

The U.S.-ROK Alliance in a Distant Future (Far, Far Away)

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Key Points

- The alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea will face several significant challenges: a radically transformed Korean Peninsula, defined by the denuclearization of North Korea; the signing of peace treaties to replace the armistice; the establishment of diplomatic relations between North and South Korea and between the United States and North Korea; and the realization of a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.
- Key challenges posed by a radically transformed Korean Peninsula will include the future of the U.S. military presence, the posture and missions of U.S. forces, expectations of a “peace dividend” in both the United States and the Republic of Korea, the China factor, and the nature of extended deterrence.
- For the United States, the U.S.-ROK alliance is a strategic asset, one of five bilateral alliances that are the foundation of its diplomatic and military strength in the Indo-Pacific region. The alliance has successfully deterred the outbreak of a second Korean War and supported a political evolution in which the Korean people have transformed an authoritarian political system into a vibrant democracy, and it stands as the guarantor of stability on the peninsula and encourages a Seoul-led unification process.
- Given the value of the alliance to both partners, policy officials in Washington and Seoul need to think ahead—addressing future challenges that even now are beginning to emerge.

Introduction

This paper considers the U.S.-ROK alliance in a distant future—in the context of a radically transformed Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia—in which:

- The promise of the Singapore Summit has been realized. The final, fully IAEA-verified denuclearization of North Korea has been in effect, including stocks of chemical and biological weapons; as a

result, sanctions from the United Nations and the United States have all been rescinded. The Korean People's Army, however, remains a potent conventional force.

- A new era in the U.S.-DPRK relationship has been realized. Washington and Pyongyang have concluded a peace treaty terminating decades of hostility and have subsequently normalized diplomatic relations.
- The Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea have exchanged diplomatic recognition. North Korea, supported by South Korea and the international community, is focused on economic reconstruction and development. A peace regime now exists on the Korean Peninsula and, as South-North engagement evolves, there will be a strong inter-Korean dynamic toward greater unity.
- The United States and the Republic of Korea have affected OPCON transfer, and a ROK general now heads the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command.

The paper seeks to understand how this transformed security environment will affect the respective national interests of the United States and the Republic of Korea. Looking ahead will bring into focus the steps that the United States and the Republic of Korea need to take now, in order to safeguard the alliance against challenging futures.

The study will begin with a consideration of U.S. national interests in the Indo-Pacific region. It will go on to review the post-Cold War evolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance and to preview the geostrategic environment of a transformed Peninsula, with implications for the alliance in an era of great power competition. Finally, it will consider U.S. interests in a transformed Korean Peninsula—the Raison d'être of the alliance and the challenges to sustainability in that distant future.

Enduring U.S. Interests in the Indo-Pacific Region

Before looking ahead to a transformed Korean Peninsula, it is important to locate that future in the context of enduring U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific region. Drawing on decades of policy statements, U.S. historic interests can be summarized as below:

- Defense of the U.S. homeland, territories, and U.S. citizens from attacks originating in the region;
- Maintenance of an open, rules-based international order, to include support for resolution of disputes through peaceful means and opposition to coercion or the use of force;
- Access to the region and freedom of navigation in the maritime and air domains, along with opposition to any power or group of powers that would deny the U.S. access to the region or threaten U.S. interests;
- Strengthening of U.S. alliance relationships and reinforcing U.S. commitment to the security of allies;
- Maintenance of a balance of power that supports regional stability and promotes economic prosperity;
- Prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missile delivery systems; and
- Promotion of global norms and values, such as human rights, democracy, and good governance.¹

¹ R.D. Hooker, Jr. ed. *Charting a Course; Strategic Choices for a New Administration* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, December 2016), 173–74.

These enduring U.S. interests are also reflected in U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula today and in the U.S.-ROK alliance. President Trump's address to Republic of Korea National Assembly, along with Secretary of State Pompeo's 2018 article in *Foreign Affairs*, together define U.S. interests as:

- The final and fully verified denuclearization (FFVD) of North Korea;
- Maintenance and strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance to meet challenges on the peninsula and beyond;
- Security and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, keeping in mind that long-term stability and security depend on realizing FFVD of North Korea and that failure to achieve this objective can have unpredictable security consequences in Northeast Asia;
- Enhancing U.S.-ROK economic and commercial relations; and
- Peaceful unification under the auspices of the Republic of Korea.²

Over the years, this set of interests has combined to shape U.S. national strategy and foreign policy toward the Indo-Pacific region and the Korean Peninsula. At times, some elements have been more dominant than others, and they have been pursued with varying degrees of success, but together they represent the foundation of U.S. engagement with the region.

Facing the Future

In his recent article "The Long-Term Basis for a U.S.-Korea Alliance," Michael O'Hanlon framed his study around two central questions:

Should . . . alliances be thought of as permanent, even expanding and growing structural elements of the global security architecture? Or should they be viewed as temporary phenomena, focused on specific threats when conditions require, but ultimately replaced by more inclusive multilateral security structures when immediate dangers recede?³

O'Hanlon notes that historically alliances have served "particular purposes for specific countries during certain periods," having "their origins in opposition to some other country or group of countries."⁴ At the same time, O'Hanlon entertains the thought that it may be possible "to move beyond classic alliances to other types of security structures,"⁵ citing concepts of cooperative security in post-Cold War Europe and the potential of a Northeast Asia cooperative security construct evolving out of the Six Party framework that focused on the denuclearization of North Korea.

