

Obama's Asia Pivot and the Koreans

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Abstract

The end of President Barack Obama's first term provides an opportunity to assess what the administration's "strategic rebalancing" toward and within the Asia-Pacific region (sometimes called the "Asian Pivot" or "Back to Asia" policy) has accomplished as well as what challenges and unmet opportunities remain. The administration has launched several successful multinational diplomatic initiatives in the region to supplement U.S. bilateral ties with key Asian partners; relations with ASEAN have clearly improved. The economic dimension of the Pivot has made progress as seen by the growth of support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. U.S. efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Asia have proved far less successful, except perhaps for Myanmar, where the political transition remains a work in progress. The U.S. military has managed to establish a broader presence in the region, especially in Australia and Southeast Asia. U.S. officials have sought to impart new energy into the five existing formal U.S. bilateral defense alliances in Asia--with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea. But the main problem with the pivot has been the inability to overcome Chinese anxiety about U.S. rebalancing, which has complicated their cooperation over North Korea and other issues. Fortunately, relations between the United States and South Korea are also strong. The ROK is becoming an important U.S. partner in several dimensions of the Pivot, though ROK-U.S. differences over North Korea might emerge with the advent of a new government in Seoul.

Keywords: Obama, Pivot, Korea, China, Rebalancing, Clinton, ASEAN, multinational, APEC, Trans-Pacific Partnership, trade, investment, alliance, alignment, containment, FTA, WTO, Myanmar, democracy, human rights, Vietnam, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Pentagon, ROK, vision, treaty, USFK,

The end of President Barack Obama's first term provides an opportunity to assess what the administration's "strategic rebalancing" toward and within the Asia-Pacific region (sometimes called the "Asian Pivot" or "Back to Asia" policy) has accomplished as well as what challenges and unmet opportunities remain. This article describes the key elements of the U.S. strategic rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific region, focusing on how the two Korean states have both affected, and been affected by, the Asian Pivot. It also speculates on how the Pivot might impact the Koreas in Obama's second term.

During the administration's first term, key members of the Obama team expressed strong interest in the Asia-Pacific region. In their view, the United States had reached a strategic pivot point and needed to rebalance its foreign policy orientation. In particular, the end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq and Libya, the anticipated 2014 U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, along with declining U.S. military commitments in and Europe, meant that the United States had an opportunity to pay greater attention to the Asia-Pacific region.¹ U.S. officials cited a variety of economic, demographic, and strategic indicators that Asia is becoming the world's most important region.² These developments included North Korea's emerging nuclear weapons status as well as instability and regime failure in several Asian countries, the relative increase in Asia's share of the world's population and economy, and Islamic terrorism in Asian-Pacific countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.³ Although downplayed by administration representatives, China's growing economic potential and military power have been a (or perhaps *the*) factor driving the U.S. government, especially the Pentagon, to focus more on the Asia-Pacific region.⁴ A bipartisan consensus now exists among U.S. leaders regarding the key elements of U.S. foreign policy toward Asia. These include: a recognition of the region's growing importance in the world, the need to maintain a strong U.S. military presence there, and the imperative of avoiding a military clash with China through a combination of deterrence and defense measures.

The Pentagon's Strategic Guidance issued in early January 2012 has affirmed that "U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities" that will lead the U.S. to "rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region."⁵ In an article for the

November 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy*, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton identified “six key lines of action” that constituted the main elements of the administration’s approach toward the Asia-Pacific region:⁶

1. engaging regional multilateral institutions
2. expanding trade and investment
3. advancing democracy and human rights
4. deepening working relationships with emerging powers
5. forging a broad-based military presence
6. strengthening bilateral security alliances

The administration’s foreign policies have generally conformed to this reorientation, though some of these elements have received more emphasis and seen more success than others.

