipulation. And there are the different meanings each country has attached to the idea of achieving greater "balance" in the relationship.¹

These U.S.-ROK divergences continue today: over engagement with North Korea, U.S. base realignment, theater missile defense (TMD) and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), Korean troop deployments overseas, defense cost-sharing, Korean beef imports, and the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA)—alongside occasional outbursts of anti-U.S. nationalism, especially among younger Koreans. But the

U.S.-ROK alliance is strong at its core, and the new administration of Barack Obama—with help from North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile tests—quickly endorsed and acted to strengthen the alliance. Some problems, such as defense cost-sharing and the “beef issue,” were resolved. The KORUS FTA will eventually be ratified, though not as soon as the Korean side would prefer, since Congressional resistance is expected to be stiff. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reassured the Korean government on a common stance toward North Korea during her first Asia tour.² Still, other matters, such as transfer of wartime operational control of ROK forces to South Korea and the relocation of U.S. bases, have been put on a firm schedule. Anti-U.S. sentiment has subsided since 2003; though generational differences remain, overall Koreans appreciate the alliance and the U.S. military presence.³ A visa waiver was granted to Korean visitors to the United States. And when the North Korean nuclear issue resurfaced, the Obama administration reaffirmed in strong terms its commitment to South Korea’s defense.

On the South Korean side, the Lee Myung Bak administration began with a promise to restore the priority of the U.S.-ROK alliance and build a “strategic alliance for the twenty-first century.” Lee has emphasized the two countries’ shared interests and common values. Breaking with his two liberal predecessors, Lee has conditioned engagement with North Korea on verifiable and complete denuclearization. In May 2009, he responded to the North Korean nuclear test by announcing that South Korea would join the Proliferation Security Initiative. He has trumpeted a “global Korea” vision that looks for a role beyond the peninsula, and in that spirit has made a non-combat troop commitment to Afghanistan. Lee has talked, for instance, about the bridging role that the ROK might play between countries in the financial crisis and on climate change. South Korea’s chairing of the G-20 in 2010 and Lee’s “green growth” initiatives put the country in a good place to play these new roles.

Whether or not South Korea is prepared, and politically able, to work closely with the United States on other regional and global issues, such as counterterrorism, peacekeeping operations, and development aid, is less certain. Talk about a common vision, as Scott Snyder has observed, never was clearly articulated while George W. Bush was president and remains unclear to the present.⁴ The “joint vision” statement that emerged from the Obama-Lee summit in June 2009 was not exactly rich in substance (they declared that the United States and South Korea will build “a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global

scope”).⁵ As always, South Korea’s foreign policy and national-security strategy are at the mercy of its domestic politics, and in this area the Lee administration has suffered from an assortment of controversies that have greatly reduced its popularity (though the trend reversed in the fall of 2009) and, consequently, its reliability as a strategic partner.⁶

Most close American observers of Korean affairs agree that the U.S.-ROK alliance has proven its value over the five decades of its existence. During that time, another Korean war has been avoided, South Korea has made the transition to democracy and from a developing to a high developed economy, the ROK military has become fully modernized, and South Korea has become an important player in regional affairs. Thus, the question is, Where does the alliance go from here? Is a strengthened bilateral alliance—a “21st century strategic alliance,” as President Lee put it when he visited President George W. Bush in April 2008—the only path to follow? Or is there wisdom for both the United States and the ROK in complementing bilateralism with multilateralism and a wider range of international relationships generally?

A number of Asia experts, including several with U.S. government experience, have urged that the alliance with South Korea be stretched to support U.S. objectives beyond East Asia. They have argued that South Korean democracy is sufficiently advanced, and values are so shared with the United States, that the alliance should be viewed in global terms.⁷ As one of those experts, Victor Cha, has put it, the United States “must strive to make the alliance an institution of intrinsic rather than just strategic value.”⁸ In fact, these experts seem to regard the U.S.-ROK alliance as having greater capability to serve American interests than any of the other four in East Asia (Japan, Australia, Thailand, Philippines). I will comment critically on this view; but for now, it may be enough to say that any such prospect of a global strategic role for South Korea depends, as it always has depended, on stable politics in Seoul and on the outcome of the security situation on the peninsula. In particular, how well Washington and Seoul cooperate in dealing with North Korea is likely to be the determining factor in any truly strategic U.S.-South Korean partnership.

In offering a perspective on the alliance, this article will focus on three areas of inquiry. First, it will assess the Obama administration’s performance so far with regard to Korean affairs, and find that it does not differ much from that of its predecessor. Second, it will examine the so-called “North Korea problem,” which I find is (or can be) less

threatening than is commonly thought, provided engagement is restored as the central element of both U.S. and Korean policy. Third, it will offer policy recommendations based on a broad view of the alliance in the context of regional (Northeast Asia) security. The central argument of my analysis is that the vitality of the U.S.-ROK alliance no longer depends only on the quality of their partnership, or on deterrence of North Korea. The new strategic challenge is to embed Korean peninsula conflict in a regional security framework, and that requires above all a good working relationship with China by all parties. Most importantly, I argue, work should move forward to construct a multilateral body for regional security cooperation, a project already agreed upon at the Six Party Talks (6PT) and a fitting strategic complement to the engagement of North Korea.

Obama's Korea Policy

Promise versus Performance

The Obama administration entered office with promises of foreign-policy departures from the George W. Bush administration in four major areas: greater reliance on traditional diplomacy, engagement with enemies and rivals, respect for international law and organizations, and the embrace of multilateralism. While it is very early to draw firm conclusions, and while Obama has been preoccupied with the economic crisis at home and the war in Afghanistan, we may still reflect critically on what the new policy-making team has and has not accomplished—and how these outcomes have impacted US-ROK relations.

U.S. policy toward North Korea so far has not been entirely consistent with the four promised new directions.