Looking at the future of the U.S. post-Cold War alliance network, O'Hanlon notes that "various American strategists have come to differ about the long-term future of the United States' alliances."⁶ Some favor continued expansion (e.g., NATO); others do not. Citing the works of Zbigniew Brzezinski and Henry Kissinger,

2 Donald Trump, "Remarks presented to the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea," November 7, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-national-asse>; Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, "On Confronting Iran," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018/10-15/michael-pompeo-secretary-of-state-on-confronting-iran>; Stephen Biegun, "Remarks of Stephen Biegun, Special Representative for North Korea" (presented at Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA, January 31, 2019), <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-dprk-at-stanford-university/>.

3 Michael O'Hanlon, "The Long-Term Basis for a U.S.-Korea Alliance," *The Washington Quarterly* (Winter 2019): 103.

4 *Ibid.*, 106.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

he cautions that “for many, moreover, given its small size and distant geographic location, Korea tends to occupy a fairly secondary, and somewhat ambiguous, place in their strategic visions.”⁷

As described in the following section, the U.S.-ROK alliance has evolved over the past thirty years. While maintaining its “classical” character of being focused on the threat posed by North Korea, the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty also provides for security cooperation in the Pacific area.

Post-Cold War Evolution of the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Implications for the Future

As the Cold War was winding down, the U.S. public and Congress began to anticipate returns on a “peace dividend.” There was a clear expectation in Congress of across-the-board cuts in defense spending and in the overseas deployment of U.S. forces. In the Asia-Pacific region, Congress focused on the Korean Peninsula and the 44,400 U.S. forces committed to the defense of the Republic of Korea.

In series of reports to Congress—“Looking Toward the 21st Century,” in April 1990 and “A Strategic Framework for the Asian-Pacific Rim,” in 1992—the Bush administration launched the East Asia Strategy Initiative, a ten-year, three-stage plan for force reduction and modernization in the region.⁸ These reports also previewed a shift from large permanent bases, such as the U.S. presence at Clark Air Force base and Subic Bay in the Philippines, toward a greater reliance on access arrangements across the region. In November 1991, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney put the plan on hold because of the emergence of the nuclear threat posed by North Korea.

Viewed through the prism of a transformed Korean Peninsula and the expected demands for a “peace dividend,” the East Asia Strategy Initiative’s focus on “access” as opposed to “fixed-basing” suggests one possible model for a future U.S.-ROK alliance.

At the beginning of the new century, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 refocused U.S. attention to new threats emanating from Eurasia’s southern periphery. In response, President George W. Bush moved to transform the U.S. military to meet the threats of a new era. The administration detailed the force transformation to be undertaken in three documents: the February 2003 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, the Department of Defense Transformation Planning Guidance, and the Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review. The 2002 National Security Strategy pointed to Afghanistan and argued that the United States “must prepare for more such deployments,” and, in preparation, must develop “transformed maneuver and expeditionary forces.”⁹

Earlier, the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review had found the deployments of the Cold War era, heavily concentrated in Western Europe and Northeast Asia, to be “inadequate for the new strategic environment in which U.S. interests are global and potential threats in other areas of the world are emerging.”¹⁰ Thus, U.S. forces were to be “lighter, more lethal and maneuverable.”¹¹ In terms of alliance management, the Bush administration sought the concurrence of the Republic of Korea to deploy forces from the peninsula to meet security threats arising beyond the peninsula. In January 2006, the two governments reached an understanding on the deployment of U.S. forces from the peninsula to meet contingencies elsewhere in the world. The understanding reads:

7 Ibid., 108

8 U.S. Department of Defense, *Looking Toward the 21st Century*, Report to the Congress, April, 1990; Department of Defense, *A Strategic Framework for the Asian-Pacific Rim*, Report to the Congress, 1992.

9 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, September 17, 2003).

10 *Department of Defense Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, September 2001), 6

11 Ibid.

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 U.S. respects the ROK position that it shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.¹²

The concept of “strategic flexibility” should inform thinking about the future of the alliance in the context of the transformed Korean Peninsula of this study.

At the same time, successive governments in Washington and Seoul were working to expand the focus of the alliance, and to transform its traditional rationale—deterrence of North Korea and defense of the Republic of Korea, if deterrence fails—to a broader regional and global construct.

On May 14, 2003, President George W. Bush and President Roh Moo-hyun met in Washington to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S.-ROK alliance. While centered on the evolution of intra-alliance military relations on the peninsula—modernization of the alliance and the threat posed by North Korea—the two presidents “pledged to work together to promote the values of democracy, human rights, and market economy . . . to build a comprehensive and dynamic alliance relationship for continued peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia,” and to highlight “the importance of increasing bilateral cooperation across a broad range of global issues . . . to improve the environment and combat crime and infectious diseases around the globe.”¹³

Two years later, on November 17, 2005, the two presidents met again in Seoul. In the Joint Declaration on the ROK-U.S. alliance and Peace on the Korean Peninsula, they approved the development of the U.S.-ROK alliance relationship “into a comprehensive, dynamic, and mutually beneficial alliance relationship” and proclaimed that the alliance “not only stands against threats but also for the promotion of common values of democracy, market economy, freedom and human rights in Asia and around the world.”¹⁴