1) Engaging Regional Multilateral Institutions

The Obama administration has launched sustained multinational diplomatic initiatives in the region to supplement U.S. bilateral ties with key Asian partners. The focus has been on deepening the U.S. partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), both collectively and with key members of the group, like the Philippines, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, and most recently Burma. In the administration’s view, ASEAN countries, with a combined population of more than half a billion people, are of increasing importance to the United States due to their growing economies and their increasing desire to balance China’s rise with closer ties to Washington. By engaging with the United States collectively through ASEAN as well as bilaterally, Southeast Asian states aim to harness the United States in defense of their mutual interests of preventing China from using its growing economic and military power to dominate the Asia-Pacific region.

The Obama administration came into office believing that the multinational economic architecture was strong, thus allowing it to focus on making progress in developing multilateral political-security institutions. In February 2009 Secretary Clinton visited the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, a first for a U.S. Secretary of State. In July 2009,

the Obama administration acceded to sign ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), a step received most positively by ASEAN leaders. The TAC was negotiated in 1976 by members of ASEAN; its primary purpose is to ensure that all disputes in the region are settled by peaceful means and that states respect the autonomy of their neighbors and regional peers. The United States was the only major Pacific power not to have signed the treaty until 2009, and many Southeast Asian leaders had cited the U.S. refusal to sign the TAC as evidence of neglect toward the region.⁷ After acceding to the TAC, the Obama administration conducted the first ever ASEAN-U.S. Leaders Meeting in Singapore on November 15, 2009, at which U.S. and ASEAN officials signed the first Joint Declaration of the ASEAN-U.S. Leaders Meeting on Enhanced Partnership for Enduring Peace and Prosperity.⁸

2) Expanding Trade and Investment

The economic dimension of the U.S. Asia Pivot took another step forward in November 2012 when the United States and some of its key ASEAN economic partners committed themselves to strive for a comprehensive regional trade agreement by the October 2013 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. Obama hosted talks on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) initiative at meetings of the East Asia Summit and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Cambodia. Formal negotiations for a TPP agreement began in March 2010 among eight countries--Australia, Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, Singapore, Peru, Vietnam, and the United States.⁹ The parties have since been holding several rounds of talks each year. With the WTO rounds now stagnating, countries are seeing the TPP and its Chinese-backed competitors as the main mechanisms for reaching region-wide multilateral trade agreements.

During its first two years in office, the Obama administration did not vigorously pursue a comprehensive economic agenda for Asia. But since 2011, the administration has launched a sustained high-profile campaign to complete long-stalled bilateral free trade arrangements and reinvigorate the TPP initiative, which informally originated before Obama became president. The TPP has become the administration's main multilateral economic initiative for the Asia Pacific region and the model for future U.S.-supported free trade agreements in Asia and elsewhere. The Obama administration's economic vision for East Asia, embodied in the TPP, contrasts and in practice competes with that of

China. The two countries are seeking to reduce the inefficient “noodle bowl” of bilateral and “minilateral” (involving only a few countries) free trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific region, but their prescriptions are different.

Beijing is actively lobbying countries to enter competing free-trade agreements (FTAs) that exclude the United States. China, which is the main trading partner for almost all other Asian states, is currently supporting two initiatives. The first is a trade and investment arrangement between China, Japan and South Korea. Although it would involve only a few countries, these states represent about 20 percent of global GDP. However, a serious hindrance to this goal is that relations between Japan and the other two countries have deteriorated in recent months due to their ongoing territorial disputes. The second Beijing-supported plan would establish a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) among 16 countries--the 10 ASEAN members (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam) and six regional partners (China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand). Altogether, these states have more than three billion people (roughly half the world’s population), they account for about 30 percent of international trade by value and 40 percent of the world’s yearly gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁰ They have set 2015 as the target for completing their negotiations, which will begin next year. In economic terms, these two Beijing-backed FTAs in principle offer relatively easily implemented multilateral trade partnerships based on a lowest common denominator formula in which countries remove some, though not all, trade barriers, resulting in rapid if narrow gains.

