

2012

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JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

ASIA AT A TIPPING POINT:
KOREA, THE RISE OF CHINA,
AND THE IMPACT OF
LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

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Vol. 23

 **KEI** KOREA
ECONOMIC
INSTITUTE
한미경제연구소



Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies

2012

Volume 23

Editor-in Chief:

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Security Challenges on the Korean Peninsula

The View from South Korea

TAEHO KIM

Change over continuity is now the tenor of the times on the Korean peninsula and beyond. For one thing, the year 2012—dubbed “Super Year”—has begun with election-year politics in many capitals including Beijing, Moscow, Seoul, Taipei, and Washington. For another, the passing of Kim Jong-il has added a new uncertainty to the future of the Pyongyang regime as well as to a host of salient peninsular issues. For still another, in tandem with the beginning of Pyongyang’s self-acclaimed kangsung daekook (“strong and prosperous great country”) drive this year, recent adjustments in the defense planning of main actors—such as South Korea and the United States—will likely unleash new dynamics in peninsular and regional security.

It should be noted at the outset that four major powers—the United States, China, Japan, and Russia—not only have shared interests in a growing number of issues revolving around the Korean peninsula and a broader East Asia, but they are also significantly affected by major developments and trend lines on the peninsula. In 2010-11 alone, such unforeseen incidents as the sinking of the Cheonan (March 2010), the artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island (November 2010), and the sudden death of Kim Jong-il (December 2011) have shown that the peninsula remains a highly volatile place, thus raising the stakes for all major powers concerned.

Not only do the United States and China continue to be the two most influential outside actors on the peninsula, but Korean issues also occupy a central place in their crowded bilateral and regional agenda. Moreover, now that China’s growing wealth and influence are increasingly felt in the region and beyond, the Republic of Korea (ROK), like most other regional states, has to live up to the emerging security and economic challenges of balancing its ties with both countries. It is this larger context of “competitive interdependence” between the United States and China, against which major trends and recent developments on the peninsula should be assessed.

The depth of changes on and around the peninsula calls into question some basic assumptions on which we have previously predicated our expectations concerning the interactions between the four major powers—the United States and China, in particular—and the two Koreas. While the direction and durability of recent changes at the regional and peninsular level remain uncertain, it is prudent to fall back on the enduring patterns and underlying contexts to shed light on new developments.

This essay analyzes the ROK’s emerging strategic framework, covering five distinct issue areas: the domestic context, inter-Korean relations, the growing yet troublesome ties with Beijing, the strategic alliance with Washington, and preparations for a multi-task, high-tech fighting force. The thrust of this essay is not to examine the details of each issue area per se, but to identify their overall trends, major debates, and likely outcomes so as to illuminate the future patterns of change on the peninsula—as envisioned by the South Koreans themselves.

Two caveats are in order. For one, while the ROK maintains a set of long-term national security objectives, its policy priorities and choices differ from one administration to another. For this reason, the incumbent Lee Myung-bak administration’s framework document—i.e., *Global Korea: The National Security of the Republic of Korea*—will be used here to assess the changing contexts of its policy priorities.¹ For the other, in the

aftermath of the Cheonan sinking, the ROK government has taken several important steps to improve its own security. One prominent example is the establishment of such new institutions as the Commission for National Security Review, whose main tasks include revision of Defense Reform 2020, redefinition of the security threat, and a more responsive crisis management system. The Yeonpyeong shelling has only accentuated the need for a higher level of military preparedness to cope with a fuller spectrum of security challenges. Until the pending legislative bills and military reform measures are put in place, the arguments made here—especially those on defense reform—should be regarded as tentative.

THE ROK'S SHIFTING DOMESTIC CONTEXT

As befits a maturing yet fast-changing liberal democracy, South Korean society is being increasingly pluralized, divided, and even politicized. Throughout much of the authoritarian rule, the “conservative government vs. liberal society” divide was the defining characteristic of politics. After the democratization process began in the late 1980s and the so-called “386 generation” arose in the 1990s,² the political pendulum shifted to the left. In light of a new domestic consensus as well as the collapse of the Cold War international order, it stands to reason that the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun pursued an engagement policy toward North Korea (e.g., the June 2000 and October 2007 inter-Korean summits); promoted a strategy of “cooperative independence” with the United States, and redefined South Korea’s role in the region as “Northeast Asian balancer.” According to Byung-Kook Kim, however, “regional and peninsular politics moved in a direction unfavorable to Roh’s [revisionist] strategic experiments.”³