The Joint Vision Statement of June 16, 2009, issued by the successor governments of Presidents Barack Obama and Lee Myung-bak, built on previous understandings. The document committed the United States and the Republic of Korea to “building an Alliance to ensure a peaceful, secure and prosperous future of the Korean Peninsula, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world.”¹⁵ They further proclaimed that with the Mutual Defense Treaty as the “cornerstone of the U.S.-ROK security relationship . . . we will build a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust.”¹⁶ In the Asia-Pacific region, the alliance partners would work to “promote human rights, free markets, and trade and investment liberalization” and, at the same time, “address the global challenges of terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, piracy, organized crime and narcotics.”¹⁷

12 U.S. Department of State, “United States and the Republic of Korea Launch Strategic Consultations for Allied Partnership,” news release, January 19, 2006, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/59447.htm>

13 The White House, “Joint Statement by the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” news release, May 14, 2003, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eap/rls/prs/2003/20627.htm>.

14 The White House, “Joint Declaration on the ROK-US Alliance and Peace on the Korean Peninsula,” November 17, 2005, <https://georgew-bush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/11/20051117-6.html>.

15 Office of the Press Secretary, “Joint vision for the alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” White House, June 16, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/joint-vision-alliance-united-states-america-and-republic-korea>

16 Ibid.

17 The White House, “Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea,” press release, June 16, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/joint-vision-alliance-united-states-america-and-republic-korea>.

In 2013 and again in 2015, the two governments reaffirmed their commitment to the objectives outlined in the 2009 statement, while expanding cooperation to include “cyber, space, climate change and global health.”¹⁸

In the Joint Communiqué of the 50th U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting, on October 1, 2018, the United States and the Republic of Korea once again “reaffirmed the two nations’ mutual commitment to the fundamental mission of the alliance—to defend the ROK . . . and to enhance the mutual security of both nations under the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty.”¹⁹ United States Secretary of Defense James Mattis reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to “provide extended deterrence” and to “defend the ROK in the event deterrence fails.”²⁰

Extended deterrence will continue to play an important security role even in the context of a denuclearized North Korea.

References to the Mutual Defense Treaty should induce strategic thinking with regard to the future scope of the alliance. While the fundamental mission of the alliance has been widely understood as the defense of the Republic of Korea, the text of the treaty makes no reference to North Korea but refers only the “Pacific area.” The U.S.-ROK alliance, of course, was concluded at the height of the Cold War, at a time when not only North Korea but China and the Soviet Union were perceived as posing threats to U.S. security interests—not only on the Korean Peninsula, but in the region and across the globe.²¹

In an era of increasing great power competition, the Mutual Defense Treaty provides a foundation for mutual support beyond the peninsula to regional and global contingencies.

Looking Ahead at a Transformed Peninsula

Notwithstanding a significant lowering (but not necessarily end) of the historic threat posed by North Korea, the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific region for global prosperity and security ensures that broader U.S. interests will long outlive the threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea.

This study makes several assumptions regarding the post-scenario security environment. The first is that the return of great power competition will shape regional dynamics for the foreseeable future, attendant with serious challenges to U.S. national interests in the Indo-Pacific region. The United States’ National Security Strategy defines the region as an area in which “geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place.”²² The document attributes the aim of China’s rapid military modernization as being “to limit U.S. access to the region and provide China a freer hand there.”²³

Subsequently, the National Defense Strategy of the United States found that “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations and predatory economics to coerce neighboring countries to reorder the Indo-Pacific to their advantage . . . it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that

18 The White House, “The United States-Republic of Korea Alliance: Shared Values and New Frontiers,” joint fact sheet, October 16, 2015, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/16/joint-fact-sheet-united-states-republic-korea-alliance-shared-values-new.

19 “Joint Communiqué of the 50th U.S.-ROK Security Consultative Meeting,” Department of Defense, October 31, 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Oct/31/2002057967/-1/-1/1/50TH-SCM-JOINT-COMMUNIQUE.PDF>.

20 Ibid.

21 Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea, October 1, 1953 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp.

22 The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” December 2017, 45 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

23 Ibid, 46.

seeks Indo-Pacific regional hegemony in the near term and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”²⁴

A second assumption is that the U.S. alliance structure in the Indo-Pacific region will continue to serve as the foundation of its regional strategy. Trends suggest that a much deeper and operationally robust U.S.-Japan alliance is likely to emerge, and that the alliance with Japan will become increasingly important as Washington and Tokyo focus on China’s challenges in the maritime and air domains. Japan’s recent defense documents highlight a convergence of concerns between Tokyo and Washington regarding China’s increasing assertiveness in the maritime domain. In its *Defense of Japan 2018*, the Ministry of Defense finds that “the unilateral escalation of China’s military activities poses a strong concern for the region, including Japan.”²⁵ The April 19 Joint Statement of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Meeting highlights the “alignment of the strategic policy documents of both countries.”²⁶

Under the Abe government, Japan has moved to play a more active role in the maritime domain. The National Security Strategy of Japan states that Japan will take measures to “address threats in the sea lanes of communication,” “promote maritime security cooperation,” and “provide assistance to coastal states alongside sea lanes of communication and other states in enhancing maritime law enforcement capabilities.”²⁷

A third assumption is that China will seek to maintain a dominant influence in North Korea. To this end, Beijing will work to sustain an independent North Korea as a buffer state. Beijing will support economic reform in North Korea, endeavor to influence inter-Korean dynamics, and continue efforts to attenuate the U.S.-ROK alliance. Key targets in terms of the alliance will be issues related to the U.S. military presence, the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), and trilateral alliance-based security cooperation. China will use its economic power as leverage to capitalize on any opportunity to drive wedges into the alliance. Beijing’s reaction to the THAAD deployment is a case in point.²⁸ Other issues likely to be targeted by Beijing beyond the peninsula include Taiwan, the South China Sea, issues related to “strategic flexibility,” Japan, and the U.S.-Japan alliance.

