

# Shifting Strategic & Diplomatic Relations with the Koreans

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# CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b> .....	vii
<b>Dealing with North Korea: Taking Stock of 2008</b>	
No Hugging No Learning <i>Michael Schiffer</i> .....	1
North Korean Questions: Taking Stock of 2008 <i>Lee Shin-wha</i> .....	15
<b>Completing the Strategic Transformation: The U.S. Military Alliances with Korea and Japan</b>	
The U.S.-Japan Alliance and the U.S.-ROK Alliance <i>James Przystup</i> .....	43
Preparing for Future Threats and Regional Challenges: The ROK-U.S. Military Alliance in 2008–2009 <i>Bruce E. Bechtol Jr.</i> .....	75
<b>Korea and Japan’s Strategic Relationship: Where to From Here</b>	
The Future of Korea-Japan’s Strategic Relationship: A Case for Cautious Optimism <i>Park Cheol-hee</i> .....	101
Beyond Bilateral Approaches: Regionalizing Japan-Korea Tensions <i>T.J. Pempel</i> .....	119
<b>Alternative Futures: U.S.-Korea Economic Ties with and without a Free Trade Agreement</b>	
Can the U.S. and South Korea Sing without KORUS? The Economic and Strategic Effects of the KORUS FTA <i>Mark Manyin, William Cooper</i> .....	135
KORUS FTA as a Better Alternative to Manage the Bilateral Economic Relationship <i>Lee Jaemin</i> .....	159
<b>Korea-Japan Economic Ties</b>	
Korea: the Next Asian domino in Global Crisis <i>Richard Katz</i> .....	177

# **PREPARING FOR FUTURE THREATS AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES: THE ROK-U.S. MILITARY ALLIANCE IN 2008–09**

*Bruce E. Bechtol Jr.\**

## **CONTENTS**

- I. Introduction
- II. ROK Military Development: Matching Capabilities to the Threat
- III. Can the ROK Government Pay for Needed Capabilities?
- IV. Wartime Operational Control:  
The Right Move at the Right Time?
- V. Conclusions

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## I. Introduction

President Lee Myung-bak won a landslide victory in 2007. His popularity before the election was obvious, and it came as a surprise to almost no one that he won by the largest margin since democratic elections first began to be held in South Korea in 1987 (Onishi 2007). Many analysts agree that the struggling economy and other issues that many Koreans believed the Roh Moo-hyun government had not addressed very well were key in helping conservatives once again return to power. But another key issue was Lee's strong stance on national defense and the relationship with what remains an unpredictable and belligerent neighbor to the north—the DPRK. Indeed, as distinguished North Korean analyst Nicholas Eberstadt (2007) stated following the election of 2007:

*South Koreans winced as their government repeatedly abstained from U.N. votes criticizing North Korea for human rights abuses. They grumbled as they saw their tax-funded “economic cooperation” projects with the North devolve into an economic lifeline for a still-hostile government in Pyongyang. And they worried as the undisguised rift with Washington over “the North Korean threat” created unmistakable strains in the vital U.S.-South Korean alliance.*

Lee's presidency shows a shift to the center-right in the ROK electorate (Steinberg 2008).

Since Lee Myung-bak assumed the presidency of South Korea, he has encountered many challenges. Indeed, Lee has been accused by many on the left for being too hard on North Korea and for bringing difficulties back into the North-South relationship (though in reality this was almost entirely a one-way relationship during Roh's administration when it came to compromise and transparency—almost exclusively on the part of South Korea).<sup>1</sup> But these criticisms have not gained nearly as much attention as those mounted against Lee for his desire to move forward on the free trade agreement with the United States, which will give U.S. beef imports what some critics (unfairly in my view) have called unsafe inroads into the South Korean food market. Indeed, the beef issue (to the surprise of many Americans) became a prominent issue in South Korea and led to candlelight vigils, protests in the street, and what amounted to a legitimate crisis for the Lee Myung-bak government (Junn 2008).

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1. For examples of criticism of Lee's North Korea policies from left-of-center analysts and politicians, see Toloraya (2008) and Shim (2008).

Although the beef issue may have been an emotional one for many Koreans, it seems there was more to it than meets the eye. Indeed, many analysts have said this was in reality a move by the left designed to subvert the new government of Lee Myung-bak. As Victor Cha (2008), a professor at Georgetown University, recently wrote:

*While the trigger for Korea's self-paralyzing demonstrations were concerns about beef, it is increasingly apparent that the ideological Left in Korea, pushed out of power after over one decade in the seat of the presidency and in control of the National Legislature—and with no major election scheduled for another four years—have taken their politics to the streets in an effort to subvert the first conservative government Korean government in a decade.*

Cha further cut to the crux of the matter when he wrote, “This is not about lofty notions of a new Korean nationalism, but about the primitive struggle for political power long a part of politics on the peninsula.” According to press reports (Kang I. 2008), several civic groups and left-of-center activists actually planned many of the rallies with the specific intent of bringing down Lee’s government.

While the beef issue has been the center of most of the attention in South Korea in recent months, in my view it took away from other important issues that must be addressed. As this issue has begun to die down, the very real challenges and issues that face Lee’s government and the ROK-U.S. alliance can now become the center of more focus by policymakers and analysts in the United States and South Korea. Perhaps most important, Lee has now stated that his policy toward North Korea is to seek eventual unification under a liberal democracy. This is a significant break from the policy of his predecessors in the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations who sought “peaceful coexistence” with North Korea but paid little attention to what would be an expensive and problematic post-unification situation (Kim S. 2008).

