

## **U.S. AND ROK STRATEGIC DOCTRINES AND THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE**

*David Straub\**

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*\*David Straub is Adjunct Professor at the School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University and formerly a U.S. senior foreign service officer specialized in Korean and Japanese affairs. The views expressed are entirely those of the author.*

## I. Introduction

The year 2006 witnessed increasing concern among both Americans and South Koreans that their alliance of more than 50 years might be in jeopardy. Differences between the two governments over the nature of the North Korean (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) regime and the challenges it posed—differences now openly acknowledged by South Korean leaders—raised fundamental questions about an alliance founded principally to deter and defend against a North Korean attack on the South. Meanwhile, the United States continued to reduce its troop levels in Korea, and the South Korean government decided to exercise operational control of its own forces in wartime, a responsibility the United States has held since the Korean War. While the U.S. and South Korean governments insisted publicly that the military measures were being taken in a cooperative manner, many South Koreans feared such steps would lead to a weakening of deterrence and possibly even the unraveling of the alliance. Within the region as well, the United States and the Republic of Korea differed in their basic approaches to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Japan.

Less pessimistic observers, however, suggested that the current troubles needed to be put in historical perspective. They noted that U.S.-ROK relations have rarely enjoyed smooth sailing for any extended period, and yet the alliance has survived and prospered. They pointed out that, historically, many conservative South Koreans have long been wary that the United States might abandon the Republic of Korea, and most South Koreans feel that the alliance was, and remains, unbalanced in favor of the United States. In the United States, concerns about authoritarian South Korean governments were a more serious danger to the alliance than the current U.S. incomprehension of ROK “naïveté” toward the North and anger at anti-American protests. How to deal with North Korea has often been a major issue in U.S.-ROK relations. The United States has conducted numerous troop reductions over the decades, which were controversial at the time but were soon accepted with no apparent loss of deterrence. U.S. officials have recognized for decades that the ROK felt its interests threatened by tensions between the United States and the PRC and that South Koreans harbored great fear of a resurgence of Japanese militarism.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the alliance today is indeed at greater risk than in the past owing to an accumulation of many strategic developments and domestic political trends in the United States and the ROK over just the past two decades:

- The end of the Cold War removed the communist ideological factor in U.S. strategic thinking about the Korean peninsula;
- The ensuing isolation and economic collapse of the DPRK made the North seem, especially to many South Koreans, much less of a threat and much more an object of national pity;

- The DPRK's pursuit of nuclear and long-range-missile programs was perceived as a much greater threat by the United States than by the ROK;
- South Koreans tend to regard the PRC's rapid economic growth more as opportunity than as threat; together with the PRC's military development, this has made them even more concerned about the effect on their country of any increase in U.S.-PRC tensions, much less the prospect of U.S.-PRC hostilities;
- Most South Koreans are concerned about the implications of Japan's rightward shift, and many are distressed by what they regard as U.S. support for, or at least acquiescence in, the trend;
- South Koreans feel less of a threat from global terrorism than do Americans, and many South Koreans believe that the U.S. response has been exaggerated and misdirected;
- The rise of a new generation in South Korea with views shaped by the struggle against ROK authoritarian governments in the 1970s and 1980s and the coming to power of progressives<sup>1</sup> as a consequence of the ROK's resulting democratization have produced a polity in South Korea with a more equivocal perspective on the U.S.-ROK alliance; and
- The coincidental trend in the United States toward Republican predominance magnified differences of worldview between the two countries.

In addition, some of these trends and differences have been highlighted and intensified by the personal styles of the current U.S. and ROK heads of state. President George W. Bush espouses a black-and-white approach to world affairs, while President Roh Moo-hyun sees many shades of gray, including in the U.S.-ROK alliance. Each country is deeply polarized internally, but President Bush generally represents a conservative viewpoint, and President Roh typically takes progressive stances. Moreover, the interplay between U.S. and ROK conservatives, on the one hand, and U.S. and ROK progressives, on the other, has resulted in a widening of the gap between the two countries and deepened internal polarization within each, but especially within the ROK.

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1. Left-of-center South Koreans reject the "left" label in reaction to its use by past, authoritarian ROK administrations to imply "pro-North Korean." In this paper, the author will therefore follow the ROK convention of using "progressive" and "conservative" to denote, respectively, the Left and the Right in South Korea.

With this as introduction, the author will seek to describe and analyze current U.S. strategic doctrine as it affects the Korean peninsula. This necessarily entails some treatment of ROK strategic doctrine because it is the degree of meshing of the two doctrines that will largely determine the usefulness, effectiveness, and durability of the alliance. The author will then discuss the impact of differing U.S. and ROK strategic doctrines for their alliance and their interests. Finally, the conclusion will consider prospects for the alliance and offer recommendations to make it a lasting force for peace and prosperity on the Korean peninsula, in Northeast Asia, and throughout the world.