For the Republic of Korea, China presents a complex set of policy choices focused on finding balance between the imperatives of economic prosperity and national security. Retired Rear Admiral Michael McDewitt has noted that “ROK military analysts recognize that one of Seoul’s biggest national security challenges is balancing between the U.S.-ROK alliance and the China-ROK strategic partnership . . . given close geographic, historical, cultural and economic ties, ROK strategists are careful to consider Chinese perceptions of a strengthened alliance.”²⁹

A fourth assumption is that Russia will continue its efforts to meddle in Northeast Asia and challenge U.S. interests in the region. Elsewhere, Moscow’s aggressive actions in Europe and the Middle East can affect U.S. global interests and spread thin U.S. attention and military deployments.

24 Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

25 Ministry of Defense of Japan, “Defense of Japan 2018,” http://www.mod.go.jp/e/publ/w_paper/2018.html.

26 Ministry of Defense of Japan, “Joint Statement of the Security Consultative Committee,” news release, April 19, 2019, https://www.mod.go.jp/e/d_act/us/201904_js.html.

27 “National Security Strategy of Japan,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, https://www.mofa.go.jp/fp/nsp/page1we_000081.html.

28 Bonnie S. Glaser and Lisa Collins, “China’s Rapprochement With South Korea,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-07/chinas-rapprochement-south-korea>.

29 Scott Snyder, ed., *The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Meeting New Security Challenges* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2012), 247.

United States Alliances in the Indo-Pacific: From the Post-Cold War World to an Era of Great Power Competition

In the 1992 Defense Department report to Congress, “A Strategic Framework for the Asia-Pacific Rim,” the Department writes:

In many respects our alliance structure is perhaps our nation’s most significant achievement since the end of the Second World War. This system of alliances and friendships constitutes a prosperous, largely democratic, market-oriented zone of peace . . . In the long run preserving and expanding these alliances and friendships will be as important as the successful containment of the former Soviet Union or the Coalition defeat of Iraq.³⁰

The report further noted that “with the end of the Cold War, the United States regional roles, which had been secondary in our strategic calculus, have now assumed primary importance in our security engagement in the Pacific theater . . . the key to our military presence has been and remains a network of largely bilateral security alliances.”³¹

Three years later, in 1995, the Department of Defense reiterated the importance of the alliance structure in “The United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region.” The Department argued that “America clearly has a stake in maintaining the alliance structure in Asia as a foundation of regional stability and a means of promoting American influence on key Asian issues.”³²

In its National Security Strategy (NSS) of December 2017, the Trump administration defined the Indo-Pacific as an arena of “geopolitical competition.” To deal with the challenges posed by China and North Korea, the NSS explains that “U.S. allies are critical to responding to mutual threats . . . and preserving our mutual interests in the Indo-Pacific.”³³

In contrast, China, in the decade following the end of the Cold War, returned to its long-standing opposition to alliances and military blocs. In his 1997 report to the Fifteenth Party Congress, President Jiang Zemin stated that “expanding military blocs and strengthening military alliances will not be conducive to safeguarding peace and security.”³⁴ A year later, on April 25, 1998, a People’s Daily article asserted that “by the end of the Cold War, however, these military alliances had lost much of their cohesive force, as the enemies they were directed at containing no longer existed. Yet, the United States has been trying to maintain old alliances, hoping to act as their hegemonic leader.”³⁵

In 1997, China presented its New Security Concept, which called for an end to Cold War thinking and an opposition to alliance politics.³⁶ In 2014, President Xi Jinping announced his Asian Security Concept which

30 Department of Defense, *A Strategic Framework for the Asia-Pacific Rim*, 1.

31 Ibid.

32 Department of Defense, *United States Security Strategy for the Asia-Pacific Region*, 1995, 2.

33 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, 45–46, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

34 Jiang Zemin, “Hold High the Great Banner of Deng Xiaoping Theory for an All-round Advancement of the Cause of Building Socialism With Chinese Characteristics’ Into the 21st Century,” *Beijing Review*, September 12, 1997, http://www.bjreview.com.cn/document/txt/2011-03/25/content_363499_14.htm.

35 Chu Shulong, *China and the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-Korea Alliances in a Changing Northeast Asia* (Stanford, CA: Asia/Pacific Research Center, June 1999), 5.