This new policy points to the important issues that will be addressed in this paper. For South Korea to be able to work toward unification under a liberal, democratic government, the government in Seoul must be able to develop its military capabilities in order to match the continuing North Korean threat posed by its conventional and unconventional forces. South Korea has a difficult task. The government (along with its key military ally, the United States) must plan for a force-on-force conflict with North Korea and maintain capabilities that effectively deter the DPRK; at the same time, South Korean government officials must prepare for a possible collapse of the threat that they are deterring and plan



for the huge challenges that will exist if either one of these scenarios occurs. To do so, South Korea must be able to actually either pay for the additional capabilities needed or ensure that a strong alliance exists with the United States, which can supplement the gaps until fiscal or military readiness challenges, or both, are met.

This leads to the question of wartime operational control (OPCON) and the scheduled dismantlement of Combined Forces Command (CFC) in 2012. Can it be done? Finally, several other issues need to be addressed in the near term as South Korea looks at its military alliance with the United States. Not the least of these issues is the cost of maintaining U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula (and cost sharing) and the upcoming move of U.S. troops out of Seoul and bases in the Uijongbu-Tongducheon corridor. I will address all of these issues in this paper and make some suggestions for planning and policy that will be important as the ROK-U.S. military alliance continues to evolve and improve to meet the challenges for security and stability on the Korean peninsula in coming years.

## **II. ROK Military Development: Matching Capabilities to the Threat**

Many issues face the alliance between the United States and South Korea, but there is no doubt that the bulwark of the relationship between these two nations is the ROK-U.S. military alliance. This is the alliance that has protected the stability and security of the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War.

The military alliance has undergone several important changes in recent years. Not the least of these is the “transformation” of ROK military forces, with an original end date of 2020, that was estimated to cost 164 trillion *won*. The plan, set into place under the Roh Moo-hyun administration, also is supposed to give the ROK military the independent capability to operate under separate wartime command from U.S. forces by 2012 (Jin 2007). Evidence that the process of transitioning to two separate wartime commands is going forward can be seen if one examines the recent Ulchi Focus Guardian exercise held during August of 2008. During that exercise, the South Koreans and Americans simulated fighting a war under two separate operational commands, one led by the chairman of South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff and one led by the commander of United States Korea Command (KORCOM—eventual successor to United States Forces Korea [USFK]). The exercise was observed by several retired military officers from both the United States and South Korea and is expected to aid in planning for the major changes that are expected to occur by 2012 (Jung S. 2008e).

There has been a great deal of criticism regarding the transformation plan set into action by the Roh administration. Not only will this expensive transformation process put a huge strain on the budget of South Korea's government, but also much of the planning put into this transformation process can legitimately be called very dangerous to the security of South Korea. The transformation plan has several key weaknesses: (1) it calls for cutting military forces by 180,000 before acquisition of modern programs can offset the reduction in forces, (2) the plan was not set up to counter North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, which have proven to be significant since the events of 2006, and (3) the plan did not include enough programs, or programs that are robust enough in nature, or the proper security measures to meet the requirements of Seoul's planned takeover of separate wartime OPCON from the U.S. military in 2012. Press reports are already saying that the ROK government may push the plan back from its planned date of 2020 to 2025 because of the reasons stated above and because of budgetary issues (Jung S. 2008h).

As the South Korean military continues its transformation process and pushes on with the challenges it faces in the changing ROK-U.S. military alliance, policymakers in Seoul cannot forget that the North Korean threat remains ominous and very real. North Korea continues to maintain the world's fifth-largest military—a military that is equipped with a nuclear capability, ballistic missiles, and an asymmetric capability that has evolved since the mid-1990s.<sup>2</sup> Pyongyang has yet to even discuss terms for eliminating its estimated 6 to 12 nuclear weapons, and it continues to deploy 70 percent of its ground forces within 90 miles of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). These forces include two deployed mechanized corps, an armor corps, and an artillery corps—plus a missile corps that has more than 600 Scuds and 200 No-dong missiles capable of striking anywhere in South Korea or Japan (Klingner 2008a). For the Lee administration to make up for the mistakes made by the Roh administration's transformation program, it will need to focus on two key areas: (1) the North Korean threat, based on the simple intelligence doctrine (Applegate 2001) that a threat is defined as capability + intent = threat, and (2) a renewed focus on interoperability with U.S. forces as ROK independent capability comes to fruition. The second key area was ignored for most of the Roh administration and will be important as the ROK and U.S. militaries make an effort to continue deterring the North Korean threat during the transitions occurring in the ROK-U.S. military alliance.

The North Korean military threat has most certainly evolved. Indeed, a drastic shortage of fuel (because of a lack of subsidies from the Soviet Union beginning

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2. For current analysis on the North Korean military threat, see Scobell and Sanford (2007).

in 1990) and sometimes food has forced a dip since the mid-1990s in the field training levels of its conventional forces, as seen in its traditional infantry, mechanized, armor, and artillery units.<sup>3</sup> Despite these very real setbacks, the DPRK has adjusted quite cleverly. In fact, since the mid-1990s, North Korea has significantly increased the capabilities of its missile forces in sophistication, numbers (large increases in the numbers of all types of missiles), and command and control. The North Korean Army has integrated missiles into its artillery doctrine, and in any force-on-force conflict (or limited conflict, for that matter) missiles would be used as “long-range artillery systems,” able to target any node in South Korea and many in Japan.<sup>4</sup>