The political comeback of conservative rule under President Lee Myung-bak and the Grand National Party (GNP)—called Saenuri Party since February 2012—has resulted in an overhaul of the past two presidents’ major policy agenda. In sharp contrast to Kim’s “Sunshine Policy” or Roh’s “Peace and Prosperity Policy” toward North Korea, Lee has pursued, on the basis of “principles and consistency,” a policy of “Denuclearization, Opening-up, and 3,000,” which North Korea has flatly rejected as a ploy to destroy itself. For the past four years (2008-2011) inter-Korean relations have suffered several major setbacks—the Six-Party Talks ground to a halt, the Mt. Keumkang tour was discontinued, the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks caused crises, and the dispute over the dispatch of South Korean condolence delegations to the memorial services of the deceased North Korean leader led to further outrage, lasting into 2012. Inter-Korean relations have turned from bad to worse, as the Lee presidency draws to a close.

Declining support for the incumbent president and the ruling Saenuri Party is evidenced by a multitude of facts.⁴ The April 2011 special elections for three National Assembly seats and for the Kangwon Province governorship—which was widely regarded as a mid-term approval test for the administration—turned out to be an electoral disaster. To add insult to injury, in the October 2011 Seoul mayoral race the GNP candidate was resoundingly defeated by Park Won-sun, a former prosecutor and political novice. Mayor Park’s policies are close to those of

the Democratic United Party (DUP).⁵ Moreover, the Blue House has been engulfed in a series of scandals and bribery cases involving its senior staff members as well as family members ranging from Lee's press and political secretaries to the financial supervisory chairman to his elder brother.⁶

At the beginning of the 2012 South Korean politics are in crisis. The ruling Saenuri Party is run by an emergency committee chaired by the long-time presidential hopeful Park Geun-hye; it has suffered a series of bitter factional struggles and electoral defeats; and it is likely to face further decline in public support unless it comes up with new faces and platforms. The opposition DUP has fared no better. Even if it has succeeded in forming an anti-GNP coalition now headed by Ms. Han Myeong-sook, a prime minister under Roh, and is geared to prevent Ms. Park from becoming the next president, it faces an uphill battle in the April general election. Its results will significantly influence the DUP's chance for retaking presidential power and survival.

The emerging foreign policy and security implications are rather clear. Should the Saenuri Party win the December presidential election with a safe majority in the 300-seat National Assembly, the ROK's North Korea policy for the next five years is unlikely to diverge significantly from the current course, even if it will strive to build trust with and elicit cooperation from North Korea. As to its alliance ties with the United States, it is reasonable to assume that closer bilateral relations, better and more regular policy coordination on major peninsular and regional issues, and a shared vision for the international community are likely to be forthcoming.

If the DUP retakes power, its first task will be to "undo what President Lee has done to what his [two immediate] predecessors achieved," the newly elected DUP chairwoman Han avowed.⁷ Among the likely changes are a return to the engagement policy toward North Korea, a more balanced approach vis-à-vis the United States and China, and a wider diplomatic network beyond the traditional emphasis on the four major powers. In its continuing pursuit of a populist agenda, the opposition coalition is likely to divert the government coffers from defense to welfare spending.

All in all, the increasingly polarized nature of South Korean politics points to greater stakes in the upcoming presidential race. As any major policy issue is inextricably intertwined with others, it would trigger a whole set of policy readjustments in many issue areas. In particular, the ROK's North Korea policy and its alliance relations with the United States are major issues susceptible to change.

NORTH-SOUTH KOREAN RELATIONS: BROTHER ENEMIES?

North-South Korean relations as well as the "North Korean factor" remain highly sensitive issues not only to South Korean domestic politics but also to its ties with the four major powers. They touch upon a wide range of current and future security issues on the peninsula, ranging from the Six-Party Talks and denuclearization/counter-proliferation efforts to the future of the North Korean regime to peaceful Korean unification.