36 David M. Finkelstein, “China’s New Concept of Security,” in *The People’s Liberation Army and China in Transition*, ed. Stephen J. Flanagan and Michael E. Marti (Washington, D.C.: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 2003), 197–210, <https://www.academia.edu/5295607/Chi>

called for a “new regional security cooperation architecture” and cautioned against strengthening of military alliances as “disadvantageous to the common security of the region.”³⁷ An accompanying Xinhua article characterized the U.S. alliances as a Cold-War security structure and a major impediment to a peaceful Asia.³⁸

In their study entitled “Chinese Attitudes toward Korean Unification,” Bonnie Glaser and Yun Sun argue that Chinese interests support the continued existence of a North Korean state, but that Beijing sees a “major potential benefit” from unification in the “reshaping of the security alliance between South Korea and the United States.”³⁹ In the environment of a transformed peninsula, China’s implicit message to Seoul will be that support for unification will “depend on whether the U.S.-ROK military alliance will be dissolved or restructured, including the withdrawal or significant reduction of U.S. troops deployed on the Peninsula.”⁴⁰

The evolution of the international security environment following the Great Recession of 2008 has only complicated economic-security choices for U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific region. In his article “Will the Current Joint Vision Hold?” Scott Snyder has argued that “a result of the financial crisis is that the United States has transitioned from being the sole guarantor of regional stability to one in which the United States is the primary guarantor of security, but is no longer sufficient in and of itself to provide security in East Asia, requiring supplementary measures to fill the gap.”⁴¹

In operational terms, Snyder argues that the United States will be looking for greater support from its alliance partners at a time when China’s influence across the region is rapidly expanding, driven by the centripetal force of its economy and its Belt Road Initiative. In his article, Snyder writes that “there will be greater pressure on South Korea to choose in specific circumstances between the United States and China, while it is in South Korea’s interests to avoid having to make a choice between the two countries.”⁴² Snyder goes on to define the critical and demanding reality ahead: “perceptions of China as an emerging threat (and partner) will strengthen the value of the U.S.-ROK alliance at the same time that it heightens mutual expectations regarding the level of investment and commitment to the alliance.”⁴³

Korean Perspectives of the Future of the Alliance

In their article “The Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Suggestions Based on Consideration of the Reunification and Post-Unification,” Kim Chang-su and Seol In-hyo posit a future similar to the transformed peninsula of this study: namely, a state of peace on the Korean Peninsula, ultimately leading to a peaceful and democratic unification.⁴⁴

nas_New_Concept_of_Security_.

37 Xi Jinping, “New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation,” May 21, 2014, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1159951.shtml.

38 Adam P. Liff, “China and the U.S. Alliance System,” *The China Quarterly* 233 (2018): 137–165; Li Zhihui and Xu Xiaoqing, “Eliminate Asia’s Achilles heel,” Xinhua, May 20, 2014, <http://en.people.cn/n/2014/0520/c90777-8729798.html>.

39 Bonnie S. Glaser and Yun Sun, “Chinese Attitudes toward Korean Unification,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 24 no.2 (2015): 84–87 (71–98).

40 Ibid.

41 Snyder, ed., *The US-South Korea Alliance*.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Seol In-hyo and Kim Chang-su, “The Future of the ROK-U.S. Alliance Suggestions Based on Consideration of the Reunification and Post-Reunification,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analyses* 25 no. 4 (December 2013): 531–547.

At the same time, the authors define the period leading to reunification as one of great uncertainty, with key external actors having complex and competing long-term strategic interests and concerns. They define the United States as a source of “crucial support” for a peaceful, democratic unification, but are concerned that some members of the U.S. public will be suspect of Korea’s commitment to the alliance after unification.⁴⁵ They see Japan as concerned with the possibility of a unified Korea inclining toward China, while both China and Russia are concerned with a unification process that would strengthen and broaden the ROK-U.S. alliance. Given this uncertain and complex environment, the authors find that all parties are “compelled to prefer the continuation of the status quo.”⁴⁶

For the ROK to move beyond the status quo of a transformed peninsula toward unification, the authors argue that Seoul must align with one of the external actors. The authors argue for the United States and the alliance: “the joint ROK-U.S. forces must be maintained in order to ensure security on the Korean Peninsula and protect against possible threats, military and others from North Korea.” They further define the alliance as “an irreplaceable and indispensable security asset.”⁴⁷

Looking toward the evolution of a unified Korea, they observe that the social, economic and political dynamics involved in the unification process will “give rise to much confusion and difficulty” and that “as the balance of power in Northeast Asia begins to shift, various states in the region will attempt to exert greater influence.”⁴⁸ In this environment they write: “it is important to maintain the ROK-U.S. alliance to minimize confusion . . . and maintain balance and stability in the region.”⁴⁹ At the same time, the alliance and a U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula are “crucial to induce substantial change in North Korea’s attitude and deter possible North Korean attacks during the reunification process.”⁵⁰

Addressing the issue of continuing the alliance amid calls for greater independence from Washington as South-North engagement intensifies, the authors conclude that the “alliance is the best option for South Korea’s national interest even when the North Korean threat weakens in the process of unification.”⁵¹ The authors also argue for an evolution of the alliance from its Cold War origins toward a “comprehensive strategic alliance” or “global partnership” in order to be “viable and sustainable” in a new security environment.⁵²

U.S. Perspectives on Korea’s Future Strategic Options

Recently, a number of U.S. scholars have focused on the future of the alliance in the context of unification, but the strategic choices and logic inherent in a unification scenario would similarly apply to the transformed Korean Peninsula that is the subject of this study.

In a December 2015 study, “Solving Long Division: The Geopolitical Implications of Korean Unification,” the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) outlined three alternative strategic options for Korea: a continental orientation focused on China, a maritime or Western-focused orientation, and a Peninsula-focused neutrality.⁵³ Also in December 2015, the Council on Foreign Relations released a study entitled “Uni-

45 Ibid, 538.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid, 540.

49 Ibid, 540.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid, 541.

52 Ibid.

53 Patrick M. Cronin et al., *Solving Long Division: The Geopolitical Implications of Korean Unification* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New

fied Korea and the Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance.” This CFR study, like the one by CNAS, set out three strategic options: maintenance of the status quo or a reconfigured security alliance with the United States, becoming an independent regional power, and tilt toward China.⁵⁴ David Helvey, in his paper “Korean Unification and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” also looked at the geostrategic dynamics shaping a future U.S.-ROK alliance.⁵⁵ And most recently, Michael O’Hanlon, in his *Washington Quarterly* article cited above, addressed the ROK’s strategic choices.