But missiles are only the beginning. Since the late 1990s the North Koreans have significantly increased the number of long-range artillery systems (the systems referred to as long-range are the 170mm self-propelled artillery system and the 240mm multiple rocket launcher system) deployed along the DMZ—close to 900 hundred of these systems are located within a short distance of the DMZ and up to 300 of these systems can target areas in and around Seoul.<sup>5</sup> The long-range artillery that can hit Seoul and other areas of Kyonggi province are also a threat because some or all of these systems are likely to be equipped with chemical munitions—this is in addition to the fact that their forward deployed positions would permit these systems to strike Seoul with little or no warning (Herskovitz 2006). U.S. Department of Defense officials have estimated that in a North Korean attack on the ROK up to 250,000 people would die in Seoul from the artillery attack alone (Geramone 2006). The final member of the “triad” that is the asymmetric threat North Korea poses to the ROK is the large, well-equipped, and highly trained cadre of North Korean Special Operations Forces. These forces number up to 100,000 and are capable of attacking key nodes within South Korea (including U.S. bases), disrupting command and control, and even carrying out acts of terrorism and assassination.<sup>6</sup>

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3. For analysis on the impact lack of readily available fuel has had on North Korean conventional military forces training trends, see Von Hippel (2006).

4. For analysis on how North Korea has increased its capabilities in command and control of missile forces by forming a missile corps, see Bermudez (2005).

5. For an excellent analysis of increases in numbers of long-range systems deployed along the DMZ beginning in the late 1990s, see the testimony of General Thomas A. Schwartz (2000), commander USFK; for specific estimates on the number of long-range artillery systems North Korea has forward deployed on or near the DMZ, see Bermudez (2003); for information regarding the number of long-range artillery systems along the DMZ that can specifically target Seoul, see Macintyre (2003).

6. For more on strategy, tactics, and capabilities of North Korean Special Operations Forces, see Kaplan (2006) and GS (1996).



During the Roh administration the ROK government refused to acquire antimissile systems capable of defending the ROK from the more than 600 Scud missiles in the North that target nodes all over South Korea. To exacerbate the situation, North Korea has now built, tested, and deployed an advanced version of the old Soviet SS-21 (known as the KN-02).<sup>7</sup> This is one of the key examples where the transformation of the ROK military as directed by the Blue House during the Roh administration in essence failed to take into account the very threat that it was supposed to be built to deter and defend against. During the Roh administration, South Korea agreed to purchase 48 secondhand PAC-2 Patriot systems from Germany—systems that will be sadly lacking in their ability to shoot down Scuds, according to the *Korea Herald* on 30 May 2007. According to sources in the South Korean press (Jung S. 2008f), these systems are now being deployed to some locations in the ROK. In my view it should be stressed that the PAC-2 system will be highly ineffective in either providing deterrence against a Scud missile attack or in actually being capable of shooting down the missile. During the Roh administration, high-level U.S. officials repeatedly advised the South Korean government of just this fact.

During the current Lee administration, the South Koreans have taken important steps to remedy their land-based ballistic missile defense, but these are only preliminary steps. Defense Industry Daily reported on 4 March 2008 that the South Korean government has now begun preliminary efforts to buy up to 48 PAC-3 fire systems (the PAC-3 system is widely considered to be much more effective than its PAC-2 predecessor in bringing down Scud and No-dong missiles), at least some of which will be deployed by 2012. In addition, *Hankyoreh Ilbo* on 8 July 2008 reported that the South Koreans are considering purchase of X-band radar, an essential element of missile defense and a system that uses advanced technology. These are both important initial steps that the ROK government needs to take in order to deter and defend against missile attacks from North Korea. But these are only initial steps. As it stands right now the only missile defense systems on the peninsula that are truly capable of defending against a missile attack are the PAC-3 Patriot systems currently manned, maintained, and operated by the U.S. Army. *Chosun Ilbo* reported on 24 August 2006 that 64 of these systems were currently deployed in South Korea.

The Japanese model serves as an excellent example of what South Koreans can expect if they build a missile defense system that forms a realistic deterrent and defense against possible North Korean attack. The Japanese Navy successfully

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7. For more on the numbers and capabilities of North Korean Scud and KN-02 missiles, see Jung S. (2007a).

conducted its first test of the SM-3 (ship deployed) interceptor missile in December 2007. The Japanese are building a two-tier missile defense system in close cooperation with the United States. The SM-3 will be launched from Aegis-class ships to intercept missiles at high altitudes, and the PAC-3 systems (deployed on land bases) will intercept missiles at lower altitudes, reported *Chosun Ilbo* on 19 December 2007. Japan plans to deploy 36 SM-3 missiles between 2007 and 2010 on four Aegis-class ships and also plans to deploy 124 advanced-capability PAC-3 interceptor missiles by 2010 on several bases and key locations throughout their country. Finally, Japan has already deployed X-band radar (Claremont Institute 2008). Thus far, according to *Chosun Ilbo* on 21 December 2007, the South Korean government has made no plans to purchase the SM-3 system (the preliminary purchase plans for PAC-3 missile systems are for many fewer systems than Japan's although the threat from North Korean missiles is higher) for their own Aegis-class ships (known as the King Sejong-class destroyers) and has not agreed to join the U.S. missile defense system—a carryover from the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations.

Japan and the United States currently man what is known as the bilateral joint operations center to coordinate and share missile defense information in a timely manner. During the North Korean missile firings of July 2006, the United States and Japan exchanged information in a timely manner through an interim coordination facility located at Yokota Air Base (DOS 2007; Little 2007). Indeed, Bush administration officials commented that having the missile defense system (land borne and sea borne) ready in and around Japan during 2006 was a significant factor in allowing the president to decide not to destroy the Taepo-dong 2 missile before it could be launched; thus, escalation of what was already becoming a regional crisis was avoided. John Rood, acting under secretary of state for arms control and international security, remarked on 11 March 2008: “We didn’t have to seriously consider options like preemption or overwhelming retaliation. We had a defense, and we were content to use that defense, and it was a way of not contributing to the crisis being larger” (Boese 2008).