## **II. U.S. Strategic Doctrine**

### *U.S. Global Strategic Doctrine*

In gauging the effect of U.S. strategic doctrine on the U.S.-ROK alliance, it is useful to note how much both U.S. and ROK strategic doctrines have changed in the short span of two decades. U.S. global strategic doctrine has been in flux especially since the terminal phase of the Soviet Union when U.S. policymakers, including some who were later to be instrumental in shaping the foreign policy of the administration of President George W. Bush, began looking toward the post–Cold War era (Mann 2004). Several policies and ideological and rhetorical approaches endured from that period through President George W. Bush’s inauguration in 2001:

- The United States sought to greatly outspend the USSR militarily so that the USSR would have no choice but to come to terms with the United States. With the USSR’s collapse, some U.S. policymakers formulated the notion of ensuring that the United States remain an unassailable global military power, so much more powerful than any conceivable combination of potential adversaries that others would not even seek to compete militarily with the United States. Initially rejected as policy during the administration of President George H. W. Bush, it would later be formally adopted by President George W. Bush as “military strength beyond challenge.”
- As a concept, mutually assured destruction was superseded by missile defense.
- With the collapse of the USSR, U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons was reduced, at least initially. U.S. military officials increasingly began to focus on achieving a “revolution in military affairs” (now generally referred to as defense “transformation”) through technological and organizational innovations to increase vastly the speed, agility, and lethality of U.S. conventional forces.

After 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush made further major modifications to U.S. strategic doctrine:

- He declared a global war on terrorism, which senior members of his administration have compared with the World War II fight against fascism (Cloud 2006). Both rhetorically and in practice, the military component in antiterrorism efforts was given greater weight relative to intelligence work, law enforcement, and diplomatic cooperation.
- President Bush stressed the danger that, owing to the existence of an “axis of evil,” irrational rogue states might attack the United States or its allies with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or proliferate WMD to undeterrable terrorist groups.
- New prominence was given to the concept of preemption.
- Along with the long-standing policy of nonproliferation, the more active measures included in the concept of counterproliferation were given new rhetorical and substantive stress in the president’s Proliferation Security Initiative of 31 May 2003.
- Promoting democracy, especially in countries with large Muslim populations, was given much greater rhetorical emphasis. This, it was argued, would reduce the threat of terrorism and bring stability to the Middle East. As the newly appointed secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice made democracy promotion a major element of her diplomatic transformation initiative and compared it with the rebuilding and reshaping of occupied Germany and Japan after World War II.
- President Bush said he would work with the international community where possible but stressed that the United States would act unilaterally if necessary. In practice, particularly in his first term, President Bush preferred “coalitions of the willing” rather than formal alliance relationships. He broke with international norms and treaties deemed to infringe upon U.S. sovereignty in unacceptable ways, and displayed considerable readiness to operate outside the United Nations framework.

These are impressively long lists, but they do not, by themselves, tell us definitively how much U.S. doctrine has changed. Some scholars have argued that there are actually major elements of continuity between President Bush’s post-9/11 strategic doctrine and doctrines of his predecessors and that the differences that do exist are chiefly of emphasis and rhetoric. Others have suggested that elements of President

Bush's strategic doctrine are "analytically defensible but unnecessarily provocative" (Dobbins 2006). One can argue, for example, that the United States and other countries have always at least tacitly reserved the right to take preemptive military action under certain conceivable circumstances.

In any event, leaders of the Bush administration themselves have argued that theirs is a new approach. They have stressed that 9/11 "changed everything." As author and journalist James Mann (2006) recently put it:

[Secretary Rice espouses] an interconnected set of ideas that make up the underlying justification for Bush's foreign policy: first, that the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks transformed international relations; second, that, as a result, many of the old assumptions about U.S. foreign policy should be thrown out; third, that the Bush foreign-policy team faces a task comparable to that of the Truman administration at the start of the Cold War, *to develop an entirely new doctrine for this new era*; and finally, that U.S. policy should be devoted to transforming the Middle East and bringing democracy to the region, a job that will take a generation. [Emphasis added.]

Perhaps most important, it is clear that many international observers, including South Koreans, perceive that President Bush is pursuing a very different global strategic doctrine. Numerous global opinion polls show a dramatic downturn in popular support abroad for the United States during the Bush administration, largely driven by unfavorable perceptions of U.S. strategic doctrine and its implementation. Foreign critics argue that their objections have been lent weight by the difficulties that the Bush administration has encountered in Afghanistan and Iraq after the occupations of those countries as well as the continuing apparent pursuit of full-fledged nuclear programs by the other two members of the axis of evil, Iran and North Korea, and the failure to apprehend Osama bin Laden.

### *Application of U.S. Strategic Doctrine in Northeast Asia*

The Bush administration's application in Northeast Asia of its strategic doctrine has had major implications for the ROK, primarily in regard to policy toward the DPRK, PRC, and Japan. It has had a great impact on U.S.-ROK military cooperation and on the size and configuration of United States Forces Korea (USFK).<sup>2</sup>

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2. It has also had significant implications for the ROK outside the region, including the Middle East—especially Iraq—South Asia, and global counterterrorism efforts, but a detailed discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

**Policy toward the DPRK.** In recent years, disagreement over how to deal with North Korea has posed the greatest threat to the strength and durability of the U.S.-ROK alliance. Perhaps more elements of the Bush doctrine apply to the DPRK than to any other regime in East Asia, especially since early 2002 when President Bush included North Korea in the axis of evil. (President George W. Bush's early policy toward the DPRK has been largely forgotten. Before 9/11, President Bush called for comprehensive bilateral negotiations with the DPRK in announcing the results of his DPRK policy review on 6 June 2001.) North Korea was a rogue state pursuing WMD and missile programs, which it might itself use against the United States or its allies or proliferate to terrorist organizations. It was led by a totalitarian dictator, about whom President Bush publicly expressed his loathing: a "pygmy" who could not be trusted to keep agreements.