A brief review of these studies will serve to identify the key drivers that U.S. analysts believe will shape the evolution of the alliance in an era of transformation on the Korean Peninsula.

In her CFR study, Sue Mi Terry identifies key factors that will shape a unified Korea’s future orientation but would arguably apply to ROK interests in a transformed peninsula—the most important being “Korea’s vulnerable geography.”⁵⁶ Given this reality, Terry observes that Korean policymakers will “have to make difficult decisions about how to place their country in the most strategically advantageous position vis-à-vis their more powerful neighbors.”⁵⁷

In this context, Terry argues that the alliance would provide not only access to advanced military capabilities, technology, and intelligence sharing, but also that “continuing to host U.S. forces . . . would preserve the special relationship between the two governments and militaries, facilitate coordination of regional strategies, and serve as a deterrent to others seeking advantage on the peninsula.”⁵⁸ Whatever the ultimate future of the U.S. military presence on the peninsula, Terry finds value in “continuing a multidimensional alliance . . . a Korea closely aligned with the United States would be more influential in the world than one that goes its own way.”⁵⁹

The challenge for the alliance will be “to go beyond the current focus on the Peninsula but also avoid becoming a perceived threat to Korea’s neighbors, particularly China.”⁶⁰ Addressing the China factor in the alliance will be a critical challenge for U.S. and ROK policymakers in a transformed peninsula. As for the ROK tilting toward China, Terry notes that Beijing, in its efforts to expand its influence in both South and North Korea, will “encounter substantial resistance from Koreans wary of domination by the historical imperial power on their border and fearful of discontinuing a close alliance with the United States that has served South Korean interests well for more than sixty years.”⁶¹

David Helvey, in his “Korean Unification and the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” notes that support for the alliance remains strong.⁶² In a February 2018 public opinion survey conducted by the Asan Forum, support for the alliance stands at over 90 percent across all generational cohorts, at 97.6 percent among conservatives, 96.5 percent among moderates and 90.4 percent among progressives.⁶³ Helvey argues that maintaining the

American Security, December 2005), 8–9, www.cnas.org/solving-long-division#.VoV0hv5dPL8.

54 Sue Mi Terry, *Unified Korea and the Future of the U.S.-South Korea Alliance* (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, December 2015), 1, 6, 7, 10, <https://www.cfr.org/report/unified-korea-and-future-us-south-korea-alliance>.

55 David Helvey, “Korean Unification and the Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” *National Defense University Press*, February 2016, <https://inss.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/699426/korean-unification-and-the-future-of-the-us-rok-alliance/>.

56 Terry, *Unified Korea*, 3.

57 Terry, *Unified Korea*.

58 Terry, *Unified Korea*, 6.

59 Ibid.

60 Terry, *Unified Korea*, 7.

61 Ibid.

62 Helvey, “Korean Unification.”

63 Kim Jiyeon, “South Korean Public Opinion,” *The Asan Institute for Policy Studies*, February 27, 2018, <http://www.theasanforum.org/>

alliance and a U.S. military presence would serve as an “insurance policy” for the ROK, allowing Seoul to deal with a “range of challenges through an extended unification process,” with the alliance providing diplomatic leverage and a “foundation for security and a hedge against China and Russia and a buffer against China-Japan competition.”⁶⁴ At the same time, Helvey recognizes that “the ROK will need to balance China’s concerns about a U.S. force presence” against “sovereign decisions in providing for its own defense and how it wishes to position itself relative to U.S.-China competition.”⁶⁵

Helvey observes that the alliance fits in with a traditional Korean foreign policy framework—association with a “greater power that would offer security but not be so close geographically that it would threaten Korean sovereignty.”⁶⁶ This author, then a member of the Council on Foreign Relations Korea Task Force, recalls a luncheon at the Blue House with President Kim Dae Jung shortly after the historic June 2000 Inter-Korean Summit meeting with Kim Jong Il. During the luncheon, President Kim was asked whether the alliance had a future; he answered immediately and affirmatively, along the lines: “It does and I’ll tell you why. Korea is faced with two great land powers to the north, and they’re not going away; to the east, it is faced with a great maritime power, and it’s not going away. The United States is strong; you are far away, and you have no designs on Korea; that’s why we like you—and the alliance has a future.”⁶⁷

Michael O’Hanlon, in his article “The Long-Term Basis for a U.S.-Korea Alliance,” argues that “Koreans will probably value an alliance with the United States over the long-term for their own security interests . . . They probably will not prefer to preserve their security all by themselves.”⁶⁸ He cites geography—and particularly the proximity of China—as a reason many Koreans “worry about being left alone next to a country with 20 times the population and about 40 times the size of a reunified peninsula.”⁶⁹

In this context, he writes: “Put simply, China is probably not a country most Koreans would prefer to have to trust and deal with on their own.”⁷⁰

U.S. Interests: the Alliance in a Transformed Peninsula

Major U.S. security interests will be realized in a transformed Korean Peninsula. The denuclearization of North Korea will enhance the security of the U.S. homeland and strengthen the non-proliferation regime. And, in the process of denuclearization, the alliance with South Korea will have been strengthened, stability on the peninsula enhanced, and the prospects for a peaceful democratic unification increased.