In an effort to draw ASEAN member states away from these U.S. exclusionary agreements, U.S. officials have argued that the TPP will yield superior economic benefits. Though the TPP would require a greater degree of commitment among its members regarding binding rules and standards, it offers the potential for much deeper gains through progress on mutual investment, government procurement, intellectual property protection, transparent competition policies, e-commerce rules, green growth, labor rights, and government procurement as well as trade barriers.¹¹ TPP addresses more issues than in existing FTAs or the World Trade Organization (WTO) accession agreements. President Obama has called the TPP a “high-standard trade agreement” that could potentially be a model for the entire region.”¹² The administration sees

the TPP as a “gold standard” for future FTAs because of its comprehensive and demanding requirements and because it “takes into account some of the industries of the future and the questions raised by those industries.”¹³ At the most recent 14th round of talks, eleven countries participated: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Singapore, Brunei, Chile, Peru, Vietnam, Malaysia, Mexico and the United States. The Obama administration has not formally excluded China from joining the TPP, but Beijing would need to revalue its currency, end subsidies to state-owned companies, provide better protection of foreign trademarks, and take other improbable steps.¹⁴

The TPP’s progress and potential is hindered by several factors. In addition to China, Taiwan, Indonesia, India, the Philippines, Russia, and South Korea have not participated in these negotiations.¹⁵ Including the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the TPP would be desirable, given the importance and dynamism of its economy, but, until recently ROK-U.S. economic negotiations focused on negotiating and then ratifying their bilateral trade agreement, which only occurred last year. Yet, a number of those countries that are participating in the TPP talks have objected to such provisions, as how to treat government-controlled enterprises, settle disputes involving foreign investors, and protect emerging economic sectors such as information technology and pharmaceuticals that might not develop without some means of limiting foreign competition.¹⁶ Given these complex and divisive technical, economic, and political issues, the October 2013 timetable for signing a TPP agreement appears overly optimistic. But the rival Beijing-backed projects must also overcome major differences among their proposed members in terms of their resources, competitive advantages, and stages of development. A more serious problem is that, though the TPP initiative has come to symbolize renewed U.S. economic leadership in East Asia, its economic impact will remain modest unless Canada, Japan, Mexico, South Korea and other national economic powerhouses besides the United States join it.

3) Advancing Democracy and Human Rights

The Obama administration has sought to improve respect for basic civil liberties and rights in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as to reduce police and judicial corruption and assist civil society nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The administration has attached human rights conditions to some of its Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance,

and, when governments have failed to meet these requirements, have withheld millions of dollars in aid. The U.S. government also supports Open Government Partnership (OGP), whose members seek to promote government transparency, fight corruption, empower citizen rights, and ensure national integrity and democratic values.¹⁷

Of course, the U.S. government's capacity to change how other governments treat their citizens is limited, and the Arab Spring has yet to arrive in full force in the Far East. Even so, one cannot say that U.S. policies have contributed in a major or enduring way to the improvement of democracy and human rights in the region, though U.S. officials can rightfully cite some important individual successes, especially in Myanmar. Democracy and human rights problems have impeded U.S. ties with China, Vietnam, and North Korea (DPRK), though U.N. human rights officials have correctly pointed out that the United States and other countries have devoted little attention to Pyongyang's human rights abuses in their focus on countering the DPRK's nuclear weapons and missile development programs or averting further DPRK military provocations. With respect to military assistance, Indonesia only recently became eligible again to participate in the U.S. International Military Education and Training (IMET) program, funded by the U.S. State Department. The IMET program provides grants for officers and civilian officials from allied and friendly countries to study in the U.S. and receive additional training, not only in strategic thinking and military tactics but also in rule of law, civil-military relations and democratic principles. Periodic suspensions of this program for Indonesia and other countries are ironic since it promotes human rights.