Consistent with their fundamental view of the North Korean regime, U.S. leaders responded with a more determined pursuit of missile defense and eventually with the introduction of new counterproliferation measures under the Proliferation Security Initiative. President Bush also continued to hold open, at least rhetorically, the possibility of a preemptive or preventive attack ("no option is off the table") even after he said publicly (White House 2002) in Seoul in February 2002: "We have no intention of invading North Korea. South Korea has no intention of attacking North Korea, nor does America."

As time passed and the DPRK did not change course, the United States increasingly focused also on North Korea's lack of respect for the human rights of its own people and on its currency and cigarette counterfeiting and other illicit activities, including through the imposition of *de facto* financial sanctions. These "defensive measures" led many observers, including most South Koreans, to conclude that the Bush administration's real goal was to isolate, contain, and possibly topple the DPRK regime, and not, as U.S. leaders continue to assert, to seek a diplomatic resolution to the DPRK nuclear and other issues while enforcing U.S. law.

In insisting that it gave priority to a diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem, the Bush administration pointed to the six-party talks as an example of the United States taking a multilateral approach rather than being unilateralist as critics charged. In fact, a review of the circumstances of the six-party forum's establishment makes it clear that the U.S. policy, while multilateral in form, retained strong elements of unilateralism in substance.

The United States informed the DPRK in October 2002 of its knowledge of the North's covert uranium enrichment program and added that it was no longer prepared to hold talks with the North until it abandoned its uranium enrichment program. When the DPRK responded instead by unfreezing its declared nuclear facilities and



withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the White House had few options. Seoul would clearly have opposed a military option because of its belief in the efficacy of diplomacy and especially out of concern about possible North Korean retaliation involving the South; thus, the military and political risks to the United States of proceeding unilaterally would have been great. Moreover, many observers have suggested that the North Koreans had likely so dispersed and hidden their nuclear facilities and fissile material that an attack would have limited effectiveness in retarding North Korean efforts, much less in permanently ending its nuclear ambitions (Sanger 2006). Also, at the time—early 2003—the United States was focused on preparations for the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Some insight into White House thinking at the time may have been provided by Vice President Richard Cheney who, in response to a public debate in June 2006 about the option of a U.S. military strike against North Korea’s long-range missiles, said, “I think, obviously, if you’re going to launch strikes at another nation, you’d better be prepared to not just fire one shot” (Raum 2006).

Bush administration leaders were thus left basically with the options of sanctioning the DPRK and of mobilizing North Korea’s neighbors to pressure it to change course. It was in these circumstances that Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Northeast Asian capitals in early 2003 advocating the establishment of a multilateral forum to deal with the North Korean nuclear crisis. Although he succeeded in persuading North Korea’s neighbors and obtained President Bush’s agreement to the forum, he was apparently not able to gain negotiating authority from the White House that went much beyond demanding that North Korea declare, and begin to dismantle, its nuclear programs before the United States would begin to discuss concretely the ways in which North Korea might benefit from such a step. In other words, the White House concept for multilateral talks with the DPRK evidently did not include engaging in real give-and-take negotiations with the North owing to the president’s strongly held beliefs about the nature of the regime and its lack of trustworthiness.

**Policy toward the PRC.** Responding to the very rapid rise of China over the past decade—the single most important strategic development in East Asia during the period and an increasingly significant factor as time passes—represented a major challenge to both the Clinton and the George W. Bush administrations. Consistent with its aim of being an unassailable military power, the Bush administration began its first term internally divided but taking a generally hostile approach toward the PRC. During the first presidential election campaign, Condoleezza Rice, as a top adviser to candidate Bush, published an article in *Foreign Affairs* (Rice 2000) that is worth recalling at some length:

... China is still a potential threat to stability in the Asia-Pacific region. Its military power is currently no match for that of the United States. But that condition is not necessarily permanent. What we do know is that China is a



great power with unresolved vital interests, particularly concerning Taiwan and the South China Sea. China resents the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. This means that China is not a “status quo” power but one that would like to alter Asia’s balance of power in its own favor. That alone makes it a strategic competitor, not the “strategic partner” the Clinton administration once called it. Add to this China’s record of cooperation with Iran and Pakistan in the proliferation of ballistic-missile technology, and the security problem is obvious. China will do what it can to enhance its position, whether by stealing nuclear secrets or by trying to intimidate Taiwan.

China’s success in controlling the balance of power depends in large part on America’s reaction to the challenge. The United States must deepen its cooperation with Japan and South Korea and maintain its commitment to a robust military presence in the region. It should pay closer attention to India’s role in the regional balance. There is a strong tendency conceptually to connect India with Pakistan and to think only of Kashmir or the nuclear competition between the two states. But India is an element in China’s calculation, and it should be in America’s, too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld initially refused to continue most forms of military exchange with the PRC. Early in the first term, however, Secretary of State Powell’s proengagement stance within the administration was bolstered by his successful management of the crisis caused by the collision of a Chinese fighter plane with a U.S. Navy surveillance aircraft off the Chinese coast. Even more important, the attacks of 9/11 refocused U.S. attention toward terrorism and the Middle East. The PRC was suddenly seen as an important potential partner in combating terrorism and in checking rogue states, including by nonproliferation and counterproliferation efforts.