For the period under review the sinking of the navy corvette Cheonan and forty-six sailors aboard the ship turned out to be another sad chapter in the long history of armed conflict between the two sides. According to the final report of the ROK-led international investigation group tasked to find out the causes of the sinking, it was a DPRK-made torpedo (MS-19) launched from a Yuno (or Yeono)-class submarine that caused the devastation. Among both substantial and circumstantial evidence, the group points to the whole propellant section of the torpedo recovered from the seabed where the ship sank, a strong indication of North Korean culpability.⁸

Pyongyang has flatly rejected any possibility of its involvement, offering instead to send its own team to investigate the wreckage. According to Pyongyang, moreover, the factors that directly affect the security of the Korean peninsula are “DPRK-US and DPRK-Japan hostile relations, US-Japan and US-south Korea military alliances, the attempt to build US-Japan-south Korea tripartite military alliance, long-term stationing of nuclear armed US troops in south Korea and the US military strategy aimed at containing China and Russia.”⁹ As to the Cheonan sinking, it has even argued “the US made such [an] absurd assertion [about the sinking,] which reminds one of a thief crying ‘Stop the thief!’” and “the US is invariably pursuing a hostile policy towards the DPRK to isolate and stifle it.”¹⁰

In the above statements, North-South relations are conspicuous by their absence; they are, in fact, in a nosedive. The prospects for an early resumption of the Six-Party Talks are slim as long as peninsular tensions remain unabated. The February 2012 deal in Beijing between Washington and Pyongyang on the temporary halting of the latter’s uranium enrichment activities as well as nuclear and long-range missile tests for “nutritional assistance” has again tantalizingly raised hopes for the resumption of the Six-Party Talks.¹¹ A new twist, however, is North Korea’s unexpected announcement in mid-March on the planned launch of a satellite atop a long-range rocket on or before the centennial of Kim Il-sung’s birthday, which falls on April 15.¹² In a curious yet familiar way North Korea has again identified the United States as the prime security threat to itself and the peninsula and its sole legitimate counterpart for talks.

The December 19, 2011 announcement of the passing of Kim Jong-il transpired in the post-Cheonan context of tense inter-Korean relations. The succession in the Kim family is a major event that has attracted keen attention but there is no way of knowing what actually goes on in Pyongyang. There are at a minimum three schools of thought on the future of heir apparent Kim Jong-un and his regime. One school points to 28- to 30-year-old Kim Jong-un’s rapid succession to his father’s official titles,¹³ China’s firm support for the younger Kim, the nonexistence in North Korea of organized opposition to his rule, and the political backing by his family members as well as by ranking party-military personnel. This orderly succession scenario assumes his eventual consolidation of political power, thanks to the “collective advisorship” or “collective interregnum.” As the DPRK is a socialist state cum feudalistic kingdom, the recent collapse of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa will not be repeated in North Korea, and that Kim Jong-un will be able to rule the country as another “great” leader, argue those who subscribe to this school.¹⁴

Another school has a long list of doubts and anxieties, including the younger Kim's leadership qualifications, his relations with septuagenarian military aides, economic problems, and diplomatic isolation. Specifically, they argue, any sort of collective leadership is inconceivable in such a dictatorial state as North Korea; its systemic weaknesses have little chance for future improvement; and in a state of "survival by instability" it must periodically rely on external instabilities and threats, which, in return, will exacerbate its internal and external difficulties. This school of thought, therefore, anticipates the continuation of tension-ridden inter-Korean relations and argues for the need to prepare for possible instability in North Korea.¹⁵

Still another school takes neither extreme views nor a middle-of-the-road position. It essentially argues for "short-term stability, long-term instability" in North Korea. Chinese Central Party School scholar Zhang Liangui, for example, points to the fact that there are no appreciable changes in post-Kim Jong-il North Korea as if he is still alive. This does not mean that the political succession is smooth and stable, Zhang continues, it just means that the younger Kim has not yet faced the hard test of consolidating his own power base or pursuing his own policies in the face of domestic and external challenges.¹⁶ Besides, as many observers have argued, how to resolve the economic problems without jeopardizing North Korea's survival—which in part depends on the state of Six-Party Talks—remains a moot question.¹⁷

Outside observers emphasize endogenous factors as the main causes for North Korea's external behavior, whereas the North Koreans themselves—as well as the Chinese officials and experts alike—stress exogenous factors to explain its external and internal behavior. Regardless of the source of its behavior, the situation in North Korea remains a significant factor in considering peninsular security, thus raising the stakes for all parties concerned.