As to diplomacy, the President has not applied engagement to North Korea. There has been no talk of “pushing the reset button” (as with Russia), being willing to meet with adversarial leaders (as with Venezuela and Cuba), or softening sanctions (as with Syria). Contrast Obama's North Korea and Iran policies, for example. Toward both, U.S. policy has been a mixture of carrots and sticks. But early on in his administration, Obama pledged mutual respect in relations with Iran and wrote a secret letter in May to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, urging a new framework for talks. Obama has been properly credited with keeping a steady hand on the tiller—i.e., being faithful to his new realism—during the popular protests in Iran against the clearly fraudulent presidential election results. His policy team reportedly

decided not to openly come down on the side of Mir Hussein Moussavi, and instead to stick to the effort to engage the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad government. Clinton and Biden are said to have wanted a tougher response, but were overruled.⁹ Despite the crackdown in Tehran, and the U.S. push for tougher sanctions on Iran, Obama seems willing to wait for a more auspicious moment for the besieged Ahmadinejad government to respond to his overtures.

There is little in this engagement scenario with Iran that is reflected in U.S. diplomacy with North Korea. Notably, when it comes to North Korea, the United States has shown a lack of patience, as reflected in Hillary Clinton's tough, even demeaning language when discussing North Korea.¹⁰ The United States has eschewed private diplomacy (until the North Koreans themselves insisted on a visit from former President Bill Clinton in return for the release of two U.S. journalists) and has failed (as of September 2009) to follow up on North Korea's overtures to the South after the death of Kim Dae Jung. The Obama administration has yet to use the kind of conciliatory language it used with Iran that suggests mutual respect. For instance, it has not repeated the vow to end "hostile intent" between the two countries that was made by President Clinton and Vice Marshall Jo Myong Nok in a joint communiqué of October 2000.

U.S. diplomacy has mainly focused on providing security assurances to U.S. allies, not to North Korea. Direct talks with Pyongyang may have been proposed by Washington at the time the new administration took office; but if so, there does not seem to have been any energetic follow-up.¹¹ No suggestions have emerged from the U.S. side about a new deal that might bring North Korea back to the Six Party Talks, though in September 2009, the North Koreans hinted that they might return to the 6PT if direct talks with the United States were part of the deal. Instead of reaffirming the agreement of all parties to the Six Party Talks in 2005 and 2007 to move toward creating a new mechanism for regional security cooperation, under Obama the United States has opted for military countermeasures to compel cooperation. The United States and South Korea conducted war games (*Key Resolve*) in the spring of 2009, which involved over 25,000 soldiers; conducted a major military exercise, *Ulchi Freedom Guardian* in August; and pushed in the United Nations Security Council for interdiction of North Korean vessels, thus risking a dangerous incident at sea or along the DMZ that could become a *casus belli*.

When the Obama administration entered office, a senior official said it was committed to “trying . . . a fundamental change [from Bush’s unilateral approach], a different view that says our security can be enhanced by arms control.”¹² As Obama said in Prague, his objective is to eliminate nuclear weapons entirely. In that spirit, the administration has canceled research on new nuclear warheads, reached agreement with Moscow on further reductions of nuclear weapons under a new START, vowed to revive efforts to gain Senate approval of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and indicated that it would seek to strengthen the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and negotiate a treaty to ban production of fissile materials. Critics have called all these efforts naïve and unenforceable, particularly against the likes of North Korea and Iran; but Obama argues that the naïveté lies with those who believe “we’re going to be able to pressure countries like Iran and North Korea not to pursue nuclear weapons themselves” so long as the nuclear stockpiles of the United States and other nuclear-weapon states keep growing. What he might have added is, *and so long as the United States continues to rely on extended nuclear deterrence on the Korean peninsula.*

When it comes to North Korea, however, Obama has not followed through on his recipe for change. While he has reached agreement with Russia on further reduction of nuclear arsenals, he has rejected the arms-control approach with North Korea in favor of pressure tactics. Oddly, in light of Obama’s campaign statements about engaging enemies, his actions are much more forceful than those chosen by Bush.¹³ Obama has made it clear that nuclear weapons in North Korean hands are unacceptable (“under no circumstance are we going to allow going to allow North Korea to possess nuclear weapons,” he said during Lee Myung-bak’s initial visit to Washington in June 2009); that bargaining in pieces to denuclearize North Korea will no longer be tried (we will not “buy the same horse twice,” Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has said); that extended nuclear deterrence would apply to South Korea and Japan; and that North Korea is a “grave threat” to international security. In short, confrontation, not engagement, is the main approach to the North, and U.S. nuclear weapons remain the deterrent of last resort.¹⁴ These sentiments, while not ruling out direct talks with Pyongyang or resumption of the 6PT stress punishment unless the North complies. They seem designed as much for a domestic as for an international audience. North Korea has given the president an opportunity to display

toughness—in contrast with Iran policy—and satisfy the pro-missile defense members of Congress.

“Crime and punishment” might therefore be said to characterize Obama’s approach to North Korea’s nuclear weapon and missile tests. Recourse to the UN has followed the usual U.S. tendency to use it when it serves U.S. purposes and ignore it otherwise. But does U.S. policy promote adherence to international law and strengthen international institutions? To be sure, North Korea has violated previous and current UN Security Council resolutions with its weapons tests. But it is arguable that the chosen countermeasures will advance the peaceful resolution of disputes, one of the UN’s principal purposes. In larger perspective, one might choose to understand North Korea’s weapons tests as part of a longstanding search for a minimum deterrent to U.S. threats in both the Clinton and Bush years—threats that, Pyongyang surely noted, were followed by invasion in the Iraq case. North Korea can also point to the hypocritical behavior of the major powers and the UN. Numerous missile tests have been undertaken by other states without UN condemnation; nuclear disarmament by the major powers remains an unfulfilled promise under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty; and proto-nuclear-weapon states such as Israel, India, and Pakistan have not faced severe international sanctions. Thus, Pyongyang might well say of U.S. policy that it amounts to “do as I say, not as I do.”¹⁵

On multilateralism, the so-called North Korea crisis has been an opportunity for the United States to reaffirm its traditional security bilateralism even as it works with the other four parties to the 6PT to pressure North Korea. But since each of the other parties has a different preference for how to deal with the North, the U.S. approach resembles its traditional approach of “multilateralism à la carte”—on one hand, accepting limited sanctions as the least common denominator for collective action, but on the other, reserving the right to take stronger action unilaterally if necessary.