Nevertheless, while eventually putting forward the more diplomatic concept that the PRC should regard itself and behave as a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system (Zoellick 2005), the Bush administration did not abandon the skeptical approach toward China adumbrated in Rice’s article. Instead, it proceeded with plans to bolster relationships with both Japan and India, in part as a means of hedging against the PRC’s rise. The United States engaged in intensive negotiations with Japan from December 2002 to May 2006 in a successful effort to strengthen bilateral military cooperation and to remove obstacles to the long-term stationing of U.S. forces in Japan, albeit at a reduced level (DOS 2006a). Regarding India, President Bush and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh agreed on 18 July 2005 on the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative as part of an effort “to transform the relationship between their countries and establish a global partnership” (White House 2005a). The U.S.

response to China was also reflected in U.S. military policy on the Korean peninsula, especially in the debate about strategic flexibility, discussed below.

**Policy toward Japan.** Many incoming Bush administration officials felt that President Clinton's administration had focused on the rapidly rising PRC to the neglect of Japan. In a play on the "Japan bashing" phrase from the era of the U.S.-Japanese trade war of the 1980s, this was sometimes referred to as "Japan passing." The bipartisan private-sector report on the U.S.-Japan alliance issued in 2000 and now popularly called the "Armitage report" after Richard L. Armitage, the deputy secretary of state and most outspoken advocate of a strengthened U.S.-Japan alliance during the first term of the Bush administration, held out the prospect or hope that Japan would become an ally on the order of the United Kingdom (INSS 2000).<sup>3</sup>

The Armitage report called for sustained, high-level U.S. attention to the alliance with Japan, and, to a remarkable degree, the Bush administration did in fact focus on Japan. Deputy Secretary Armitage himself played a prominent role, establishing a regular strategic dialogue with his Japanese counterpart, receiving the Japanese ambassador on a drop-by basis, and meeting so many visiting Japanese that he was sometimes jokingly referred to within the Department of State as the "Japan desk director." Armitage and Secretary Powell also were reported at times as having implied that Japan needed to revise its "peace constitution" to allow it to play a larger role in the alliance and to qualify it for permanent membership in the United Nations Security Council. (They also stressed, however, that any decision to revise the constitution was up to the Japanese.)

In terms of actually strengthening the military alliance, the Department of Defense played the leading role within the U.S. government in the 40 months of negotiations, mentioned above, to increase cooperation and to remove irritants threatening local Japanese support for the continued stationing of U.S. forces. In a remarkably strenuous effort, Deputy Under Secretary of Defense Richard Lawless led a U.S. interagency team in a nearly nonstop negotiation process with the Japanese during this period. The impression given by media reporting was that the alliance was being boosted to an entirely new level of cooperation. In fact, as Deputy Under Secretary Lawless made clear in little-noted remarks in Tokyo in early 2006 near the end of the negotiations, the talks were aimed at achieving a level of cooperation that most outside observers probably assumed had already existed for a decade. Indeed, a large gap existed, not only in Japan and the United States but especially in China and Korea, between the reality of modestly increased U.S.-Japanese military cooperation and a greatly exaggerated perception of it.

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3. "We see the special relationship between the United States and Great Britain as a model for the alliance" (INSS 2000).

The most noteworthy aspect of U.S.-Japanese cooperation during the Bush administration, however, was the personal relationship between President Bush and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. As leaders with unorthodox personal styles, they nevertheless enjoyed an excellent personal chemistry. President Bush's escorting of Prime Minister Koizumi to Elvis Presley's home must surely rank as one of the most remarkable gestures to a foreign leader in the history of the U.S. presidency. Their personal ties complemented their determination, each for his own strategic and domestic political reasons, to pursue closer bilateral relations, but especially to deal with the rise of China. This was reflected in President Bush's decision to appoint as ambassadors to Japan people of the stature of former senator Howard Baker and, later, Thomas Schieffer, one of the president's closest friends and supporters.

As a consequence, both President Bush and Prime Minister Koizumi made a number of politically difficult decisions in favor of maintaining their relationship. Prime Minister Koizumi, for example, braved major domestic opposition to the dispatch of Japan Self-Defense Forces to Iraq, and President Bush imposed patience on his bureaucracy and, indirectly at least, on Republicans in Congress in dealing with Japan's extended total ban on imports of beef from the United States owing to concern about bovine spongiform encephalopathy ("mad cow" disease). The United States also offered full and demonstrative support for Japan's efforts to resolve the issue of its abductees to North Korea, despite concern on the part of the Chinese and South Koreans that this was imposing yet another burden on the six-party talks to end North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions.

Prime Minister Koizumi was even more demonstrative in his embrace of the United States than was President Bush in his embrace of Japan. Particularly after his visits to the Yasukuni Shrine became a major impediment to Japan's relations with the PRC and the ROK, Prime Minister Koizumi seemed figuratively to wrap himself in the American flag. At a joint press conference with President Bush in Kyoto on 16 November 2005, he stressed (through an interpreter), "There is no such thing as U.S.-Japan relationship too close" (White House 2005b). He added:

Some people maintain that maybe we would pay more attention to other issues, probably it would be better to strengthen the relationship with other countries. I do not side with such views. The U.S.-Japan relationship, the closer, more intimate it is, it is easier for us to behave and establish better relations with China, with South Korea and other nations in Asia.