A "STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP" WITH BEIJING?

That the ROK and China have since 1992 remarkably improved their bilateral relations in all major issue areas is beyond doubt. In economic terms, China has emerged as the ROK's "four No. 1s": its largest trading partner, its largest export market, its largest importing country, and its largest trade-surplus source. In 2011, for instance, the trade volume was \$220 billion with a surplus of \$47.8 billion in the ROK's favor.¹⁸ This is, indeed, music to the Korean economist's ears as its economy has, otherwise, remained stagnant for some time. On the political and diplomatic fronts as well, China and the ROK hold frequent high-level meetings on a bilateral and multilateral basis. As long as the current and future Chinese leadership prioritizes economic development, which depends, in part, on regional and peninsular stability, China would likely continue to emphasize "peace and stability" on the peninsula. As befits growing ties and frequent contacts, the official relationship was elevated to a "strategic cooperative partnership" (*zhanlue hezuo huoban guanxi*) in May 2008. While growing bilateral ties are commendable, this does not mean that the two sides are supportive of each other's major policy goals—especially when it comes to concrete issues and longer-term questions on

the peninsula. Included in this long list are such important questions as Korean unification, the Koguryo historical case, North Korean residents in China, and the end-state of the North Korean regime.¹⁹

In fact, the twenty-year ties between Seoul and Beijing have shown mixed results: a) uneven growth in different issue areas—the so-called “hot economy, cold politics”; b) rapid expansion in the number of actors and in the scope of their ties; c) the effect of the “rise of China” on their bilateral ties; d) the growing gap in their respective national power; and e) a widening gap between official rhetoric and reality.²⁰ It is in this changing context that whenever bilateral disputes arise, they tend to spur popular resentment toward the other side, as seen in the death of an ROK maritime policeman in late 2011 and in the repatriation of North Koreans from China in early 2012.

In a nutshell, the three most fundamental and longer-term questions in the ROK’s diplomatic and security relations with China are: a) In light of the U.S. role and influence in regional and peninsular security and of China’s growing importance to the ROK, how is it best to cope with the United States and its competition with China? b) How can the ROK reconcile its need for cooperation with China and, at the same time, its potential conflicts with China, as noted above? and c) What role would China actually play in the future of North Korea and the Korean peninsula? As a barrage of South Korean newspaper articles and commentaries criticized China’s attitude toward the Cheonan sinking as well as toward the ensuing ROK-U.S. combined naval exercises, one may ask this critical question: “Would China behave the same way once the unification process begins as it did in this crisis?”

China’s “military rise” is an issue of growing security concern to the ROK, but it is often viewed as of long-term nature. Of all factors that affect China’s calculus toward the peninsula the geostrategic and historical considerations remain most enduring and consequential. First, the peninsula is not only located closest to China’s capital but it also shares a 1,400-kilometer (880-mile) land border with China. Furthermore, Chinese strategists often perceive the peninsula as a “route” (*tonglu*) between the maritime and continental powers. Second, it is also in this peninsula that the fledgling PRC fought with the mighty United States sixty years ago. Before that, historical rivalry between China and Japan over the peninsula and the West Sea (Yellow Sea) also illustrates the strategic importance of the peninsula. Third, in China’s view, fast-growing economic ties between Beijing and Seoul testify to the validity of China’s ongoing reform and opening drive. Fourth, not only was traditional Korea part of the Sinocentric world order, but China’s potential to become a full-fledged great power or superpower will likely be tested again on this peninsula.

More specifically, China’s operational SSNs and SSBNs are not only harbored in the North Sea fleet but they mostly patrol in the Yellow Sea and the East China Sea. China’s future carrier battle groups, once they become operational, would also likely be located in the vicinity of the peninsula. China’s increasing number of modernized combat aircraft as well as of conventional missiles needs to be reckoned with, even if they are not necessarily targeted at the peninsula. More

immediate attention should be given to the PLA's rapid reaction forces (RRFs). By the present estimate, seven out of the PLA's eighteen group armies (GAs) are RRU or mobile forces (MFs), and four of them are located in the Beijing (38th and 27th), Shenyang (39th), and Jinan (54th) Military Regions (MRs). In light of the past patterns of China's use of force in a diplomatic crisis as well as the growing body of evidence for North Korea's internal weaknesses, they could be employed in a variety of future North Korean contingencies such as a humanitarian crisis, a large flow of refugees, or instability in the border areas.