Walking the Walk

Serious engagement with North Korea would have to proceed from an understanding of its basic international objectives: regime survival, quest for international legitimacy, and self-determined development. These goals lend themselves to a U.S. policy of patient search for common ground, relying on diplomacy rather than threats or sanctions.

Forcible measures, while appealing in response to North Korean militancy, surely feed *sangun* (“military-first”) politics, a fortress-state mentality, and militant nationalism. In the end, such measures are more likely to lead North Korea to expand its weapons capabilities than to rejoin the 6PT.

Moreover, classifying North Korea as an unrepentant and untrustworthy rogue state is not entirely accurate. On a number of occasions it has been possible for the United States to reach agreement with the DPRK and gain its cooperation, starting with the Agreed Framework of 1994.¹⁶ We might recall Pyongyang’s missile moratorium of 1999, its responsiveness to accusations made surrounding Kumchang-ri, and its receptivity to visits by various senior U.S. officials. The DPRK has joined the ASEAN Regional Forum. It has engaged in a variety of Track II and Track III activities with individuals and groups from the United States, the European Union, and Canada, among others. In accordance with the 2007 joint statements of the 6PT, North Korea cooperated in allowing the IAEA to resume inspections, providing a fairly comprehensive declaration on its nuclear programs, and completing about 80 percent of disablement. According to one specialist, it was the Bush administration’s insistence, backed by South Korea and Japan, on more intrusive verification that led Pyongyang to halt disablement; and when the incoming Obama administration stepped up the rhetoric critical of North Korea—particularly Hillary Clinton during her Asia trip—the hardliners in Pyongyang responded in kind with weapons tests.¹⁷

Further strengthening the case for persisting on a diplomatic path to resolve the nuclear issue is the likelihood that both domestic and international factors account for North Korea’s resort to nuclear-weapon and missile testing. The North’s provocative acts might be part of the drama of leadership succession, a function of its economic woes, a reflection of its “military-first” politics, or a response to the changes in South Korea’s policy toward the North. Externally, the possible factors include North Korea’s disappointment with the Obama administration’s perceived failure to present a new package that would satisfy its security needs; the dim prospects for productive direct bilateral talks with the United States; hence, the failure of Kim Jong Il’s America policy and the shift to a tougher line that might, among other objectives, demand recognition as a nuclear-weapon state. Any or all of these factors argue

for caution and against the notion that Pyongyang is set on an aggressive path that has rendered negotiations moot.

Given the opaqueness of North Korean decision making, these comments about motives must be speculative. Nobody knows with reasonable certainty what prompted the weapons tests in 2009, nor what might convince the North Koreans to stop them, return to talks, and ultimately dismantle their nuclear-weapon capability. But the absence of clarity on such weighty matters is itself an argument for patience and prudence—and an opportunity for considering new approaches.

Revising U.S. Policy: Some Recommendations

Six Steps

What can the Obama administration do differently from the Bush administration with respect to Korean peninsula problems?

First, it can endorse engagement of North Korea as the central U.S. policy, and urge the South Korean government to do likewise. Then Obama might renew security assurances to North Korea and re-affirm that the United States will not undertake “regime change.” This action would put Washington in a better position to build trust with the North and pave the way for productive bilateral or (with the ROK) trilateral talks. The Bill Clinton mission to Pyongyang provided an excellent opportunity for damage repair and trust building. To sustain the momentum, U.S. leaders should lower the volume of rhetoric critical of North Korea, rejecting the pattern of name-calling that had become standard in the Bush-Cheney years. Demonizing one’s enemy is never fruitful; it merely embitters an already tense situation. This is not to say that criticism of North Korea, for example on its horrific human rights situation, should be avoided. But gratuitous insults should be.

Obama’s point about the unlikelihood that Iran and North Korea will forfeit the nuclear option while faced with U.S. nuclear weapons seems especially well taken in light of the Iraq experience. Surely the North Koreans have considered that if Saddam Hussein had a nuclear deterrent, the Bush administration might have had to think twice about an invasion. But whether or not arms control will achieve the desired results depends ultimately on what motivates the Iranians and North Koreans in the first place. So far as Pyongyang is concerned, some experts contend that what it wants is to be recognized as a nuclear-weapon state (NWS) precisely in order to negotiate arms reductions—that is, to get added security in exchange for reducing its arsenal.¹⁸

Perhaps so; or perhaps talk of NWS status is just a bargaining move. It is extremely unlikely that North Korea, any more than India or Pakistan, will be granted NWS status—UN Security Council resolution 1718 of October 14, 2006, explicitly states that North Korea “cannot have” that status—all the more so in light of the way the North has sought it. North Korean leaders surely understand that, just as they understand that Obama has rejected arms control in their case and made elimination of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons the indispensable objective of U.S. policy. Thus, the real challenge for negotiators may be how to grant the DPRK added security and legitimacy *without* having to elevate its nuclear status, and without having to rely on nuclear weapons.¹⁹

Second, Obama can build on the agenda with North Korea—showing willingness to get past the nuclear issue and deal with other, equally pressing matters, such as North Korea’s development and the role of the five other parties in it. Peter Hayes at the Nautilus Institute has suggested that a new U.S. policy of *extended non-nuclear deterrence* be implemented on the Korean peninsula. Secretary of State Clinton’s dismissal in May 2009 of the idea of further economic aid to Pyongyang until it returned to the 6PT may have been politically necessary, but may not have been strategically wise. At least some North Korean leaders may be chafing at the country’s increasing economic dependence on China, creating an opportunity for the United States, South Korea, Japan, and others to step in. For instance, Obama might seek South Korean and Chinese initiatives, with U.S. support, to enlist North Korea’s participation in regional economic activities, such as the Asian Development Bank and energy cooperation.