The reason behind Seoul’s failure to purchase a modern missile defense system with the capabilities necessary to truly deter the North Korean threat is most certainly not a lack of encouragement from the United States. In fact, during the Roh administration General B. B. Bell (2007a), then the commander of USFK, stated, “The Republic of Korea must purchase and field its own TMD system, capable of full integration with the U.S. system. The regional missile threat from North Korea requires an active ROK missile defense capability to protect its critical command capabilities and personnel.” This assessment continues to be the view of the current commander of USFK, General Walter

Sharp, who stated in congressional testimony that South Korea should build a “layered” missile defense system (probably a reference to the same type of system that is currently being built and deployed by Japan) and should look to being interoperable with the U.S. global missile defense shield (also a possible reference to the arrangement between U.S. and Japanese missile defense forces). General Sharp also stated, “in the short term, South Korea must develop a systematic missile defense solution to protect its critical civilian and military command capabilities, critical infrastructure and population centers” (Jung S. 2008d). During Lee’s successful campaign for president, the *Korea Herald* in a special edition in December 2007 reported that Lee stated that, if elected, his government might reconsider the Roh government’s stance on missile defense. If South Korea is to be capable of defending itself against a missile attack from the North, significant steps must be taken to initiate this policy.

Missiles are not the only North Korean threat against the South that has evolved since the mid-1990s. The biggest is one that was largely ignored or at best underrated during the Roh administration: the necessity to acquire an independent, modern, robust, C4I system (command, control, communication, computers, and intelligence)—a system capable of being fully integrated with U.S. systems and interoperable servicewide (joint) within the ROK military. This is critical now as the United States has nearly completed the transitioning of 10 major security operations from USFK to the South Korean military. The 10th and last mission (search-and-rescue operations with the U.S. Air Force that will now be conducted with ROK forces in the lead role) is scheduled to be transitioned in the fall of 2008 (Jung S. 2008b). Of key importance here is the fact that in 2005 the ground-based mission of providing counterfire against North Korean artillery (including the long-range systems) was handed over to the South Korean Army. Up until that time the mission had been handled by the Second U.S. Infantry Division, which was equipped with 30 multiple rocket launcher systems and 30 M109A6 Paladin self-propelled howitzers (Kim and Lee 2005).

The relationship of C4I to this artillery mission is quite simply a matter of life or death. Integration of these systems into a modern C4I system means that when they are operating in counterbattery mode they will have a quick reaction time and also the ability to identify the location of North Korean artillery units with radar and take them out just as the enemy systems have been fired or are about to be fired. A lack of this capability means the South Korean systems that replaced the U.S. systems are simply guns that cannot react rapidly enough to target North Korean systems in a timely manner and thus protect allied forces, Seoul, and the seat of government (Yun 2005). This becomes even more a matter

of concern if one addresses the issue of integrating counterbattery fire with allied airpower. Without a modern C4I system (as Korea's U.S. allies have) this is next to impossible and, in fact, severely degrades the South Korean capability to target North Korean systems and quickly destroy them.

To be sure, Lee Myung-bak pledged during his campaign to turn the South Korean military into an efficient, high-tech force by establishing a network-centric capability. There are already signs that this is beginning to happen. During August it was announced that the United States and South Korea had reached an agreement on the ROK military acquiring the Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). The Global Hawk system is an advanced, long-range, long-dwell-time aircraft, and it can transmit its data via satellite to forces on the ground.<sup>8</sup> There have been other efforts to upgrade C4I for ROK forces, but they thus far have proven to be too little, too late. One example of this is the Koreasat 5 (also called the Mugunghwa 5), which serves as a combined civil and military communications satellite, according to *Donga Ilbo* on 23 August 2006. Although this is certainly a step in the right direction, thus far this system has proven to be purely experimental, not integrated into a national information architecture where the military is thoroughly integrated with the national command authority (such a system and integration do not exist), and unlikely to meet even the basic needs of either an independent or integrated C4I system.

To put a finer point on it, the South Korean military (and its decision makers in government) continues to depend on the United States for almost all strategic information. In fact, at least for now, ROK forces are also heavily dependent on U.S. systems for much of their tactical battlefield information.<sup>9</sup> South Korea holds a significant edge in integrating, interpreting, processing, and utilizing battlefield information (such as the movement of forces, activities of missile units, and mechanized forces) over North Korea—especially on forces that are not near the DMZ—only because of the many high-tech C4I systems that the United States currently staffs, maintains, and deploys to the Korean peninsula (or off-peninsula) as part of its obligations in the ROK-U.S. military alliance (Kim M. 2008).

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8. Reported by *Chosun Ilbo* on 11 August 2008, <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200808/200808110007.html>, and by StrategyPage.com on 12 August 2008, [www.strategypage.com/htm/htintel/articles/20080812.aspx](http://www.strategypage.com/htm/htintel/articles/20080812.aspx).

9. For details of specific U.S. systems that South Korea depends on to provide both strategic and tactical battlefield and potential battlefield information and the current gaps in South Korea's military information systems, see Yun (2006).

For the third element of the North Korean asymmetric threat—Special Operations Forces (SOF)—the role of C4I is important for South Korea’s military in defending against North Korean SOF and in working together with U.S. allies in order to respond or deploy in any force-on-force conflict. The former commander of Special Operations Command Korea, Brigadier General Simeon Trombitas (2007), supports this assessment: “Constructing a bilateral C4I sharing capability with a common architecture is critical for interaction with our ROK counterparts to increase the synergy between our forces and enhance command and control.”