China's "military rise" will continue to influence the security environment. In addition to military consideration, therefore, the ROK should work for the improvement of overall bilateral ties that can pave the way to reunification. As long as China's future position on the peninsula remains uncertain, the ROK must simultaneously pursue both "exchange and cooperation" and "anticipation and preparation" in case China changes its current course of "peace and development." A hedging strategy—as adopted by most regional powers—will remain the most reasonable approach for the foreseeable future.

If China's "benign and reliable" policy is not forthcoming and, in particular, when it becomes a more daunting military power with a campaign-level fighting capability, the ROK cannot help but further strengthen its defense ties with the United States. Not only the ROK, any regional states that are likely to be affected by the PLA's growing anti-access capability should take this into consideration. Avoiding any "containment" network, the individual states should be able to prepare for any possible disruptions in the regional balance of power through regular consultations, transparent planning, and joint exercises among themselves.

THE STRATEGIC ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE U.S. AND THE ROK

South Korea is a genuine middle power by any definition. Given its geographical location as well as its neighboring major powers, however, it is a relatively weaker power. To overcome its continuous plight, there are only two ways: "internal balancing" and "external balancing." The object of the latter should have a) no territorial ambitions, b) a will and capability to assist in time of crisis, and c) a proven historical record to be a benign power. The only country which meets the three conditions is the United States. Besides, it is imperative to ponder over how South Korea emerged from the ashes of the Korean War to become an economic powerhouse—achieving one trillion dollars in trade in 2011—with enhanced international stature. The essence of its external balancing is, therefore, to maintain a special relationship with the United States. In fact, the alliance between the ROK and the United States has been one of the most successful and enduring security ties in the post-World War II era. Their geographical and cultural distance notwithstanding, both countries have weathered political and economic storms in their growing bilateral ties. The balance sheet has been mutually satisfactory: the U.S. security commitment has helped the ROK to grow into a democratic, industrial state, while the U.S. has maintained a secure forward position at one of the world's strategic crossroads.

In the post-Cheonan context as well, Seoul has further strengthened its alliance ties with Washington. A train of such developments as U.S. support for ROK positions at the UN Security Council, the 2+2 meeting in Seoul, and the combined naval exercises indicates the Lee Myung-bak administration's closer ties with the United States and Japan. Additionally, the scheduled transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) in April 2012 has been adjusted to December 2015, reflecting changes in the ROK's post-Cheonan security environment.

Another dimension of the Cheonan crisis is the growing awareness of the importance of U.S.-China relations in peninsular security.²¹ In post-Cold War East Asia, China's rise has been a "strategic reality" to the United States and regional countries in their economic and diplomatic activities. Likewise, China's ascendancy could cause a change in the regional structure of power in which the United States maintains the leading and stabilizing role, a host of bilateral alliance and defense ties, and a set of economic and security objectives. It is in this context that what Michael McDevitt called "capabilities competition" between the United States and China should be seen.

Given China's recent series of more assertive foreign policy behavior—at a time when a more reassuring attitude is called for—such as its position on a civil nuclear agreement between Washington and Hanoi, its more confrontational behavior in the South China Sea, and its diplomatic row with Japan over a fishing boat collision, it stands to reason that neighboring countries are concerned about how China might use its new power and influence.²² In addition, in light of vast differences in strategic visions, political systems, social values, and regional objectives, it is logical to assume that the United States and China will remain divergent over peninsular and regional issues, such as a missile defense (MD) system, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), maritime safety, and "strategic flexibility." At the peninsular level future developments such as a North Korean contingency, the future status of the U.S. forces in Korea, and the strategic posture of a unified Korea are issues of great unknown consequences.

An intriguing question is whether closer ROK-U.S. alliance relations would invite a harsher reaction from China—thus detrimental to the ROK's relations with China—or would they be beneficial for China's overall posture toward it. As long as the Chinese government views the alliance as part of U.S. "containment" strategy and its position remains similar to that of North Korea, China is likely to take a critical stance toward the alliance, making peninsular and regional issues more difficult to resolve. The opposite—i.e., the ROK's distraction from the alliance—would be far more consequential for the ROK, however, possibly leading to a more independent yet isolated state without a reliable ally. It is, thus, in the interest of the ROK to maintain rock solid ties with the United States, notwithstanding the rise of China or their effect on the U.S.-China relationship.