Third, Obama might creatively respond to Lee Myung-Bak’s “global Korea” ambitions. Here, the administration should keep recent history in mind. In the early 1990s, President Kim Young Sam called for an “open and global foreign policy,” and his foreign minister, Han Sung-joo, articulated elements of a “new diplomacy.”²⁰ “New diplomacy” essentially meant ending South Korean clientalism without diminishing the security alliance with the United States. It incorporated Korean contributions to the resolution of global issues (such as through anti-poverty development assistance and soldiers for UN peacekeeping), the promotion of multilateralism economically (in APEC) and in security (a Northeast Asia security dialogue), new ways to engage North Korea (building on Roh Tae-woo’s “Northern Policy”), and embrace of foreign-policy idealism (a diplomacy of values). Thus, for South Korea to step

outside the alliance and into regional and global roles is hardly novel, and should pose no problem for Washington.²¹ Both could agree to make the establishment of a Northeast Asia security dialogue mechanism a central aim of regional policy, building on (or bypassing) the 6PT process.²² In the meantime, they can support quadrilateral cooperation on environmental, confidence-building, and other topics with Japan and China.

Fourth, and consequently, the Obama administration should resist the kind of advice mentioned earlier to transform the alliance with the ROK into a strategic partnership. The South Korean government or particular interest groups may well be tempted to leverage U.S. support for domestic purposes—purposes that may be politically or strategically destabilizing. Such manipulation of the alliance occurred regularly during the Cold War. In the summer of 2009, the Korean government announced that it would be forming a joint task force with the United States to consider a Korean plan to augment the spent fuel from its commercial nuclear reactors.²³ Approval of such a plan clearly would increase tensions with the North as well as raise concerns elsewhere about South Korea's one day "going nuclear." Korean support of U.S. policies might also be used to impact North-South Korea relations. One example is the U.S. request that the ROK provide funds to support the war in Afghanistan, reportedly after apparently (and sensibly) deciding not to request South Korean troops.²⁴ A leading South Korean news article, noting that the request was delivered by Richard Holbrooke and not Stephen Bosworth, suggested, "we have to show sincerity in the Afghan issue before we can expect solid cooperation from the U.S. to solve the North Korean nuclear issue."²⁵ U.S. support of Pakistan is another example: Again, Washington sought and received South Korean money.²⁶ If the payoff for these contributions is a harder U.S. line on North Korea, it will be detrimental to a negotiated resolution of the nuclear and missile issues.

Another consideration against having the US-ROK alliance become a "strategic partnership" is that it risks involving both countries in unsupportable adventures abroad. The Vietnam War is a case in point; Afghanistan could become another. It is one thing to cement a partnership around development aid to poor countries, steps to mitigate global warming, or humanitarian and UN-sanctioned peacekeeping missions; but it is quite another to suggest partnering in international interventions. South Korea has enough on its plate in dealing with the

North; for it to play a global security role as part of another “coalition of the willing” would be quite risky.

Finally, such advocacy perpetuates Cold-War thinking about alliances. Similar arguments have been made about Japan—that it should “do more” (for the United States) in return for U.S. protection, and that Japan’s fears of abandonment should constantly be addressed. These arguments always downplay Japanese public opinion, which seems less fearful of abandonment than it does of being drawn into overseas conflicts; and they give insufficient credit to the many ways that Japan has in fact supported the United States in return for U.S. security guarantees, sometimes (such as in wartime and violations of the supposed “non-nuclear” policy) at considerable risk to domestic political stability. Though South Korea’s relationship with the United States is, of course, different from Japan’s, some of the same alliance dynamics apply. Korean public opinion is bound to be wary of a leader who follows the United States too closely. Roh Moo Hyun was able to go against public opinion in sending troops to Iraq because he had established his independence of U.S. policy beforehand. In the current situation, it may not be to the benefit of either South Korea or the United States to have too tight of an alliance in which South Korea is perceived, at home or abroad, as a “follower” country.

We are in a new era in East Asia where multilateral cooperation, not alliance competition, is the name of the game, and where security threats have taken on new meanings beyond military ones. “Abandonment,” while a legitimate fear on occasion, can also be a ploy to obtain more commitments from the United States. The solidity of the U.S. commitment to the alliance and to the ROK’s security is not in doubt, and there is no indication that Pyongyang doubts it.²⁷ Reaffirming the value of the alliance can be accomplished in several ways that do not require new commitments or missions, such as strategic reassurances (which Obama has made), improved high-level communication, revitalization of the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), and (as mentioned below) ratification of the KORUS FTA and sales of militarily necessary weapons.²⁸

Fifth, if Obama is serious about multilateralism, he should avoid doing anything that reinvents the Cold War division of Asia. This is especially important because of its implications for U.S. and ROK relations with China. Washington and Seoul need positive relations with China for both narrow (North Korea) and large-scale (global

environment and arms control) matters. China's cooperation is immensely important, regardless of what happens in North Korea—whether the future is collapse, integration in East Asian institutions, fulfillment of denuclearization promises, or simply low-level crisis management. If South Korea were to follow the advice to be a close strategic partner of the United States as a hedge against possible future Chinese expansionism,²⁹ it would risk losing a vital economic *and strategic* partner in Northeast Asia.