4) Deepening Working Relationships with Emerging Major Powers of Russia, India, and China

The most problematic dimension of the Asia pivot has been developing "working relations" (meaning generally positive and effective, if limited, cooperation) with the emerging major powers of Russia, India, and China. U.S. policymakers have been unable to find a way to harness Moscow's new interest in East Asia in a mutually profitable manner. Russia does not fit nicely into any of the above categories, since it is not a longtime U.S. military ally, a new security partner, a major player in the Asian-Pacific economy or regional multilateral institutions, and it does not really constitute an emerging power. The Obama administration has often ignored Russia or simply

treated the country as an afterthought in its Asian policy. Meanwhile, ties between the Indian and U.S. governments have been treading water for the past few years, with declining expectations in both countries of a breakthrough partnership between the world's largest democracies that would help bolster regional security and the global economy. While there have been many senior official exchanges between the two governments, including reciprocal presidential visits, the hoped-for breakthrough in their relationship has yet to occur. Indians are still struggling with their domestic problems--including economic inequality, corruption, political infighting, and the transition to a new generation of leaders--which has made it difficult for India to assume the more elevated global role desired by the Obama administration and others.

The main unresolved issue affecting the Obama administration's Asian pivot is how China will fit into the new framework. U.S. officials are divided regarding whether Beijing is a potential partner or persistent problem. The administration has yet to find a robust balance between deterring without alarming Beijing, or assuring its allies and friends that the United States will neither abandon them to China's growing might nor entrap them in an unwanted confrontation with Beijing. The Obama administration has sought to avoid confronting China directly by emphasizing general principles—freedom of the sea, peaceful settlement of territorial disputes, etc.—rather than targeted policies designed explicitly to counter China. The Obama administration has sought to channel China's rise into mutually beneficial directions by inducing Beijing to accept U.S.-backed regional security and economic goals and procedures. U.S. officials describe their objective as to “reinforce the system of rules, responsibilities, and norms that underlies regional peace, stability, and prosperity.” U.S. officials have accordingly laid down a series of military and diplomatic markers affirming U.S. support for the peaceful resolution of territorial disputes, freedom of maritime navigation, military transparency, fair commercial practices, and other rules of behavior. Chinese officials have declined formal endorsements of many of these principles but generally have refrained from overtly challenging them.

There are powerful forces promoting cooperation as well as conflict between Beijing and Washington, and no one can say with certainty which drivers will prove stronger. Historically, it is often difficult for established powers to accommodate a rising power, though the China-U.S. dyad differs from earlier cases of hegemonic power transition in

several respects. Not only do both countries possess secure nuclear deterrents, but their economies are closely interlinked in unprecedented ways. Nonetheless, the lack of Chinese political and security transparency further complicates this global power transition by deepening uncertainties regarding Beijing's goals and means. Above all, it remains unclear if future Chinese leaders might not be tempted to exploit their country's growing power to try to remake, if not the world, than at least East Asia in their desired image. In any event, Beijing is surrounded by subordinate states with constraints on their territorial sovereignty and freedom of foreign-policy action.

5) Forging a Broad-Based Military Presence

Having a "broad-based" U.S. defense presence in the Asia-Pacific region means diversifying both the location and type of military deployments in the region. U.S. officials have declared their goal of making the U.S. force posture in Asia more "geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable."¹⁸ Partly due to foreign military basing constraints in Japan and South Korea, the Obama administration aims to expand defense cooperation with other Asian partners. The focus of this effort has been in Southeast Asia, which complements the large-fixed U.S. bases in northeast Asia and also provides for superior access to the vital shipping lanes that pass through Southeast Asia. Current efforts focus on Singapore (preparations are currently underway for the basing of U.S. Navy Littoral Combat Ships at Changi Pier), Indonesia (new arms sales and joint training and education opportunities), and Vietnam (expanding engagement to encompass port visits, joint exercises, and defense dialogues). U.S. forces here can also move rapidly, either northward to reinforce the U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan or to the west to support Indian Ocean contingencies. In addition to a wider geographic focus, the administration has strived to expand security cooperation beyond counterterrorism to encompass regional defense arrangements extending from India to Australia to the Philippines.¹⁹

The Obama administration has sought to underscore, through word and deed, that the United States will not reduce its military commitments or capacity in East Asia even while cutting back its force deployments in Europe and the Middle East. Well before the January 2012 issuance of the Defense Strategic Guidance, the Pentagon (especially with U.S. naval submarines and Air Force stealth fighters), has been reinforcing the U.S.

military presence in East Asia.²⁰ The administration's defense budget preserves U.S. military capabilities destined for Asia while cutting defense spending in other areas.