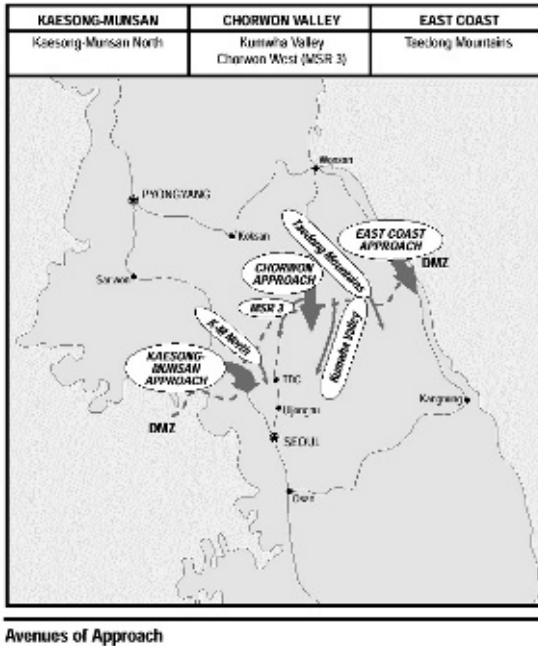
Another important factor must be addressed if one is to discuss South Korea’s current capability to counter the North Korean SOF threat. This is the airlift of South Korea’s own elite special forces and airborne brigades. South Korea currently has seven special forces brigades (all airborne) in its army and five independent brigades (two infantry and three counterinfiltration). Other smaller units also would require airlift in any conflict or contingency. These are among the ROK’s most elite forces, and they are among the best trained in the world—but without airlift they cannot get to where they need to go to conduct their vital missions. The South Korean Air Force transport fleet is currently lacking in its capability to conduct this mission. There are only 10 C-130Hs in the ROKAF inventory and 15 smaller, Spanish-designed, twin-engined CN-235Ms (So 2002). Thus, as it stands right now, a major source of airlift for the ROK special forces and other airborne units (because of capabilities lacking in the ROKAF) is the U.S. Air Force. These two issues (C4I and airlift) must be addressed and compensated for in order for the South Korean military to truly be able to counter the North Korean SOF threat in an independent way. Thus, as the Lee administration looks to the future, these are important acquisition and integration issues that will have to be addressed.

I have addressed only three key threats from North Korea—a triad of asymmetric threats if you will. North Korea has been able to successfully integrate these capabilities into its military forces as resource constraints have limited the training and ultimately some of the readiness of its more conventional traditional ground forces. But one must keep in mind that during a full-scale force-on-force conflict these asymmetric forces would likely be able to create gaps and vulnerabilities in ROK and U.S. military forces defending South Korea that would then enable less-capable—but still deadly—DPRK forces to move into these gaps and attack key nodes, causing significant damage in the essential early hours and days of any war. This is an important aspect of analyzing the threat that must be (and likely is) included in any planning for conflict on the Korean peninsula. One has only to look at the unique landmass of the Korean



peninsula along the DMZ to realize the narrow invasion corridors into South Korea provide opportunities that can be exploited (see *Figure 1*).

**Figure 1: Korean Invasion Routes**



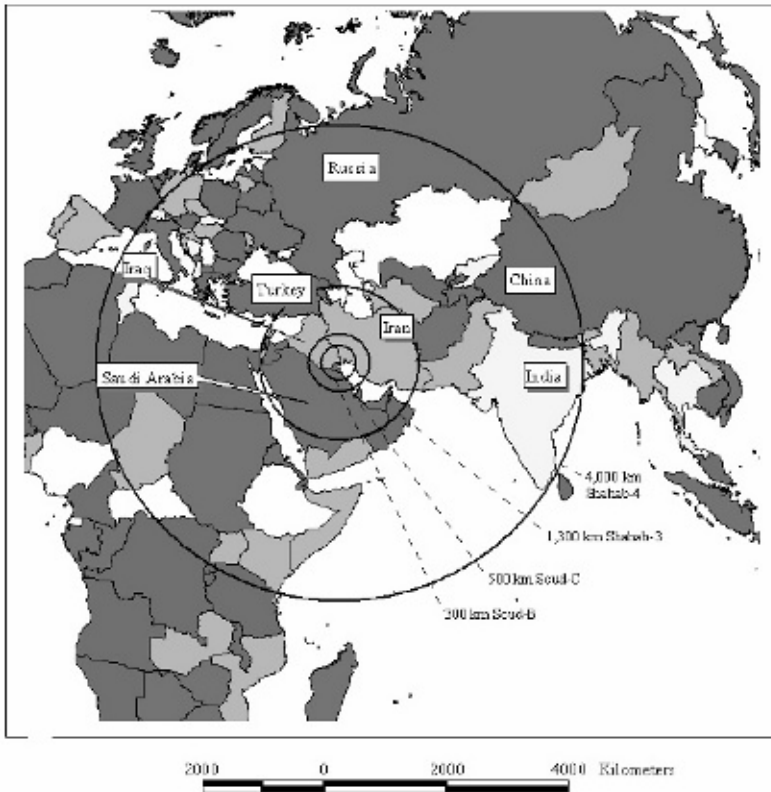
Source: North Korean Country Handbook, U.S. Department of Defense, May, 1997, URL: <http://www.dia.mil/publicaffairs/Foia/nkor.pdf>

Other issues of the current ROK transformation are important as well as South Korea deals with challenges related to development and integration with U.S. forces. One that I would like to discuss here is the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—an issue that is likely to be a source of continuing debate as the Lee administration looks to its immediate national defense and its alliance with the United States. The reason this is so important is because of the threat that North Korea poses to regions outside of Northeast Asia through its proliferation of a variety of weapons systems, particularly missiles. Pyongyang has shown a singular proficiency in its ability to proliferate missiles, missile components, and missile technology to nations in both the Middle East and South Asia. The result is a serious threat to the status quo in these regions and often a ratcheting up of tensions.