Although Prime Minister Koizumi made similar statements on a number of occasions, he later stressed that he had "never said that as long as Japan-U.S. relations are good we could not care less about other countries" (MOFA-J 2005). With Chinese and

Koreans, however, the damage was done in terms of their perceptions of both Japanese and the U.S. intentions.

Over the decades, the United States has carefully but consistently encouraged closer relations between its South Korean and Japanese allies. Japan's support would be critical in the event of any North Korean attack on the ROK. During the Cold War, both Japanese and Korean backing was needed for U.S. efforts to contain the USSR. After the Cold War, such support was useful in managing the rise of China and in dealing in both diplomatic and military terms with the challenge posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

**Policy regarding the U.S.-ROK alliance.** Among the elements of the Bush administration's strategic doctrine, its policy regarding military aspects of the U.S.-ROK alliance had a direct and immediate impact on the ROK second only to its North Korea policy. Some aspects of the U.S. approach toward military matters reflected concerns about North Korea, but more were focused on regional issues such as the rise of China and others on developments in the global security environment. As with its overall strategic doctrine, the Bush administration's approach toward its military alliance with the ROK combined elements old and new.

The decisions to reduce the number of uniformed USFK personnel from 37,500 to 25,000 by 2008, to move U.S. bases away from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and out of Seoul into consolidated facilities farther south, and to transfer some USFK roles and missions to ROK forces were widely interpreted by South Koreans as reflecting lessened U.S. support for the alliance. Many South Koreans believed that the Bush administration—or Secretary Rumsfeld personally—had taken the decision in pique against the so-called anti-Americanism of President Roh's administration. Conservatives feared a weakening of deterrence, while progressives suspected that the southward redeployment might be intended to get USFK out of the range of DPRK artillery if the United States chose to launch a preemptive strike against North Korean nuclear facilities. The controversy over the U.S. moves precipitated a major, continuing debate within South Korea, reflecting and contributing to the polarization of South Korean politics.

In fact, the reduction in USFK ground forces did not reduce deterrence and had relatively little to do with North Korea or with anti-American feeling in the South. Since the end of the Korean War, there has rarely been an extended period in which the United States was not planning for or implementing a reduction of USFK ground personnel, and, indeed, U.S. military planners were studying a possible reduction in the latter years of the Clinton administration. South Korean conventional forces have long been superior to those of the North, and even more so since North Korea's economic collapse in the early 1990s. With recent increases in the mobility and lethality

of its forces, the United States needed to retain only enough ground forces in the ROK to serve as a cadre to receive massive reinforcements from the United States in the event of a North Korean attack. Moving the remaining peacetime U.S. forces southward, out of the range of DPRK artillery, would help to ensure that the reception and integration of wartime U.S. reinforcements would take place as quickly and effectively as possible. Moreover, to reassure anxious South Koreans, the United States pledged to spend an additional \$11 billion to bolster military defenses on the peninsula during the transition.

U.S. policy toward Korea also reflected a heightened emphasis on strategic flexibility worldwide, as documented in the U.S. Global Posture Review. Tasked with vastly expanded missions around the globe but without a major increase in personnel, the U.S. military banked on its increased mobility to allow its forces to redeploy as crises arose rather than be stationed permanently in large numbers in a few countries. ROK anxiety about the USFK reduction itself was compounded by concern that strategic flexibility meant that additional USFK personnel might at any time be suddenly dispatched or redeployed abroad, including possibly to counter the PRC, for example, in the event of a crisis involving Taiwan.

### **III. ROK Strategic Doctrine**

**Policy toward the DPRK.** The ROK's main external challenge was and remains the DPRK, but ROK thinking about North Korea has changed dramatically since the progressive camp captured the presidency in 1997. That political development amplified tendencies already under way as a consequence of the fall of the USSR, the rise of a market-oriented China, and the DPRK's economic collapse and reduced conventional threat. Instead of seeing a militarily superior, threatening communist rival state to the north, South Koreans now tend to emphasize their common nationality with the people of the North and doubt that the DPRK regime would or even could attack the South with its conventional forces. As for the DPRK's long-range missile, nuclear, and other WMD programs, many South Koreans believe that they are intended to deter the United States and the DPRK is willing to bargain them away for credible U.S. security guarantees, even after the North Korean nuclear test of 9 October 2006. In any event, South Koreans have long felt at greater risk from DPRK artillery along the DMZ near Seoul than they have from the DPRK's asymmetric forces.

Fundamentally, most South Koreans believe that their system is politically and economically superior and that, by the ROK's taking a patient, magnanimous approach, North Korea will gradually become more like the South, facilitating reconciliation and, eventually, unification of the peninsula on South Korean terms and with minimal risk and disruption to the lives of the people of the South. Just in case their assumptions about North Korea's military threat are incorrect, most South Koreans want to maintain

the alliance with the United States, even as they demand rectification of what they consider to be unequal or disrespectful U.S. treatment. This, in essence, was President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy, which President Roh Moo-hyun renamed the "policy of peace and prosperity" and continued essentially unchanged.

**Policy regarding the PRC.** South Koreans tend to view the PRC's rise more as an opportunity than as a threat, and, indeed, the ROK has taken great advantage of the PRC's increased economic openness and growth. In just the past few years, the ROK's trade with China has exceeded its trade with the United States, and South Korea has a large share of total direct investment in the PRC. PRC and ROK students by the thousands have enrolled in each other's colleges and universities.