There is wisdom in the idea that South Korea should maintain the kind of balanced relationship with China and the United States that it has exhibited in recent years. U.S. policy should recognize that such a balance (which, to be clear, preserves U.S. security ties with the ROK) serves its own as well as all others' long-run interests in regional stability.³⁰ When U.S.-China relations are on the upswing, the good will redounds to the benefit of the rest of Asia, including Taiwan and the Korean peninsula. The United States has to recognize that China's regional and global influence are bound to keep rising,³¹ that the "responsible stakeholder" approach to China is outdated, and that Korea is likely to find its interests best served by maintaining a friendly, mutually rewarding relationship with Beijing—a relationship that has become of greater import to the ROK than that with Japan.³² "Leadership" in Asia can be shared, if unevenly, and doesn't have to be regarded as zero-sum.

China has more than proven its value in sustaining the 6PT process and preventing war on the peninsula, policies that have forced it to keep North Korea afloat as long as possible.³³ Its security interests in Korea, as in Taiwan, need to be respected. One way to respect them is to cultivate strong U.S.-China ties such that, when the day comes for Korean unification, China has no reason to fear regime change or U.S. or Japanese "colonization" of northern Korea, while the United States has no reason to fear a Chinese intervention to restore order and impose a pro-Beijing leadership. Regular U.S.-PRC-ROK senior-level meetings, inclusion of the PRC within TCOG, and even U.S. participation in some form in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, would be ways to deepen U.S.-China dialogue while also contributing to regional security.

Sixth, the United States should make every effort to be on the positive side of Korean nationalism.³⁴ That means sticking to its scheduled turnover of OPCON to South Korea in 2012, despite the opposition of many Korean military leaders; pushing for ratification of

KORUS FTA, which is likely to be a significant confidence-builder for Koreans about the alliance;³⁵ and preventing ugly incidents at U.S. bases that are affronts to the Korean people. These steps all have in common a determination to recalibrate the alliance, respect Korean sovereignty, and deflate anti-Americanism. The rationale here does not rest on the belief that the U.S.-ROK alliance will fray; nor is it intended to mean a downgrading of the alliance. Like all other U.S. alliances, this one has gone through transformations and endured strains before. U.S. alliances with the EU in NATO, with Israel, and with ANZUS have all undergone major stresses, most often due to the gap between U.S. strategic perspectives and the narrower purposes for which allies entered into the alliance.³⁶ The United States should be prepared to draw down its military force level, currently 28,500, still more as relations normalize with North Korea and as Japan assumes more obligations for its own defense. Besides, we are long past the time when the ROK required a U.S. presence in order to deter North Korea. Like Israel, South Korea has high-tech military forces, a strong U.S. security commitment behind it, strong support in Congress, and a long track record of developing or obtaining weapons in support of defense modernization and self-reliance.³⁷

Conclusion

The U.S.-ROK alliance has certainly proven its resilience. But we have to recognize the inadequacies of bilateral alliances in an age of limited resources, the appeal of multilateralism in Asia, generational change in Korea, and ever-present nationalist sensitivities in the Korean body politic. Alliances can take many forms, moreover; they do not have to be founded on a large foreign military presence that is expensive and politically problematic. The United States should look for ways to keep Korea secure other than by nuclear deterrence and a network of military bases. The North Korean threat with nuclear weapons aggression is no longer the chief security issue in Northeast Asia; the future path of a rising, powerful China is.

Fortunately, the time is ripe for changed thinking. New leaders have come to power in Japan and Taiwan as well as in the United States and South Korea. This augurs well for reducing China-Japan, Japan-Korea, and China-Taiwan tensions. In Japan, Hatoyama Yukio has reassured the United States that it remains the “cornerstone” of Japan’s foreign policy. But he has also indicated that what used to be called “re-

Asianization” will be emphasized—notably, in the idea of an East Asia Community—and that Japan will seek to accommodate the trend of multilateralism:

we must not forget our identity as a nation located in Asia. I believe that the East Asian region, which is showing increasing vitality, must be recognized as Japan’s basic sphere of being. So we must continue to build frameworks for stable economic cooperation and security across the region. . . . The financial crisis has suggested to many that the era of U.S. unilateralism may come to an end. It has also raised doubts about the permanence of the dollar as the key global currency. I also feel that as a result of the failure of the Iraq war and the financial crisis, the era of U.S.-led globalism is coming to an end and that we are moving toward an era of multipolarity.³⁸

And in Taiwan, President Ma Ying-jeou has vigorously pursued closer economic and political contacts with the mainland while not giving ground on the issue of sovereignty. Beijing has welcomed these departures from the pro-independence policies of Chen Shui-bian. These developments, along with positive U.S.-China relations and the foreseeable end to the U.S. occupation of Iraq, provide incentives to do things differently—specifically, to move with the tide of greater balance in the foreign policies of East Asian states—notwithstanding destabilizing events such as the global recession, conflicts in South Asia, and North Korea’s provocations.

It might well be objected that the greatest barrier to changed thinking lies in the domestic politics of all these countries. Beset by a recession, political squabbling, and an increasingly unpopular war, the Obama administration may have great trouble selling a new approach to North Korea or deeper engagement with China. Lee Myung-bak’s government may not be politically able to restore engagement with the North. The new Hatoyama government in Tokyo may prove as inept as its predecessors—and unable to fulfill promises of better social security and less bureaucratic control of the policy process. Finally, China may be convulsed by ethnic and other unrest and official corruption. There is, of course, no way to know how probable or influential any of these developments might be. Ultimately, leaders in these and other countries will have to sell the notion that there is a window of opportunity for moving East Asia onto a cooperative-security track.