Another core element of the Asia Pivot focuses on building the capabilities of local militaries to deal with lower-level threats. For example, the administration wants to enhance the air and naval capabilities of friendly maritime states so that they can help protect international waterways from pirates and other threats to freedom of the seas, allowing the U.S. Navy to focus on higher-end threats. So, the United States is selling 24 F-16C/Ds to Indonesia and coastal ships to the Philippines. Similarly, the United States is helping countries build stronger ground forces to suppress local terrorists and insurgents. Border security programs also extend to encompass the potential movement of nuclear and other dangerous materials to global markets. All these capabilities promote the security of the international air and maritime commons, which serve as the foundation of the global economy.

6) Strengthening Bilateral Security Alliances

The operational advantage of many of these initiatives is questionable. It is still unclear if short duration visits by units of U.S. Special Operations Forces on rotation (one of the elements likely to receive budget increases in coming years) can make the same contribution to achieving U.S. goals (detering potential aggressors and reassuring friends) as those normally sustained by large U.S. military bases in local host nations and visits by enormous aircraft carrier groups. The "tyranny of distance" in the vast Asia Pacific region likely negates some of the value of forward deploying the U.S. Marines in Australia, at least if the intent is to influence decision making in Pyongyang or Beijing. Although the use of "places not bases" costs less, host governments like Japan and South Korea often defray a significant amount of U.S. costs. In any case, budget strictures are already disrupting some initiatives, such as the proposed transfer of Marines from Japan (especially Okinawa) to Guam and opportunities for Japanese and U.S. troops to conduct joint exercises on Guam's extensive training ranges.

To compensate, U.S. officials have sought to impart new energy into the five existing U.S. bilateral defense alliances in Asia--with Australia, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea.

Australia is an important U.S. military ally, both globally and within Asia. President Obama and Prime Minister Julia Gillard renewed the alliance in November 2011, when they announced an agreement to place 250 U.S. Marines in Darwin, marking the first stage of a rotation plan that will see as many as 2,500 U.S. Marines rotate through Darwin as well as other augmentations to the U.S. military presence in Australia. But the recent U.S. defense budget cuts are compelling Australia to assume more of its own security burdens at a time when Australia's military budget is also under pressure. Possible tensions could arise if the U.S. and Australian militaries expect greater future support from each other since both are reducing their capabilities. At the same time, China has become Australia's largest trading partner, outpacing the United States. China is not a clear and present danger to Australia, like Japan was in the 1930s, and Australians want to maintain good relations with Beijing.

By the end of the first Obama administration, the bilateral security relationship with Japan had rebounded from earlier tensions over local opposition to the Futenma Marine Air Station on Okinawa and the new Japanese government's striving to pursue a more balanced policy between Washington and Beijing. Japan remains the most important U.S. ally in the region. These two large democratic countries have a relationship built on deep bilateral economic and security ties as well as shared democratic values. However welcome, the new access agreements to the modest military facilities in the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia cannot compare in terms of military value with the large and permanent U.S. bases in Japan.