Reflecting China's increasing economic importance, geographic proximity, vastly larger territory and population, and shared cultural roots, the ROK regards good relations with the PRC as in its vital interests. The ROK would be deeply concerned about any rise in tensions—not to mention the possibility of hostilities—between its ally the United States and the PRC. Thus, President Roh's administration feared that the implications of U.S. strategic flexibility included the possibility that that United States might unilaterally deploy its forces in the ROK against the PRC, undermining ROK-PRC relations and even putting the ROK at risk of PRC military retaliation.

The rise of China, a perceived resurgence of militarism in Japan, and ROK progressives' doubts about U.S. intentions and judgment have led some South Koreans, including President Roh, to worry publicly about a repetition of the great-power rivalry of the late nineteenth century that resulted in Korea's colonization. Such concerns, and ROK disagreement with the United States and Japan over North Korea policy, appear to have been behind President Roh's controversial declaration in March 2005 that the ROK henceforth would act as a "balancer" in Northeast Asia (*Korea Herald* 2005).

**Policy toward Japan.** Despite enormous economic cooperation, ROK-Japanese political ties remain profoundly troubled. Koreans north and south define themselves in large part in terms of their antipathy for Japan's 40-year colonial rule of their nation, which they also regard as having contributed to Korea's subsequent division. Japan's failure to take measures on the order that West Germany did to respond to the emotions and concerns of its neighbors means that moves today by Japan toward becoming a more normal state are regarded with the deepest suspicion by most Koreans.

The gap between the perceptions of Koreans and Japanese about historical and territorial issues is large and growing. Many Japanese, to the extent they are even aware of South Korean feelings, find them incomprehensible or believe they are largely the result of demagoguery on the part of a weak ROK leadership seeking to shore up its domestic support. In fact, while ROK leaders are undoubtedly aware that criticism of Japanese positions on such issues is popular, the sources of South Korean feelings



and beliefs toward Japan run much deeper than any mere reflection of agitation by a South Korean administration.

As a consequence of these controversies and misunderstandings, South Korean–Japanese cooperation on diplomatic and security affairs has been seriously affected. The South Korean president refused to meet Prime Minister Koizumi during Koizumi’s final year in office. (The election of a new Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, on 26 September 2006 allowed ROK–Japanese summit meetings to resume.) Lower-level consultations generally continue, but the tone of discussions has been poisoned. Incipient military cooperation has been hurt, and important bilateral coordination on North Korea policy between the ROK and Japan, and trilaterally including the United States, was undermined. Most South Koreans today regard current trends in Japan as strategically more worrisome than the rise of China. U.S. encouragement of Japan’s military development and efforts to strengthen the U.S.–Japanese alliance coupled with the U.S. decision not to take issue publicly with Japan’s position on leadership visits to the Yasukuni Shrine and other historical and territorial issues have puzzled and upset many South Koreans.

**Policy regarding the U.S.-ROK alliance.** President Kim Dae-jung stressed and President Roh Moo-hyun continues to stress the importance of the alliance with the United States even as both called for a more equal relationship and did little to counter often exaggerated and sometimes even invented domestic ROK criticism of the United States and USFK. President Kim’s administration demanded a limited revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), and the United States eventually complied. President Roh, perhaps to counter the perception that he ran on an anti-American platform, took demonstrative steps, including a high-profile visit to USFK headquarters, immediately after his inauguration to reassure Americans and conservative Koreans that he valued the alliance. In fact, as a candidate, too, Roh was generally careful in his criticism of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

It is not evident that President Roh at the time of his inauguration had well-formed ideas about how to promote the more equal relationship with the United States about which he spoke as a candidate. In any case, owing in large part to President Bush’s policies in response to 9/11, the atmosphere was not conducive to ROK demands on the United States. In fact, it was the United States that placed demands on the ROK, including eventually for the dispatch of ROK forces to Iraq.

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4. It was the main opposition candidate, not Roh, who joined the massive candlelight protests against the United States after the USFK traffic accident that killed two middle-school students, and, again, it was the opposition candidate, not Roh, who summoned the U.S. ambassador to his office shortly before election day to demand yet another revision of the SOFA.



Especially given his own inclinations and the feelings of his political camp, Roh took extraordinary steps to support the United States after 9/11. These included making a passionate, personal appeal to the National Assembly to agree to the dispatch of ROK forces to Iraq. Roh indicated to the National Assembly that he did not believe that the invasion of Iraq was justified; however, he argued in an appeal that was little noted in the United States that the United States was too important for ROK interests not to respond positively to its request. He implied that the dispatch was necessary if he was to be able to deter President Bush from taking potentially disastrous unilateral action against North Korea. Ultimately, the South Korean military contingent in Iraq became the third-largest there, after those of the United States and the UK.

The U.S. decision to reduce USFK ground forces by one-third placed President Roh in a very difficult position at home. He himself had not called for a reduction—even though doing so might have appealed to his core supporters—and the fact that the decision came from the Americans caused most South Koreans to suspect that the United States was reacting in part in anger over the anti-Americanism that President Roh was said to represent. This remains the case today even though it became increasingly clear to South Koreans that U.S. needs in Iraq and elsewhere were a major factor in the U.S. decision.