At present, the U.S.-ROK relationship is officially termed "strategic alliance," a redundant label which emphasizes their shared values such as freedom, human rights, liberal democracy, and the market economy. Ties are built upon mutual trust, growing interdependence, and peace-building efforts at all levels. The

KORUS FTA, which entered into force on March 15, 2012, as well as the “Go W.E.S.T.” (Work, English Study and Travel) program for Korean youngsters are examples of continuing efforts to boost their maturing ties.

Changes in inter-Korean relations could have a significant impact on the future course of the ROK-U.S. security relationship. Recent domestic and external changes in the two countries have not only influenced the alliance, but they have also raised new issues or old issues in a different form which are endogenous to the alliance. While those issues have largely been subordinated to their national interests so far, they could become sources of strain for the alliance if long unresolved.

A MULTI-TASK, HIGH-TECH DEFENSE FORCE

The ROK’s defense plan not only reflects long-term strategic objectives, but it also builds on existing programs such as Defense Reform 2020, which is now under significant revision. In view of the continuing dual task of preparing for present-day threats as well as future uncertainties, the ROK armed forces are geared toward achieving a host of objectives including a technology-intensive fighting capability, a balanced, joint military structure, sharing of combined assets with the U.S. forces, and a higher level of responsiveness for a wide spectrum of nontraditional security threats.

These goals will be adjusted in accordance with changes in the security environment, many of which are unknowable at this time. Included in this category are: a) the future of North Korea and its nuclear program; b) the fluctuation of U.S.-China relations and its impact on the peninsula; c) uncertainties surrounding Chinese military intentions; and d) the emergence of unforeseen security threats in the region and beyond. The Cheonan crisis, for instance, has had a far-reaching impact on the defense planning of South Korea.

The most fundamental and comprehensive defense plan for the future shape of the ROK armed forces is the Defense Reform Basic Plan, 2011-2030 or the DR 307 Plan for short. Its primary purpose is to enhance the ROK armed forces’ independent fighting capability at the peninsula-level theater. It thus incorporates a gradual transition to the ROK’s military role as a leading force from the previous supporting one. The timetable has already been set as December 1, 2015 when the wartime OPCON is transferred to the ROK commander from its U.S. counterpart.

Four priority programs of the DR 307 Plan are worth mentioning. First, it aims to enhance the capacity to counter future North Korean provocations by striking the origins of provocations as well as its basis of support. This is a prime lesson learned from the Yeonpyeong shelling when the same types and level of weapons were used to prevent armed conflict from escalating. Any further provocations from the North would be met with a far greater level of retaliation, including air strikes. The creation of the Northwest Defense Command in June 2011 is geared toward defending the conflict-ridden islands near the Northern Limit Line (NLL) in the Yellow Sea.

Second, the DR 307 Plan will restructure the armed forces' upper-tier command and control system. The ROK has long maintained a dual command structure in which the defense minister carries the military administrative authority, whereas the joint chiefs of staff exercise military command. Under such structure each service chief has only limited authority over military administration, but not over military command. This will be changed into an integrated structure in which each service chief exercises both functions, allowing each service to develop its own information-gathering capability, a critical factor in responding to limited provocations from the North.

Third, the DR 307 Plan sets out a phased defense modernization drive to counter North Korean provocations by improving the joint nature of all services. For the first phase (2011-12) requisite weapon systems and equipment will be acquired to counter limited provocations from the North beyond the existing acquisition program. The second phase (2013-15) will necessarily focus on securing core capabilities in preparations for the OPCON transfer. The final phase of the DR 307 Plan (2016-30) envisions a multi-task, high-tech force to deal with future challenges, which are often interpreted as regional threats.

Fourth, it also points out the emerging need for the ROK armed forces to play a greater role in regional and global security. It not only suits the ROK-U.S. Joint Vision Statement, in which the alliance's regional and global scope is specifically mentioned, but the overseas experiences will doubtless help manage contingences which might arise on the peninsula. The Plan also specifies the continuing role of ROK peacekeeping operations around the world.