One has only to look to the recent example of Iran to understand why PSI is so important. North Korea sold 18 Taepo-dong X (also known as the Musudan) ballistic missile systems (a system based on the old Soviet SS-N-6 design) to

Iran in 2005 (Ben-David 2005). According to press reports, Iran successfully conducted a test-launch of this system during 2006. The missile is reported to have a range of up to 4,000 kilometers (Vick 2006; Rubin 2006). As shown in **Figure 2**, Iran now has the capability thanks to missile systems acquired from North Korea (all of the systems on the map were acquired from North Korea) to threaten not only Israel or other nations in its own region but NATO forces in Europe as well (HPSCI 2006).

**Figure 2: Ranges of Iran's Missiles**



Source: Andrew Feickert, "Missile Survey: Ballistic and Cruise Missiles of Selected Foreign Countries," Report no. RL30427 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 26 July 2005).

South Korea during the Roh administration refused to participate actively in PSI, and most agree that the key reason was likely a reluctance to join in activities that would hurt reconciliation efforts with North Korea.<sup>10</sup> According to a special edition of the *Korea Herald* that came out in December 2007, before Lee Myung-bak assumed the leadership of South Korea, aides were stating at the time that

10. For more analysis on South Korea's role in the PSI, see Kim Myung-jin (2006).

Lee might reconsider South Korea's stance on PSI and take a more active role in it—particularly if North Korean nuclear provocations were to intensify. Given the current state of affairs with the six-party talks and North Korea's continuing proliferation to other rogue states such as Syria, one hopes that this will happen (J. Kim 2008; Harden 2008; DNI 2008; Henry 2008). This would in my view be a welcome decision in Washington.

In fact, the United States has renewed calls for South Korea to take an active role in the PSI. At a media roundtable reported by *Chosun Ilbo* on 29 May 2008, John Rood, acting under secretary of state for arms control and international security, stated, "We would certainly encourage them [South Korea] to join, and we've engaged in a number of discussions with them." Rood also stated, "The present government in Seoul is, I think, reviewing the issue. We will await the outcome of that." Indeed, one of the key ways that Seoul can contribute to and strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance would be to take a more active role in the PSI. Such a move would also likely serve to hamper Pyongyang's proliferation to dangerous regions of the world.

### **III. Can the ROK Government Pay for Needed Capabilities?**

If South Korea truly is to be capable of self-reliant national defense in coming years, it must initiate the programs and policies—among others—addressed earlier in this paper. The difficulty is that this will be an expensive effort and one that is likely to put a severe strain on an economy in South Korea that is already experiencing difficulties.

President Lee recently addressed two global issues that are having a profound effect on the South Korean economy—soaring oil prices and global crop shortages. While on a visit to the city of Pusan during July of this year, Lee stated, "The economy is heavily dependent on exports. Therefore, these factors make it challenging for the government to find the right solutions. But we are people who tend to become strong and united when times are extremely tough" (Kang H. 2008). The effects of rising prices for fuel and food have already had an impact on the South Korean military. In fact, according to press reports, in July of 2008 the South Korean military was forced to reduce exercises to save energy. Flight training hours for pilots are to be reduced, with some of the training being made up on simulators; the army has made plans to reduce by 30 percent its field training exercises using tactical vehicles, and the navy will reduce 27 percent of its training—to include slowing down the speed of its vessels training at sea (Jung S. 2008c).

There is also likely to be a direct impact on another important issue for South Korea's military forces—Defense Reform 2020, Seoul's transformation plan to upgrade and modernize its forces to prepare for independent national defense capabilities. According to recent press reports, the transformation plan, set to be finished by 2020, may end up undergoing extensive revision. The primary reason for the drastic overhaul of the reform package is budget shortfalls, according to many military experts and defense officials in South Korea. Some experts have predicted a further decrease in defense expenditures for the plan. One of the first programs that might be axed as a result of these budget shortfalls is the Global Hawk UAV program. The South Korean government might quite simply be unable to afford the world's most sophisticated high-altitude UAV.

The budgetary problems inherent in Seoul's current military transformation plan could have other ramifications. First, transformation might end up getting pushed back to a finish date of 2025. Second, the current schedule for systems acquisition and troop cuts is assessed by many experts to be inadequate to account for North Korea's asymmetric capabilities. And third (and perhaps most important), many military experts also assess that the defense reform did not include required arms procurement plans and security measures for Seoul's transition to independent wartime OPCON of its forces, scheduled to occur in 2012 (Jung S. 2008a).

To exacerbate issues related to wartime OPCON and the transition of ROK and U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula in coming years, the planned cost of the U.S. base relocation of U.S. forces from bases near the DMZ and in Seoul to a "hub" at Camp Humphreys (subsidized by the ROK government and including the Land Partnership Program, a trade of U.S. bases in the western corridor for land expansion at Humphreys) is being projected to increase, according to South Korean Ministry of National Defense sources (Jung S. 2008j). These are important issues related to the transformation of ROK forces, and the issues of defense reform and base relocation will have an impact on the planned disestablishment of CFC and the establishment of two separate wartime operational commands.