While President Roh's reasons for supporting the U.S. decision on a troop reduction are not clear, it is likely that they were many and complex. Presumably, he calculated that he could not dissuade the United States, especially given the post-9/11 circumstances. In such a situation, his own inclinations, which probably favored an eventual reduction of USFK ground personnel, may have come into play. Perhaps he also reasoned that the reduction, if managed with skill and luck, would appeal to his own base while the United States would help him with conservative South Korean critics by emphasizing that the reduction was decided for military reasons and would not weaken deterrence.

President Roh was much more active on two strategic issues involving USFK. His administration publicly expressed serious concern about the U.S. concept of strategic flexibility. Conservative South Koreans were worried that it weakened deterrence because U.S. forces could leave the ROK at a moment's notice to deal with a crisis abroad; progressives feared that such dispatches might embroil the ROK in hostilities with third countries, especially the PRC. A months-long controversy with the United States and in the ROK media followed. Ultimately, the dispute ended with Secretary of State Rice and Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon agreeing (DOS 2006b) in January 2006 that:

Regarding the issue of strategic flexibility of U.S. forces in the ROK, Secretary Rice and Foreign Minister Ban confirmed the understanding of both

governments as follows: The ROK, as an ally, fully understands the rationale for the transformation of the U.S. global military strategy, and respects the necessity for strategic flexibility of the U.S. forces in the ROK. In the implementation of strategic flexibility, the United States respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.

Undoubtedly this must have been considerably less reassurance than President Roh initially sought.

The second strategic issue about which President Roh was and remains very active is wartime operational control (OPCON). The United States exercised OPCON of both U.S. and ROK forces during and after the Korean War. Beginning in 1994, at the ROK's initiative and with U.S. support, the ROK began to exercise peacetime OPCON over its own forces. While there was some discussion of the ROK's assuming wartime OPCON over its forces at least as early as the administration of President Roh Tae-woo (1988–93), Roh Moo-hyun not only called for this step as a presidential candidate but, for the first time for any ROK president, pressed the issue with the U.S. government beginning in 2005 (DOS 2005).

When it became evident in mid-2006 that not only was President Roh serious about wartime OPCON but also the United States was willing to agree, the issue became a major controversy in the ROK. Conservatives regarded the move as proof that President Roh did not value the alliance and that the Bush administration was so alienated by President Roh's administration that it too no longer cared about the alliance. They argued that, willy-nilly, the step would result in a weakening of deterrence and possibly even the dissolution of the alliance. In any event, they added, the ROK was not ready to assume wartime OPCON because of gaps in its conventional capabilities. They further argued that acquiring those capabilities in just a few years—the ROK was calling for the change to take place in 2012 while the United States said it should be accomplished even earlier, in 2009—would impose too great a burden on the ROK budget and taxpayers. Nevertheless, at the 38th annual Security Consultative Meeting on 20 October 2006, the United States and the ROK formally reconfirmed their intention for the ROK to assume wartime OPCON while they deferred a decision on the exact timing of the transfer within the period 2009–12 (DOD 2006).

Why President Roh should have pressed such a controversial issue is not completely clear. He himself has repeatedly argued forthrightly that it was an objectionable limitation on ROK sovereignty that another country should have wartime OPCON of its forces. He also stressed that ROK forces had become militarily capable of assuming this function and that the U.S. government was in agreement and had offered reassurances that the change would not weaken the alliance or deterrence. President

Roh added that the cost of assuming the USFK roles and missions that would be transferred to the ROK as part of this process would not constitute a problem given the scale of the ROK civilian economy. It is also possible that President Roh believed that ROK assumption of wartime OPCON would result in significantly increased ROK influence vis-à-vis the United States in the event of a crisis on the Korean peninsula and that this, desirable in itself, might also help to persuade the DPRK to deal with the ROK with greater seriousness.

#### **IV. Effects of Differing Doctrines on the Alliance**

The long-term effects on the U.S.-ROK alliance of these dramatic doctrinal changes on the part of both parties cannot be predicted with confidence. Too many major strategic and political variables remain, including the intentions of the DPRK and the PRC's future course. Moreover, as documented here, top leaders in each country have had a major impact on strategic doctrines, and there will be a presidential election in the ROK in December 2007 and also one in the United States in November 2008. It is possible, however, to analyze the short-term, and possibly some of the mid-term, effects on the alliance.

The changes have certainly resulted in considerable concern in the ROK about the health and effectiveness of the alliance. Progressives reacted very negatively to the new elements in the Bush administration's strategic doctrine, which reinforced their belief that the United States was a dangerous bully not only on the Korean peninsula but also throughout the world. Conservatives felt that their own president did not himself identify fully with the ROK and its history and that his words and deeds risked not only weakening deterrence with the United States but even the future of the alliance itself. Younger South Koreans consistently told pollsters of their dislike, even hatred, of U.S. foreign policy, even as most of them acknowledged appreciating aspects of U.S. society and culture. While the controversy is less salient among the U.S. public, U.S. political leaders are deeply concerned about the alliance, with Republicans tending to blame the ROK government and Democrats blaming both the Bush and the Roh administrations.

Certainly, the most obvious damage done to the alliance has been to cooperation in responding to the challenges posed by North Korea. The United States and the ROK need to agree on basic aims and cooperate closely if either is to have a reasonable possibility of dealing effectively with a regime as difficult as North Korea. Apparently recognizing this and for other reasons as well, the leaders of both the United States and the ROK have, from their own perspectives, made considerable efforts to consult and cooperate. Unfortunately, their basic approaches have differed so greatly that little useful came of the efforts. From the outset of the six-party talks, U.S. and ROK

positions on when and what benefits to offer North Korea in exchange for its giving up its nuclear ambitions were far apart and quite evident to the other parties, including the DPRK. With the PRC and Russia already tending to side with the DPRK on such issues, there was little prospect that the talks would reach agreement.