Far-reaching and ambitious as it might be, the DR 307 Plan has been pending at the National Assembly and is likely to be passed some time after the formation of a new legislature in April 2012. This has already caused a delay in the implementation of several reform measures such as the Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in the first phase, as noted above.²³ Only then can the ROK military restructure its organizations, acquire core capabilities, and execute exercises to achieve the Full Operational Capability (FOC) by December 2015.

In terms of preparing for present and future security challenges, the ROK's defense planning based on the principle of "limited defense sufficiency" should continue.²⁴ It means, among others, a minimum defense capability to deter and deny military provocations and to respond to small-scale conflict on and near the peninsula. In the near term, it should be able to cope with possible maritime conflict in the Yellow Sea on top of the existing military threat from North Korea. In the mid- and longer term it calls for a capability to raise the cost of military provocations, which depends upon a more independent intelligence-gathering capability, effective naval and air power, and a high-tech force.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion on five issue areas that touch upon Korean security, we may deduce several findings. One is the importance of the results of the 2012 elections for programs such as defense reform and relations with North Korea and the United States. While election politics everywhere focus mostly on the domestic agenda, the politicized nature of Korean society as well as the opposition's relentless critique of the incumbent administration (the so-called "politics of vengeance") is not reassuring, especially in view of the continuing North Korean threat as well as the need for a stable transition in the ROK-U.S. alliance in the years ahead.

Another is the persistence of a host of uncertain issues that involve the United States, China, and the two Koreas. Given the possibility of prolonged "competitive interdependence" between Washington and Beijing and their likely divergent interests over peninsular and regional issues, South Korea needs to continuously prioritize its strategic relationship with the United States over that with China, even if it should also build cooperation and confidence with China. As a corollary, South Korea should be able to reap the benefits of its U.S. alliance ties with the U.S. in addressing the growing importance of the "China factor" to itself.²⁵

Still another is the need for a two-sided strategy toward China. As it is entirely possible that China will remain a source of both despair and hope in realizing national objectives, South Korea needs to hammer out mid- to long-term policy plans toward China that encompass the Korean unification process. Its more immediate goal should be building cooperation and trust with China to raise the costs if and when the latter changes its emphasis on peace and stability on the peninsula. The quintessence of this strategy is to maintain exchanges and cooperation in select yet wider areas, while anticipating and preparing for a reversal of its present course toward the Korean peninsula—as perceived in South Korea in the aftermath of the Cheonan sinking.

It remains a daunting challenge for the Korean government to cope with a combination of domestic and external uncertainties—now and in the future. A series of recent developments beyond the peninsula including the global economic downturn, a shift in U.S. military strategy, and new leadership line-ups in major actors would invariably interact with inter-Korean relations. At a time of great change it is sensible for all those involved to weather the current, difficult phase on the Korean peninsula in a cooperative and prudent manner. This is the real litmus test for the viability of a peaceful Korean peninsula in the face of divergent and unrelenting national interests of the United States, China, and the two Koreas.