At the same time, in an era of geopolitical competition, it will remain in the national interest of the United States at the strategic level to preserve—and evolve—the U.S.-ROK alliance, and to maintain the integrity of the Asia-Pacific bilateral alliance structure (Japan, the ROK, Australia, the Philippines and Thailand) as the foundation of its Indo-Pacific strategy. This study assumes that in the environment of a transformed Korean Peninsula, China will work to expand its influence in both the ROK and DPRK, and, at the same time, work to attenuate, if not fracture, the U.S.-ROK alliance.

south-korean-public-opinion.

64 Helvey, “Korean Unification.”

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Author’s interview with David Helvey.

68 O’Hanlon, “The Long-Term Basis for a U.S.-Korea Alliance,” 105.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid, 111.

In a transformed Korean Peninsula, U.S. interests would essentially be threefold in nature. In terms of security interests, the United States would want to consolidate gains accruing from denuclearization and North Korea's return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, from the normalization of relations, and from an evolving peace regime on the peninsula. In this environment, the United States would work to prevent a reemergence of North Korean threats—nuclear, chemical, biological and conventional. To deal with nuclear-related issues, the United States would rely on IAEA monitoring and inspections of former nuclear sites. To deal with conventional issues, an arms control regime would likely be structured.

The alliance also serves to support a second and long-standing U.S. national security interest: preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Even with the denuclearization of North Korea, the Republic of Korea will be faced with nuclear-armed neighbors. The U.S. alliance commitment to extend nuclear deterrence to the ROK obviates the need for Seoul to develop its own nuclear weapons program. A South Korea unmoored from alliance and pursuing a nuclear weapons capability is likely to destabilize Northeast Asia to the detriment of U.S. security interests.

A third interest is to support the growth of a democratic, market-oriented, confident and strong Republic of Korea, which will be able to shape the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asian regional relations in ways that reflect mutual interests—the primary interest being the maintenance of peace and stability and the fostering of an environment that, over time, would result in unification under the constitution of the Republic of Korea. As for the region, it would be in U.S. interests to encourage the evolution of long-term stability in ROK-Japan relations that would strengthen democracy in the region and enhance prosperity on the peninsula.

The alliance has also served as the foundation of Korea's military support for the United States in beyond-the-Peninsula contingencies. Korean military forces have served in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, since the passage of the Law on Participation in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations in 2009 and the creation of the International Peace Support Force, the Republic of Korea has assumed a larger role in support of international peace and stability. While not an alliance function, Korean peacekeeping deployments serve to advance broad U.S. interests in international stability.

Finally, the alliance stands as the basis for U.S.-ROK cooperation across a broad range of fields. In a 2012 study entitled "U.S.-South Korea Alliance," authors identify numerous domains benefiting from the alliance-based U.S.-ROK relationship, namely the maritime relationship, counterterrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, outer space, pandemics and biological threats, climate change, peacekeeping, post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction, development assistance, and humanitarian aid.⁷¹

Issues and Challenges for the Future

Questions about the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance should be expected to follow the denuclearization of North Korea, the conclusion of peace treaties, and the normalization of relations between Seoul and Pyongyang and between Washington and Pyongyang. The United States and the Republic of Korea should be expected to have similar, though not identical, national interests. However, even where they may seem identical, there may be important differences—especially with regard to priorities, perceived threats, and approaches to addressing them.

⁷¹ Snyder, ed., *The US-South Korea Alliance*.

The current force and command structure of the alliance is defined by the threat posed by North Korea. It is aimed at deterring North Korea and successfully defeating it should deterrence fail. Reconciliation and a transformed Korean Peninsula will present a new strategic picture for both the United States and the Republic of Korea. The answers, in Washington and Seoul, to five key issues will shape the future of the alliance in a transformed peninsula.

The first is related to threat perceptions. To what extent will concerns about potential instability in North Korea or the reemergence of a North Korean threat dominate defense policy in the Republic of Korea and in the United States? Answers to this question will significantly shape the future of the U.S. military presence in the ROK; it will undoubtedly also be influenced by the evolution of domestic politics in both countries.

Alliance managers should already begin to consider the footprint of the alliance in a transformed Korean Peninsula. In the East Asia strategy documents of the early 1990s, the Department of Defense, following the loss of Clark Airbase and Subic Bay naval station, shifted from fixed basing to an “access” strategy, “places, not bases,” in Southeast Asia. Today, Singapore, Thailand, and Australia are key nodes in this strategy. The “places, not bases” strategy was reconsidered by the United States Naval Institute in its 2015 study “Making Places Not Bases a Reality.”⁷² In “Imagining a New US-South Korean Security Architecture,” Richard Sokolsky and Daniel R. Depretis write:

In the event a comprehensive peace and security regime on the Korean Peninsula leads the government in Seoul to request a lower U.S. military profile, the “places, not bases” model; provides a viable option for accommodating South Korean preferences.⁷³

A second issue is budget related. Will the ROK—and to what extent—be prepared to continue financial support for a U.S. military presence, at a time when both the Republic of Korea and the United States will be looking for “peace dividends?” Much as the end of the Cold War raised political and budgetary questions regarding the U.S. military presence on the peninsula, a significant reduction in the military threat posed by North Korea would likely raise similar issues. A strong political dynamic in Congress to “bring the boys home” should be anticipated. A similar political dynamic regarding the Special Measures Agreement should likewise be anticipated in the National Assembly.