The U.S. emphasis on counterproliferation and not dealing with rogue states ran headlong into the ROK's engagement policy. With the apparent failure of the six-party talks, the United States has proceeded increasingly to pursue defensive measures even as it continues to assert its interest in a diplomatic resolution of the nuclear issue. The ROK leadership's equally principled belief in the necessity and potential of its engagement policy has resulted in the ROK, not to mention the PRC and Russia, in effect undercutting such U.S. efforts.

Regionally, the U.S. approach to China and, even more so, to Japan has deeply concerned many South Koreans. Although Condoleezza Rice in 2000 stressed the need to work more closely with both South Korea and Japan to manage the rise of China, the ROK-U.S. debate on strategic flexibility revealed a very large gap in the alliance on that issue. That the ROK is closer now to the PRC than to the United States regarding North Korea and on a number of other issues has raised Chinese prestige and weakened U.S. influence in the region.

Ironically, the contentious debates over USFK and its role may have a positive outcome, assuming that the United States does not initiate other major changes in the medium term. The reduction and rationalization of USFK should not in itself weaken deterrence, while, along with the move of USFK headquarters out of Seoul and the transfer of wartime OPCON, they should reduce both symbolic and physical irritants to South Koreans. Moreover, the U.S. moves appear to have disabused many South Koreans of the widely held notion that the United States maintained forces in the ROK only for its own selfish interests and would continue to do so regardless of the wishes of the Korean people. Together with increasing South Korean dissatisfaction over North Korea's continuing failure to respond to their magnanimity, these U.S. policy changes have resulted recently in public opinion in the ROK that is less critical of the United States and more critical of the DPRK than was the case only a few years ago.

## **V. Conclusion**

While there are major questions today about the strength and durability of the U.S.-ROK alliance, based in part on sincerely held differences of principle between the two heads of state and in part on objective interests, there are sound reasons to be optimistic.

Fundamentally, the United States and the ROK remain strategically important to each other. The ROK today is a dynamic and powerful state and would be generally considered a major power if it were located in, for example, Europe. But its immediate neighbors—the PRC, Russia, and Japan—are decidedly imposing in terms of their territories, populations, economies, and militaries and will remain so for the foreseeable future. The United States will thus continue to offer the ROK at least the hope of serving as a relatively disinterested state that will help maintain a balance of power and stability in the region and, if necessary, come to the ROK's defense. Furthermore, the global economic might of the United States, the millions of personal ties between Koreans and Americans, and the global culture that is increasingly shared by both younger Koreans and American represent a powerful and enduring glue for the bilateral relationship.

While the ROK is not as large a factor in U.S. interests, it is far from trivial. The ROK's astonishingly successful economic and political development while in a close alliance with the United States reflects well globally on the United States as an ally. Conversely, it would be a major blow to U.S. prestige and credibility if, after nearly 37,000 Americans gave their lives in the Korean War and after more than five decades of the closest alliance, the United States walked away from the ROK or the ROK rejected the United States. The ROK is also a significant player globally and has usually supported major U.S. diplomatic and security efforts abroad. The ROK is the seventh-largest trading partner of the United States and the fourth-largest importer of U.S. agricultural products. Nearly two million Koreans and Korean Americans live in the United States, and the more than 50,000 Korean exchange students constitute the third-largest group of foreign students in U.S. colleges and universities.

The difference between the United States and the ROK over how to deal with North Korea is the fundamental and most damaging strategic disagreement in the alliance. If the threat posed by North Korea is successfully resolved, prospects for the alliance will be much brighter. Although it appears increasingly unlikely that President Bush and President Roh will be able to narrow significantly their principled differences over North Korea while in office, they are likely to continue to try to maintain the alliance and reduce the fallout from their disagreements. There are reasonable grounds to expect that their successors, no matter which political parties they represent, may be in closer agreement on basic issues and thus will find themselves able to engage in more effective cooperation on North Korea and other issues as well.

In any event, there is much that can be done to bolster the alliance and increase the benefits it brings to both countries and to the region:

- Responsible government officials on both sides should recognize that, as much as the two governments may disagree about the proper approach toward North

Korea, their differences are principled and sincerely held. Based on that, the countries should redouble their alliance management efforts in a spirit of mutual respect and appreciation. Similarly, Korean and American citizens should recognize that, despite differences, the leaderships of the two countries do value the alliance and, from their own perspectives, have worked hard and in good faith to maintain it.

- Opinion leaders in the public and private sectors of both countries, including the media, should use more temperate language in discussing the alliance and the issues confronting it and put such discussion into a broader perspective.
- Both countries should facilitate and fund an expansion of exchanges of young people in order to develop a larger cadre of true experts, especially in the United States, about the other country.

In the short term, with administrations in both countries due to change and DPRK behavior continuing on its current negative trajectory, there is a limited but still significant risk to peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and to the alliance. In the long term, however, the United States and the ROK still share many fundamental interests. If the leaders and the citizens of both countries carefully consider what each means to the other and act accordingly, they should be able to maintain and strengthen the alliance and the benefits it brings to both peoples, the region, and the world.

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