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4. For a brief analysis of the party's name change as well as its struggle for survival, see Stephan Haggard and Jaesung Ryu, "South Korea's Saenuri (nee GNP) in Transition," February 15, 2012 available at www.piie.com/blogs/nk/?p=4956.
5. The Democratic Party also changed its name to the Democratic United Party (DUP) in December 2011. Mayor Park Won-sun finally joined the DUP in February 2012.
6. Among a barrage of newspaper reports, see Editorial, *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 31, 2012.
7. See her acceptance speech on January 15, 2012 at the DUP's official web page (www.minjoo.kr/blog/9418). As to the "politics of vengeance," see the editorials of *Chosun Ilbo*, March 2, 2012 and *Dong-A Ilbo*, March 3, 2012.
8. See the final report of the international investigation group (September 10, 2010) available at www.mnd.go.kr.
9. A prepared speech text by a North Korean researcher at an international conference, which is believed to have been the first after the Cheonan crisis. Kwang Yong So, "Security and Confidence building on the Korean Peninsula," paper presented at "Regional Peace Building: The Korean Peninsula and North-east Asia" hosted by Lingnan University, Hong Kong, June 10, 2010.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See Kim Young-jin, "Seoul Says Steps Still Needed for 6-way Talks," *Korea Times*, March 1, 2012; Steven Lee Myers and Choe Sang-Hun, "North Koreans Agree to Freeze Nuclear Work; U.S. to Give Aid," *New York Times*, February 29, 2012. See also Ralph Cossa, "US-DPRK Agreement: Limited Progress, but no Breakthrough (Yet)," *PacNet #14*, March 2, 2012.
12. See Kang Hyun-kyung, "ROK, US Urge Halt to Rocket Plan," *Korea Times*, March 25, 2012; Song Sang-ho, "Allies Up Press on N.K. to Scrap Rocket Launch Plan," *Korea Herald*, March 25, 2012.
13. Although the North Korean media announced that Kim Jong-un was born in 1982, he is widely believed to have been born in 1984. As his grandfather Kim Il-sung was born in 1912 and his father Kim Jong-il in 1942, this scheme of things would make the year 2012 100th, 70th, and 30th anniversaries of their births.
14. Okonogi Masao has argued that compared with the more difficult circumstances Kim Jong-il faced after his father's death, his son has more than a fair chance for survival. See his "Kim Jong-un eui Saengjon Junryak," *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 10, 2012.
15. Victor Cha has noted that as the situation in North Korea is not "normal," and China's interests differ from those of South Korea or the United States, the latter two must pursue closer policy coordination. See his "North Korea: What Not to Do," *PacNet #1*, January 9, 2012. For North Korea's continuing military threats and the military dimension of its contingency, see Bruce E. Bechtol, Jr., "Understanding the North Korean Military Threat to the Security of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia: Declined or Evolved?" *Korea Observer*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Spring 2009), pp. 115-64; Bruce Bennet and Jennifer Lind, "The Collapse of North Korea: Military Missions and Requirements," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2011), pp. 84-119.
16. This is the essence of his comments at a Beijing conference, February 10, 2012. See also Renminwang, February 17, 2012 available at <http://world.people.com/GB/1032/17143066.html>

17. For a balanced yet representative view of this school, see Taewoo Kim, "Living with North Korea without Kim Jong Il: A South Korean Perspective," KINU Online Series CO 12-02, January 2012 available at www.kinu.or.kr. Kim is president of the Korea Institute for National Unification.
18. Data from the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT).
19. For a detailed analysis of the different positions on the salient peninsular and regional issues between the ROK and China, see Taeho Kim, "'Strategic Cooperative Partnership' between Beijing and Seoul? A Quest in Search of Reality," *New Asia*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp. 14-33.
20. The author is grateful to Professor Young Nam Cho at Seoul National University for insightful discussions on this subject.
21. For a succinct yet critical analysis on the *Cheonan* crisis and its impact on the strategic calculations of the United States and China, see Benjamin Schreer and Brendan Taylor, "The Korean Crises and Sino-American Rivalry," *Survival*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (February-March 2011), pp. 13-19.
22. On this issue of China's "responsible behavior," see for example Joseph S. Nye, "China Is Seriously Miscalculating," *Taipei Times*, March 16, 2010, p. 6; David Shambaugh, "Is China Ready to Be a Global Power?" November 10, 2009 available at www.brookings.edu/opinion/2009/1110.
23. Kang Choi at IFANS has offered an extensive analysis on the ROK's defense reform in its changing alliance ties with the U.S. See his "Challenges and Tasks in the Transformation of the ROK-US Alliance," *Korea Policy*, Vol. 9 (November/December 2011), pp. 24-31. Also see Kang Choi, "Maintaining the ROK-U.S. Alliance, and the Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance" available at www.eai.or.kr/data/bbs/kor_report/2011111412321876/pdf.
24. This is the author's term, which apparently is congruent with the ROK government's new post-*Cheonan* defense posture called "proactive deterrence." The latter term seems more targeted at the North Korean threats and has yet to be incorporated in the full report, which is in the making at the time of this writing.
25. Chung Min Lee has offered a similar yet comprehensive argument on South Korea's responses to the rise of China. See his "Coping with Giants: South Korea's Responses to China's and India's Rise," in Ashley Tellis, ed., *Strategic Asia 2011-12. Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers: China and India* (Seattle and Washington: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2011), pp. 161-91.



ASIA AT A TIPPING POINT: KOREA, THE RISE OF CHINA, AND THE IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS

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