### ***Burden Sharing***

Burden sharing has been a major source of contention during the past two years—starting under the Roh Moo-hyun administration and now continuing under the Lee Myung-bak administration. The most important aspect is the issue of non-personnel stationing costs (NPSC) for U.S. troops stationed in South Korea. In 2007 Seoul's contribution to the Special Measures Agreement (which

covers these costs) represented only 41 percent of the NPSC. During 2007, the commander of USFK, General B. B. Bell (2007a), stated that this percentage falls far short of an even cost-sharing agreement between allies, which would include a 50 percent NPSC contribution from both allies. These costs are usually used to pay for important alliance maintenance relating to the stationing of U.S. troops in Korea; they include labor costs for South Korean employees of USFK, the purchase of logistics and supplies, and the construction of military facilities. The failure of Seoul to make what many consider to be a fair contribution to these costs (in an era when U.S. forces are already dangerously stretched all over the world) could lead to dangerous cuts in force and military base maintenance (Lee 2007).

During July 2008, officials from the U.S. Department of Defense and the ROK Ministry of National Defense met in Washington and held talks (called the Security Policy Initiative) to discuss a variety of issues, including burden sharing. But at the end of the talks South Korean and U.S. officials were unable to narrow differences over how to share joint defense costs related to the maintenance of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula. During the talks U.S. officials again called on South Korea to increase funding for NPSC, bringing South Korea in line with Seoul's growing economy and increased responsibility for national defense. Officials from Seoul responded that their government wanted to provide military equipment and materials to the U.S. military instead of offering host-nation funds in cash (Jung S. 2008k).

As officials from the United States and South Korea prepared to meet and hold talks on cost-sharing issues in August 2008, the issue of 50-50 cost sharing for NPSC continued to remain a contentious issue. The meeting in August 2008 did not produce results that were equitable to both allies. Washington asked Seoul to pay 6.6 to 14.5 percent more during 2009, but South Korean officials countered that they were looking at a possible raise of a maximum of 2.5 percent, equal to the previous year's domestic inflation rate. Washington also asked Seoul to increase its portion of the cost to 50 percent on a long-term basis, but South Korean officials countered with setting Seoul's share at an "adequate and reasonable" level and to change the cost-sharing method from paying one lump sum to sending materials on a case-by-case basis (once again referring back to part of Seoul's offer during July 2008). Talks will continue, but the issue remains one that has been difficult for the two allies to reach agreement on. South Korea's share during 2008 accounted for 741.5 billion *won*.<sup>11</sup> If increased by 6.6 percent, this would be 790.4 billion *won*, and a 14.5 percent hike would be 849 billion *won*.

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11. \$1.00 = 1,082 *won*.



I earlier compared South Korea's policy and acquisition of missile defense systems with that of Japan's. I believe it is also useful to refer to the Japanese model when it comes to the issue of burden sharing. If one is to look at NPSC costs, the percentage of what Japan pays is significantly higher compared with South Korea's payments (Chanlett-Avery, Manyin, and Cooper 2006). Indeed, as the Japan-U.S. military alliance continues to transition, more than 8,000 of the 18,000 Marines currently in Okinawa will move to Guam. Tokyo has agreed to pay a significant portion of these costs (Halloran 2007). The Marines are expected to relocate by 2014, and, of the estimated \$10.27 billion cost for facilities and infrastructure development for the III Marine Expeditionary Force, Japan will pay \$6.09 billion (DOS 2006).

### ***Base Relocation***

Another important issue that certainly has fiscal implications for the United States and South Korea is that of base relocation. During the Roh administration the time line for consolidation of U.S. Army forces from several small bases and such large compounds as Yongsan (in Seoul) and Camp Casey to one hub at Camp Humphreys (near Pyongtaek) was pushed back to 2012 (Jung S. 2007b). But the relocation has run into numerous problems, not the least of which has been a continuing trend of cost overruns. According to recent press reports, the head of the U.S. base relocation office at the Ministry of National Defense, Maj. Gen. Park Byoung-hee, stated in August 2008 that "the sides are working to set the target year and to determine the exact cost of the project, but there still remains a difference of opinion on several issues" (Jung S. 2008i). Yonhap reported on 21 July 2008 that unnamed officials in Seoul have implied that the ongoing project is likely to be delayed (again) for at least a few months. This is another issue that will have an impact (along with the issue of a transformation of ROK forces that simply will not meet either the time lines or capabilities requirements set during the Roh administration) on the planned disestablishment of CFC and the corresponding establishment of two separate ROK and U.S. war-fighting commands.

## **IV. Wartime Operational Control: The Right Move at the Right Time?**

Issues discussed earlier have direct relevance to and are also directly tied in with perhaps the most sensitive issue to be discussed here—the issue of wartime operational control. According to an agreement reached between Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Minister of National Defense Kim Jang-soo in 2007, CFC is to be disestablished, and the ROK and U.S. militaries on the Korean peninsula will continue to function as allies with two separate wartime

operational commands effective 17 April 2012 (DOD 2007). Yonhap reported on 26 February 2007 that the issue of ROK and U.S. forces fighting a conflict with North Korea under two separate military commands has been a huge source of contention; most ROK retired military officials and generals have been openly critical of the change in wartime OPCON because they believe it is both premature and dangerous to the security of South Korea. The Web site Geostrategy-Direct.com reported on 30 April 2008 that during the early months of 2008, U.S. officials reportedly said that ROK forces were making progress in C4I improvements that would be necessary in order to operate under separate wartime command beginning in 2012, but other officials admitted that the South Korean R&D budget increased only nominally compared with budgets of the three previous years. Indeed, tough financial times ahead may mean more of the same in the future.