Unfortunately, Japan is struggling economically and remains divided politically, which constrains its contributions to international security. Although Japan has long faced threats from China, Russia, and North Korea, these have become more serious in recent years. Japan continues to assert its territorial claims regarding all three countries. Though publicly neutral on these disputes some U.S. officials believe that Tokyo could benefit Japan and the United States if it compromised with South Korea and perhaps Russia. Japan's dispute over Takeshima (the South Koreans call the island "Dokdo") remains an impediment to Tokyo-Seoul cooperation regarding North Korea. Conflicting claims with Russia over the Northern Territories (which Russians refer to as the southern Kuriles) are also less an immediate military threat—Japan lacks the military power to force Russia to relinquish the islands—but do

prevent Tokyo and Moscow from collaborating closely on regional security issues as well as impeding economic cooperation between two complementary economies

The Philippines has welcomed the Obama administration's strong interest in Southeast Asia and ASEAN, of which the Philippines is a leading member. The Philippines has been perhaps the ASEAN country most interested in strengthening security relations with the United States. The Obama administration has since focused on strengthening the U.S.-Philippine security alliance, enhancing security and stability in the South China Sea (West Philippine Sea), modernizing the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), supporting the peace process in Muslim areas of Mindanao, and promoting broad-based economic growth and democratic development in the Philippines. The 2011 Manila Declaration commemorated the 60th anniversary of the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) and reaffirmed the treaty as the central foundation of the U.S.-Philippine relationship for the future.²¹ The Obama administration also launched an annual Bilateral Strategic Dialogue, beginning on January 27, 2011, which aims to advance U.S.-Philippine cooperation on bilateral, regional, and global issues. The Obama administration has pledged to triple U.S. military aid to the AFP and has relaxed restrictions on the AFP's purchase of U.S. military equipment. This has resulted in the purchase of decommissioned U.S. Coast Guard vessels and ongoing negotiations over the purchase of a squadron of F-16 fighter jets. The U.S. has also discussed new direct military cooperation, including more frequent joint exercises between the AFP and U.S. military, more troop rotations into the country, and perhaps, most importantly, the deployment of surveillance aircraft over the Philippines to monitor the South China Sea.²²

Thailand has remained the longest and currently sole formal ally of the United States in the Continent of Southeast Asia. On November 15, 2012, U.S. Defense Secretary Panetta signed a joint vision statement with Thailand's Defense Minister Sukampol Suwannathat, affirming and renewing the Thai-U.S. military partnership. The joint vision statement highlights four areas of future bilateral defense cooperation: regional security in Southeast Asia; support for the stability of the Asia-Pacific region and beyond; the expansion of bilateral and multilateral interoperability and readiness; and bilateral relationship-building, coordination, and collaboration at all levels. Panetta emphasized the U.S. willingness to help develop and modernize Thailand's military.

Thai officials emphasized that the vision statement would not affect Thailand's good relations with China.

The Koreas and the Pivot

Fortunately, relations between the United States and South Korea are also strong. The ROK is becoming an important U.S. partner in several dimensions of the Pivot, though ROK-U.S. differences over North Korea might emerge with the advent of the new Park Geun-hye government in Seoul.

The immediate security threat to U.S. interests in the Asia-Pacific region emanates from the DPRK. North Korea has detonated two nuclear explosive devices already and aims to make small nuclear warheads that it can launch on the DPRK's improving ballistic missiles. Although the DPRK presently lacks ballistic missiles capable of reaching North America, it already has many missiles that can attack targets in Japan, including the U.S. forces based there. Before he left office, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates estimated that the DPRK could have an intercontinental ballistic capability with sufficient range to hit targets in North America within five years. Meanwhile, indications of disruptive DPRK proliferation activities in Burma, Syria, and elsewhere are widespread. The Obama administration achieved remarkable successes in securing international sanctions against North Korea and Iran for their proliferation activities, but recent UN reports indicate that the sanctions are not being applied effectively, with some Chinese entities seen as a major problem.