U.S. thinking on Korean security—and Korean thinking as well—should turn toward working with its 6PT partners to create a Northeast Asia security mechanism, thus embedding U.S.-Korea relations in a formula for *regional* security. Bringing China into the picture as a security guarantor of a “permanent peace regime” in the Korean peninsula—understanding that the DPRK, as one component of that regime, would probably require constant attention and “feeding”—could create a security net of greater long-term vitality than a bilateral alliance alone, which is subject to the inevitable frictions caused by foreign bases and political shifts. Engagement of the North is, in reality, the only viable option for defanging it, whether that means the complete elimination of its nuclear weapons or the warehousing of its current nuclear arsenal. Part of an engagement strategy would be to embed North Korea in multilateral groups, a task that South Korea might find a worthy complement to the bilateral alliance with the United States.

Admittedly, the history of East Asian multilateral organizing does not provide much optimism for the idea that the United States will give full support to a multilateral approach to regional security.³⁹ Three themes stand out in that history. First, ever since the end of World War II and the creation of the so-called San Francisco system (marked by the treaty of peace with Japan in 1951), the United States has strongly preferred the hub-and-spokes approach to regional organizing. Second, the United States has generally opposed East Asian multilateral initiatives, including those proposed by security allies (such as South Korea’s Asia and Pacific Council and Japan’s Asian Monetary Fund) as well as those proposed by non-allies (such as Malaysia’s East Asian Economic Grouping). Third, where the United States has acquiesced in East Asian multilateralism, it has done so grudgingly—either with limited participation (such as ASEAN and ARF) or with some confidence that it could have significant influence over the agenda (as with APEC). Yet the most important regional groups in East Asia are precisely those in which the United States is not a member: ASEAN+3 and the Chiang Mai currency swap arrangement.

While this history does not bode well for the possibility that the 6PT can evolve into a Northeast Asian security dialogue group, there are some positive developments. The fact that the United States, since the second George W. Bush administration, has embraced the 6PT process and evidently does not see it as undermining the bilateral alliance system is one modest encouragement. The fact, too, that all six parties to the

6PT have given their blessing to the idea of a Northeast Asia regional mechanism is important. Moreover, the recent policies of China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia all reflect the important role their leaders assign to multilateral organizing, notably on the functional side (environmental protection, trade, and energy, for instance). Thus, what some analysts are calling a “critical juncture” in regional history may be at hand, with the North Korean nuclear situation creating the crisis that seems to be a necessary ingredient in bringing that juncture about.⁴⁰

Thus, what we are depicting here is a refocusing of alliance politics to take account of the new security options that multilateralism provides.⁴¹ The United States has been a latecomer to Asian multilateralism, and has shied away from active participation in ARF and other groups. China, on the other hand, has made multilateral diplomacy a cornerstone of its “new security concept.” Multilateral groups, to be sure, have their shortcomings; in the Asian way of things, they do not have the contractual, collective-security obligations of, say, NATO. But ASEAN and ARF provide forums for confidence-building measures and preventive diplomacy. Their emphasis on dialogue has institutionalized China-South Korea-Japan discussions (ASEAN+3), brought North Korea under the tent, helped prevent inter-state warfare in Southeast Asia, produced progress on territorial disputes, promoted free-trade agreements (notably, the China-ASEAN FTA) and steps toward a common currency basket, and gained acceptance of the Treaty of Amity and Concord by China and Japan. While it is commonplace (especially in Washington) to say that strong multilateralism of the European variety cannot be duplicated in East Asia, such a conclusion ignores the creative diplomacy that has been practiced within the ASEAN process.⁴²

Refocusing the alliance also means acknowledging, and, in fact, promoting South Korea’s policy independence, particularly when it comes to dealing with China. As one Korean analyst has written, the alternative to the patron-client, hub-and-spokes framework that has long characterized U.S.-ROK relations

is to deal with South Korea on more equal terms and engage it as a partner in building a new order in the region, facilitating China’s gradual transition and resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis to usher in a new era in Asia. This alternative would require the United States to be more ‘equidistant’ between China and Japan . . . South Korea would play the role of an

advocate for cooperation in the region, not a balance in the neorealist sense of the term.⁴³

Clearly, this approach to the alliance involves policy changes of considerable magnitude, and counts on cooperative relationships that carry heavy historical baggage. But it will also hold out very positive benefits, such as for Korean unification, improved neighborly relations for Japan, and lower costs for the U.S. military.

One should also consider the possible consequences of indecision or holding fast to the status quo: a gradual drift of South Korea away from the United States, perhaps even with the end game of acquiring nuclear weapons;⁴⁴ North Korea's firm unwillingness to rejoin the 6PT or accept denuclearization; fissures among the five parties to the 6PT, and the demise of that framework and its gains in consensus decision making; Japan's quest for "normal nation" status; arms racing in East Asia; and the acceptance by some East Asian states of the Beijing Consensus.⁴⁵ "Back to the Cold War" may seem like only a remote possibility; but if containment of North Korea remains the focal point of U.S. policy, South Korea will be placed in the awkward position of having to choose between a continued tight alliance with the United States and closer ties with China.⁴⁶ And if containment should succeed, there is no telling what North Korea's embattled leaders might do. Neither North Korea's collapse nor a North Korea that lashes out seems preferable to an engagement policy aims—as South Korean leaders have long preferred—at a soft landing.

U.S. relations with the ROK should therefore be brought into line with a firm common commitment to engagement. Now that North Korea is, however temporarily, on its own engagement trajectory with the South, Washington needs to encourage South Korea's leaders to get back to President Lee's promised "flexibility" in relations with the North, such as by improving high-level ROK-DPRK communications, reversing the downward trend in South Korean development aid and trade with the North,⁴⁷ and restoring production at the Kaesong Industrial Park. By the same token, South Korea should be discouraged from needlessly provocative acts such as war games, propaganda balloon releases, and idle speculation about leadership succession in North Korea. The United States and South Korea should join forces on a coordinated economic development and environmental protection plan for the North, linked to humanitarian steps for dealing with North Korean refugees. The common alliance task immediately ahead is to prepare for a post-Kim

Jong Il world. It is essential that South Korea and the United States be on the same page concerning how to make the new North Korean leadership feel both more secure and more willing to join the modern world.