Despite the outcry from many in South Korea—particularly now that the left-of-center government is no longer in power—several U.S. officials have stated definitively that postponing the date for separate war-fighting commands (and ending the successful tenure of CFC) is simply not an option. Yonhap News reported on 21 December 2007 that the outgoing U.S. ambassador to South Korea, Alexander Vershbow, stated this when he said, “As I said, the strategic transition plan is already agreed upon and it is being implemented.” In my view this is a big mistake. Although complete self-reliance and its own separate wartime command may seem like the right thing to do in the long run, it will quite simply be impossible to realistically complete all of the initiatives important for assuming wartime OPCON by 2012 or to have anything close to a self-reliant South Korean military by that time. One of the key reasons for this is because the threat from North Korea and the North Korean government’s intentions to use that threat have not subsided.

A special edition of the *Korea Herald*, published in December 2007 during Lee Myung-bak’s campaign for the presidency, reported that Lee’s aides hinted that Lee might consider a proposal to the United States that would push back the dismantlement of CFC for two or three years unless North Korea discards its nuclear weapons programs. Thus, the issue may not yet be dead. Kim Tae-woo, a researcher at the Korean Institute for Defense Analysis, recently said, “Lee has been seeking to take a more cautious position on the wartime operational control transfer.” Kim further commented, “Now we must see whether Lee can convince the United States to change its mind, though it seems to be a long shot at the moment” (Jung H. 2008). Important and powerful members of the National Assembly also support pushing back the date for transfer of wartime OPCON. Not the least of these is Kim Hak-song (2008), the current chairman of the 18th

ROK National Assembly's National Defense Committee; Kim opposes OPCON transfer before North Korean denuclearization.

Other important issues must also be considered before CFC is disestablished and the United States and South Korea assume separate wartime OPCON of their forces. The first is unity of command. The loss of a unified command (which is what exists currently) is likely to curtail the high degree of coordination that exists between ROK and U.S. forces today. This is also likely to lead to higher casualties—including among South Korean civilians. The other issue is political. The change in wartime OPCON could lead to misperceptions about the ability of the ROK military to conduct a war against the North on its own, and in the United States this could also lead to reduced congressional and public support for a large-scale presence of U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula.<sup>12</sup> This would be extremely dangerous for South Korea's security and stability and would not bode well for regional security as a whole, particularly given the fact that some in the U.S. Senate have recently shown an impatience with the alliance, perhaps because of U.S. obligations elsewhere.

Ultimately, all of the issues addressed in this paper are tied to the issue of wartime OPCON. South Korea is facing tough economic times. This means the government is unlikely to be able to fund many of the important initiatives that are necessary to implement independent capabilities. These capabilities were not planned responsibly in the previous ROK presidential administration, which unwisely downplayed the North Korean threat. The same fiscal concerns facing ROK military acquisition programs also have an impact on Seoul's ability to complete infrastructure initiatives associated with moving U.S. forces from key locations in the ROK to the major hub at Camp Humphreys. USFK plans to transform into Korea Command, as approved by the United States, beginning in 2010 and to begin transferring units down to Camp Humphreys as barracks and other facilities are built.<sup>13</sup> If that is delayed, there will be problems. Because all these issues are tied together and because things simply do not seem to be moving on schedule, what could happen is that the United States will delay for a few years OPCON transfer for completion of facilities at Camp Humphreys. This would also give the ROK military time to build up its capabilities in a more realistic, pragmatic manner that would better enable it to face the threat from the North.

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12. For additional analysis on the political and military dangers of initiating an early OPCON transfer, see Klingner (2008b).

13. For details about how ROK and U.S. forces will launch their separate war-fighting commands, see Jung S. (2008g).

## V. Conclusions

In my view, four basic pillars of cooperation will enhance the current status quo. In previous papers I have addressed the four basic pillars of cooperation, both domestically and with the United States, that the South Korean government can look to as leaders confront the threat of a rogue state to the north and the tough fiscal realities they will continue to face because of challenging economic times (Bechtol 2008):

**Closer technological cooperation.** This should involve bigger, more robust, longer-range combat, communications, and intelligence systems. Government and business must initiate joint ventures that will enable quality focused programs that will upgrade defense capabilities and surpass threat systems while they downplay vulnerabilities that are likely to occur as CFC is dissolved.

**Closer intellectual cooperation.** Intellectual cooperation should focus on a renewed and continuing commitment to combined doctrine, training, and education.

**Closer ideological cooperation.** Ideological cooperation includes a newfound commitment to democracy, human rights, and free-market economies as South Korea and the United States reaffirm an alliance that faced tough times under the previous administration in the Blue House.

**Fiscal commitment.** A commitment to support the other three pillars can be accomplished through defense appropriations that enable realistic, threat-based acquisition of important systems that will be needed for truly independent national defense capabilities.

As South Korea looks to improve its national defense, the United States can also play a major role—that of a strong supporting ally. By allowing the ROK government time to build up its capabilities and improve its forces—perhaps by delaying the implementation of a change to wartime OPCON—Washington will prove that it supports its loyal military ally and seventh-largest trading partner (Business Roundtable 2006). To any analyst who has done a thorough analysis of current correlation of forces, opposing firepower ratios, or terrain-dominated strategy, it is obvious that South Korea’s military will continue to need the help of the United States in meeting the North Korean threat. The tyranny of proximity dictates that one can hardly draw any other conclusion. Lt. Gen. Edward Rice of USFJ recently remarked: “North Korea continues to be a regime that is not very transparent in terms of their capabilities and their intentions” (AP 2008).

Thus, the United States and South Korea must reinforce an alliance that will continue to contribute to the security of the Korean peninsula and the stability of Northeast Asia as a whole.

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