The new generation of leaders in Pyongyang, led by Kim Jong-un who assumed office in December 2011, has not fundamentally departed from Kim Jong Il's policies. The United States has made no progress in eliminating North Korea's nuclear arsenal or engaging with the DPRK within a multilateral framework supported by South Korea. The Obama administration has been willing to negotiate nuclear and other issues directly with the DPRK, but only within the Six-Party framework. It has affirmed its willingness to offer Pyongyang generous substantive terms for abandoning its nuclear program. Washington is prepared to work with the other parties to compensate the DPRK for any steps it has taken towards ending its nuclear weapons and missile programs, including by supplying economic assistance and security guarantees. But since Pyongyang has continued its intransigence, most recently by launching a long-range missile in December and threatening a third nuclear weapons

test, the United States and its allies have shunned the DPRK diplomatically and punished it with additional unilateral and multilateral sanctions. Representatives of the current U.S. administration, like its predecessors, have also affirmed a readiness to curtail North Korean nuclear threats by means other than negotiations, including sanctions, strengthening allied defenses in the East Asian region, and increasing U.S. and multinational interdiction efforts.

The Obama administration remains committed to the longstanding “action for action” approach that combines the use of positive and negative incentives with a willingness to engage the DPRK within the multilateral context of the Six-Party Talks. Washington is prepared to work with other parties to compensate the DPRK for any steps it takes towards ending its nuclear weapons and missile programs, including economic assistance and security guarantees. But U.S. officials have indicated that they require evidence, before resuming the Six-Party Talks, that the DPRK is making progress toward ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Under its policy of “strategic patience,” the Obama administration has demanded that the DPRK give some concrete indication that it will make major nuclear concessions. But this policy of patiently waiting for verifiable changes in DPRK policies possesses several risks. First, it provides North Koreans with additional breathing room to refine their nuclear and missile programs. It also contains the risks that the DPRK might again launch more ballistic missiles or detonate another nuclear device to confirm and support this development process or simply to demonstrate frustration at being ignored. Finally, the strategy of waiting for the DPRK to introduce major reforms risks allowing a minor incident to escalate through the ROK’s new proactive deterrence policy.

Whither the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Unlike its two immediate predecessors, the administrations of Presidents Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), the government of President Lee Myung-bak joined the United States in insisting that the DPRK end its nuclear weapons program as part of an inter-Korean peace deal. Furthermore, President Lee conditioned new aid on an end to DPRK provocations and concrete DPRK concessions regarding its nuclear program and other past misdeeds, particularly the DPRK’s 2010 sinking of the South Korean warship *Cheonan* and its shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Seoul did try to restart a dialogue with

North Korea in January 2011, but plans for a ministerial level meeting collapsed after North Korea refused to accept responsibility for the *Cheonan* sinking.

The most important function of the ROK-U.S. alliance remains the protection of South Korea from external attack, but the alliance has also evolved, and should continue to do so, to address broader extra-Korean issues in regards to the Asian Pivot, where the two countries share important interests. At their first summit in Washington in June 2009, Presidents Obama and Lee issued a Joint Vision statement expressing support for expanding further the global role of the ROK-U.S. alliance. The declared intent was to move beyond the traditional “hub-and-spoke” bilateral alliance model that sustained the U.S. security position in East Asia during the Cold War and create a more comprehensive and better integrated regional security structure addressing transnational security challenges, such as those emanating from transnational terrorism, natural disasters, and WMD proliferation.

The new vision aligns well with the Asian Pivot and reflects the 21st century reality that South Korea has become a global player. In terms of economics, the ROK clearly ranks as one of the most powerful countries in the World. Since 1990, South Korea has vigorously participated in the activities of various subsidiary and specialized UN agencies, as well as other international organizations. The ROK has recently been elected for a two-year term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, a position that will provide even more opportunities for South Korea to play a global security role in partnership with the United States. In order to revitalize its economy, South Korea is pursuing expanded free trade agreements (FTAs). Seoul has concluded FTAs with more than a dozen countries and organizations, including Chile, Singapore, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), ASEAN and the United States. The FTAs are expected to help ROK companies expand global markets and also enhance South Korea’s economic efficiency through increased competition.

The United States and South Korea are also coordinating more effectively and comprehensively their global diplomatic, development, and defense efforts, part of the “3-D” foreign policy agenda embraced by the two governments. Energy security and climate change look to be another set of important issues to both presidents. The future will likely see efforts to extend this partnership to include other countries, especially India (despite distance) and Japan (despite island disputes).