Notes:

¹ Patrick M. Morgan, "American Grand Strategy and the US-ROK Alliance," *Pacific Focus*, vol. 24, No. 1 (April, 2009), pp. 22-42.

² Speech in South Korea, February 20, 2009, at www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/02/119412.htm.

³ See Stephen J. Flanagan et al., "Adapting Alliances and Partnerships," in Flanagan and James A. Shear, eds., *Strategic Challenges: America's Global Security Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2008), pp. 246-47.

⁴ Snyder, *Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision for the U.S.-South Korea Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2009), p. 7.

⁵ Text at www.voanews.com/uspolicy/2009-06-23-voa2.cfm.

⁶ As Scott Snyder has written, public support for foreign policy in South Korea is "a particularly formidable obstacle" because "many alliance issues are politically contested and little room exists to imagine a new alliance concept unburdened by the legacy of past inequalities and the fear of U.S. abandonment." *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ Kurt M. Campbell et al., *Going Global: The Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, February 2009); Snyder, *Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision*.

⁸ In Campbell et al., *Going Global*, p. 11.

⁹ Roger Cohen, "The Making of an Iran Policy," *New York Times*, July 30, 2009, online ed.

¹⁰ Prior to a meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum in Bangkok in July 2009, she likened the North Koreans to "small children and teenagers and people who are demanding attention."

¹¹ A former U.S. diplomat communicated to the author that shortly after taking office, the new administration did send feelers to the North Korean leader on direct talks but did not receive a reply. But according to various South Korean

press reports following President Obama's election victory, the North Koreans were rebuffed by his camp when they asked about attending his inauguration.

¹² William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, "The Long Arc of a Nuclear-Free Vision," *New York Times*, July 5, 2009, p. 1.

¹³ Donald G. Gross, "North Korea and the Importance of Arms Control," NAPSNet, June 25, 2009, at www.nautilus.org/fora/security/09052Gross.html.

¹⁴ Consider here Secretary Clinton's admonition: "Current sanctions will not be relaxed until Pyongyang take verifiable, irreversible steps toward complete denuclearization. Its leaders should be under no illusion that the United States will ever have normal, sanctions-free relations with a nuclear armed North Korea." Speech at the United States Institute of Peace, October 21, 2009, Department of State No. 2009/1049, at www.usip.org/files/resources/Clinton_usip_remarks.pdf.

¹⁵ Samuel S. Kim, "North Korea's Nuclear Strategy and 'Intermestic' Politics," paper presented at a conference on "North Korean Nuclear Politics," University of Washington, Seattle, June 4-5, 2009, p. 30.

¹⁶ See Robert Carlin and John W. Lewis, *Negotiating with North Korea: 1992-2007* (Stanford, Calif.: Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, January 2008), esp. appendix A for a list of agreements between the United States and the DPRK.

¹⁷ Leon V. Sigal, "Why Punishing North Korea Won't Work . . . and What Will," online at www.nautilus.org/fora/security/09046Sigal.html.

¹⁸ On that objective, see the speech by Victor Cha, "North Korea: What Next?" at the Carnegie Council, June 3, 2009, at www.cceia.org/resources/transcripts/0172.html. Cha also suggests that North Korea wants the same deal that India obtained: separate treatment for its military and civilian nuclear power plants.

¹⁹ Added security can take a number of forms: diplomatic recognition, negative security assurances, regular summit or other high-level meetings, a U.S. promise not to reintroduce nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, and a peace treaty that finally ends the Korean War. See Sigal, "Why Punishing North Korea Won't Work."

²⁰ This paragraph relies on my chapter, "Korea in the Asia-Pacific Community: Adapting Foreign Policy to a New Era," in Ray Weisenborn, ed., *Korea's Amazing Century: From Kings to Satellites* (Seoul: Fulbright Program, 1995), pp. 84-89.

²¹ South Korea's foreign minister, Yu Myung-hwan, announced plans to increase official development assistance to 0.25 percent of GNP from 0.09 percent. *Korea Times*, October 29, 2009.

²² Peter Van Ness, "Designing a Mechanism for Multilateral Security Cooperation in Northeast Asia," *Asian Perspective*, vol. 32, No. 4 (2008), pp. 107-26.

²³ Yonhap, "S. Korea to Form Task Force on Nuclear Accord with U.S.," Seoul, July 6, 2009; NAPSNet, July 6, 2009.

²⁴ *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 4, 2009, reported that a senior Lee Myung-bak administration official told it that "Washington has made a request for a large amount of cash for Afghanistan if it proves too controversial to send troops." Another official confirmed the request and added: "We will take into account the US-Korea alliance and public sentiment before we make a final decision." NAPSNet, May 5, 2009.

²⁵ *Chosun Ilbo*, April 17, 2009, in NAPSNet, April 20, 2009. The ROK decided to expand support in Afghanistan from \$30 million to \$74.1 million until 2011 and to bolster the scale of its contribution of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to Afghanistan, all in lieu of sending troops.

²⁶ Yonhap (Seoul), April 17, 2009, in NAPSNet, April 20, 2009.

²⁷ See Terence Roehrig, "Restructuring the U.S. Military Presence in Korea: Implications for Korean Security and the U.S.-ROK Alliance," in Korea Economic Institute, *On Korea 2008* (Washington, D.C.: KEI, 2007), pp. 142-45.

²⁸ South Korea has been the third-largest importer in the world of conventional weapons in recent years (2004-2008), with 73 percent of those weapons purchased from the United States. (It bought about \$1 billion worth of U.S. weapons in 2007.) In fact, the United States sold a higher percentage of conventional weapons to South Korea than to Israel or the United Arab Emirates during those years. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, *SIPRI Yearbook 2009: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 15. See also *Korea Herald*, December 23, 2008, at NAPSNet, December 24, 2008.

²⁹ Snyder, *Pursuing a Comprehensive Vision*, p. 18. For instance, South Korea would not want to make its territory available to the United States in case of a U.S.-PRC crisis over Taiwan. See Flanagan et al., *Strategic Challenges*, pp. 253-54.

³⁰ Whether China's rise means (as I believe it should) that U.S. policy should give China highest priority, or that it should continue focusing on traditional

U.S. allies and seeking ways to offset Chinese power, is of course a fundamental issue for the new U.S. administration. For contending views, see the “Special Roundtable: Advising the New U.S. President,” *Asia Policy*, No. 7 (January, 2009), at http://nbr.org/publications/asia_policy/AP7/AP7_B_SpecialRT_AdvisingPres.pdf.

³¹ Pew and Chicago World Affairs Council polls show that in many parts of Asia the belief is that China will be the strongest country in the region by mid-century. But the United States still has a large reservoir of positive regard throughout Asia, notwithstanding the distaste for Bush’s policies and widespread admiration for China’s economic advances.

³² Much like Roh Moo Hyun, Lee Myung-bak has spoken of Korea’s need for a “balanced diplomacy” with China and the United States, a view consummated in the Lee-Hu Jintao summit of May 2008 when China and the ROK agreed to establish a “strategic cooperative relationship.” See David C. Kang, “The Security of Northeast Asia,” *Pacific Focus*, vol. 24, No. 1 (April, 2009), p. 14.

³³ One consequence of China’s strong economic ties to North Korea, which include taking in nearly three quarters of its exports, is that it weakens the international sanctions voted on by the UN Security Council and strengthens the North Korean military, which evidently controls coal, metals, and other exported items. See Blaine Harden, “China Trade Helps Shield N. Korea,” *Washington Post*, June 27, 2009.

³⁴ See Gi-Wook Shin and Paul Y. Chang, “The Politics of Nationalism in U.S.-Korean Relations,” *Asian Perspective*, vol. 28, No. 4 (2004), pp. 119-145.

³⁵ See Uk Heo, “The US-ROK Alliance: Security Implications of the South Korea-US Free Trade Agreement,” *Pacific Focus*, vol. 23, No. 3 (December, 2008), pp. 365-81.

³⁶ See Morgan, “American Grand Strategy and the US-ROK Alliance.”

³⁷ Jae-Jung Suh, “Transforming the US-ROK Alliance: Changes in Strategy, Military and Bases,” *Pacific Focus*, vol. 24, No. 1 (April, 2009), pp. 61-81. The ROK has consistently responded to changes in the U.S. defense posture and North Korean threats with weapons upgrades and increased military spending of its own. Consider that in 2009 alone, the ROK began deploying 1,000-km. range surface-to-surface cruise missiles, and made its first space launch from Korean territory (a Russian-made rocket with a Korean-built satellite). Seoul’s ability to count on the United States for new weapons was enhanced in 2008 when Congress upgraded the ROK’s procurement status to the same level as NATO and Japan. See John Feffer, “Ploughshares into Swords: Economic

Implications of South Korean Military Spending,” *KEI Academic Paper Series*, vol. 4, No. 2 (February, 2009) and Flanagan et al., *Strategic Challenges*, p. 251.

³⁸ Hatoyama, “A New Path for Japan,” *New York Times*, August 27, 2009.

³⁹ Kent E. Calder, “Critical Junctures and the Contours of Northeast Asian Regionalism,” in Calder and Francis Fukuyama, eds., *East Asian Multilateralism: Prospects for Regional Stability* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 15-38.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22. The other two crises that spurred regional organizing were the Korean War and the Asian Financial Crisis.

⁴¹ For similar ideas, see Hyeong Jung Park, “Looking Back and Looking Forward: North Korea, Northeast Asia and the ROK-U.S. Alliance,” Brookings Institution paper, December 2007, available at www.nautilus.org/fora/security/08004Park.pdf.

⁴² For a good critique of the U.S. stance, see Ralph A. Cossa, “East Asia Community-Building: Time for the United States to Get on Board,” *Policy Analysis Brief* (Stanley Foundation), September 2007, at www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pab/CossaPAB07.pdf.

⁴³ Wonhyuk Lim, “Regional Multilateralism in Asia and the Korean Question,” NAPSNet Special Report, at www.nautilus.org/fora/security/09072Lim.pdf.

⁴⁴ On South Korean interest in developing a nuclear weapon, see Doug Bandow, “A New Approach to Counter Nuclear Proliferation on the Korean Peninsula,” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring-Summer, 2009), pp. 66-68.

⁴⁵ For example, a number of Chinese economists have urged a distancing of East Asian states from the major economies in order to avoid another regional financial crisis such as occurred in 1997. The argument is that the 1997 crisis revealed the vulnerability of Asian economies that were too dependent on the U.S. and other export markets and too reliant on easily withdrawn Western capital—in short, economies that were pursuing the IMF/World Bank development model. Hence, to the Chinese, the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) is an attractive alternative. See He Fan et al., “After the CMI: The Future of Asian Monetary Cooperation and China’s Role,” at www.aseansec.org/17904.pdf.

⁴⁶ For interesting observations on this scenario, see David C. Kang, “Inter-Korean Relations in the Absence of a U.S.-ROK Alliance,” *Asia Policy*, No. 5 (January, 2008), pp. 25-41.

⁴⁷ In mid-2009 the Lee government did decide to resume humanitarian aid to North Korea. However, the NGOs selected to deliver aid are few in number, and the reported amount of aid—less than \$3 million—is not impressive.