Not only does the ROK accept the necessity for U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) to contribute to its possible extra-peninsular missions, but South Korea's own military modernization program, the Defense Reform Project 2020 adopted in 2005, has increased its capacity to participate in international missions. While reducing ROK ground forces from 680,000 to 500,000 troops, and grouping the remainder into more agile, modular structures, the ROK air force and navy will receive enhanced long-range surveillance and strike systems, including some AWACS planes and UAVs as well as KDX Aegis-equipped destroyers, Dokdo class amphibious warships, and longer-range Type 214 attack submarines. The United States and South Korea are also contemplating extending their security partnership into even newer realms, such as cyber and outer space. At the October 2012 44th annual U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) Security Consultative meeting, U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta told reporters that, "The United States and South Korea will continue to enhance close alliance cooperation to address wide-ranging global security challenges, including through stabilization and reconstruction efforts, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief and counterproliferation." Panetta also announced the signing of terms of reference for bilateral ROK-U.S. military space cooperation. The document established a U.S.-South Korea defense working group to address space policy, architecture, training and personnel exchange.²³

In South Korea's 18th presidential election, held on December 19, 2012 Park Geun-hye of the governing Saenuri (New Frontier) Party defeated Moon Jae-in of the opposition Democratic United Party. If history is any guide, North Korea will likely test Park during her first few months in office to gauge how she will respond to DPRK provocations. The next provocation could well be a DPRK nuclear test that will help bolster North Korea's legitimacy as a nuclear weapons state like India and Pakistan. According to the Institute for Science and International Security [ISIS], the DPRK currently has sufficient weapons-grade plutonium to make as many as 18 nuclear warheads. North Korea also seems prepared to manufacture more fissile material by enriching its own ample supplies of natural uranium. It is unclear if Park shares Lee's commitment to a "Global Korea," a policy that has substantially raised South Korea's global profile by hosting high-level events, participating in international peacekeeping and other achievements. Park has said, however, that South Korea needs a secure environment to achieve sustained economic growth, a position that harmonizes well with the

Asian Pivot.

Park's election presents opportunities and challenges for the United States. Fortunately, when Lee became president in 2008 for a single five-year term, he made improving ROK-U.S. relations a priority. His efforts, along with DPRK reckless belligerence, helped ensure that the just held elections have seen little, if any, of the anti-Americanism common in earlier elections. Park will probably continue the pro-U.S. line of the Lee administration, but Washington and Seoul need to develop a better means of deterring DPRK provocations. They also must ensure a smooth transition to ROK operational command as well as overcoming their differences regarding South Korea's civil nuclear ambitions. U.S. officials are uncomfortable with South Koreans' interest in developing the capacity to separate plutonium and enrich uranium. Securing the ROK's commitment to join the TPP will prove difficult in light of the struggle to negotiate and ratify the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) that entered into force last year. It is unclear how much additional benefit South Korea will gain from the TPP. Seoul also worries about Beijing's likely hostile attitude toward the TPP. China is South Korea's main trading partner, and, despite past experience, many South Koreans hope that Beijing will finally get tough on Pyongyang and force it to improve its behavior.

Future Scenarios

The DPRK suffers from several serious vulnerabilities, including its potentially contested dynastic succession, increasingly horrid economic conditions, and weakening conventional forces. North Korea could slowly die due to its economic failings, but it could also abruptly collapse (an ongoing fear of the Chinese government, given the likely upsurge in refugees and border conflict this will cause), followed by military intervention from neighboring countries. China, South Korea, and the United States should informally establish clear rules of behavior for such a scenario. In the interim, the United States and South Korea need to cooperate closely to watch the DPRK's succession process and future evolution. Given the unpredictable security environment in northeast Asia, Washington and Seoul should undertake extensive contingency planning. In particular, it will probably make sense in the next few years to review, update, and make more detailed the 2009 Joint Vision Statement.

Notes:

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