A third issue is related to the U.S. future military posture. In the context of South-North reconciliation, U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula will be transitioning from an on-the-peninsula mission to a regional power projection role, with increasing focus on the maritime and air domains. Issues related to “Strategy Flexibility”—the deployment of U.S. forces from the Peninsula to deal with regional and global security and humanitarian contingencies—will, in the context of an increasingly competitive U.S.-China relationship, present the alliance with a complex challenges. For the foreseeable future, China will remain the ROK’s top trading partner, with Korean prosperity heavily dependent on access to the Chinese market.

The ROK, without question, will be sensitive to China’s interests in considering U.S. deployments from the Korean Peninsula. In the dynamics of a transformed Korean Peninsula, the Republic of Korea is likely to work to isolate the peninsula from the evolving competition in the U.S.-China relationship and refrain

72 Colonel Michael W. Pietrucha, “Making Places, Not Bases a Reality,” *Proceedings of the U.S. Naval Institute* 141 no. 10/1,352 (October 2015), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2015/october/making-places-not-bases-reality>.

73 Richard Sokolsky and Daniel R. DePetrus, *Imagining a New U.S.-South Korean Security Architecture* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 15, 2018), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/11/15/imagining-new-u.s.-south-korean-security-architecture-pub-77725>.

from supporting what it may consider provocative actions toward Beijing—China-related contingencies in the maritime and air domains that the United States may deem to require a military response. In the context of OPCON transfer having been effected, the issue of “strategic flexibility” and U.S. deployments will need to be addressed, either within the Combined Forces Command structure or in potential alternative command structures.

With the elimination of the threat posed by North Korea and the realization of a peace regime, the alliance may need to refocus command and control relationships to better support overarching U.S. strategic objectives. Enabling a free and open Indo-Pacific, protecting vital U.S. economic interests, and supporting regional stability may be best realized in a supported/supporting command relationship—one that permits U.S. forces and associated capabilities stationed in the Republic of Korea to exist for broader security purposes. Fulfilling a U.S. supporting role will require adjustment to force posture and composition to enable greater “strategic flexibility.” For example, removing most U.S. land forces from the Korean Peninsula will result in an exclusive ROK-led ground defense, while the U.S. provides support with advanced air and maritime assets. This transition will also comport with a long-standing ROK objective of assuming a leadership role as a U.S. ally.

At the same time, Korean sensitivities should not constrain the ROK from quietly supporting U.S. strategic interests in the maritime domain. For example, as a trading nation, the Republic of Korea has a national interest in maintaining a stability in the maritime domain, and it can easily support capacity building in the maritime states of Southeast Asia.

A fourth issue is related to the idea of extended deterrence. U.S. extended deterrence commitments to South Korea have long focused narrowly on the threat from North Korea. Indeed, the U.S.-ROK alliance has adopted a tailored approach that hones deterrence and extended deterrence against North Korea’s unique interests, strategies, and capabilities. Should the North no longer be a threat, U.S. deterrence policies and capabilities for the peninsula would necessarily change, potentially in fundamental ways.

How these changes manifest would depend largely on whether the Republic of Korea believes U.S. extended deterrence is needed to manage its relationship with China. On one extreme, the ROK could rely solely on the promise of the Mutual Defense Treaty as a kind of existential deterrent against future aggression from China or other potential adversaries, one that would not require a heavy U.S. military presence on the peninsula. Such an approach would leave ill-defined who is being deterred from doing what and with what means, which runs counter to the clarity that is widely believed necessary for effective deterrence.⁷⁴ On the other extreme, the alliance could adopt a posture explicitly aimed at deterring Chinese aggression. This approach would likely entail a heavy U.S. strategic presence on the peninsula but come at the expense of ROK-Chinese relations that could prove costly for South Korea’s economy. The likely extended deterrence relationship will be somewhere between these two extremes; it will depend largely on ROK views on the requirements for deterring nuclear armed neighbors.

A fifth issue is related to the United Nations command structures on the Korean Peninsula. The United Nations Command (UNC) was established under UNSC 84, on July 7, 1950. Its Military Armistice Commission (MAC) for Korea was established in July 1953 to supervise implementation of the Armistice. In a transformed peninsula, with the signing of peace treaties, the MAC would be dissolved. The UNC would remain in being, unless dissolved by the vote of the UN Security Council. The United Nations Command-Rear is located in Japan, with access to UN bases in Japan in the event of a contingency on the

74 See, for instance, Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 38.

Korean Peninsula. In looking toward a transformed peninsula, the United States and the Republic of Korea should begin now to consider the future role of the UNC and its support command in Japan. At the same time, with wartime OPCON having been transferred, the United States and the Republic of Korea should use the present to explore other command arrangements that would effectively serve the security interests of both parties.

Concluding Thoughts

A final question is whether, in the absence of the historic threat posed by North Korea, a “comprehensive alliance” based on shared values—democracy, human rights, market economics, and non-traditional security interests such as the environment, international crime and infectious diseases—is sustainable in both countries. To a significant degree, sustaining the alliance will require dedicated political leadership. Beyond the alliance managers of the day, it will require presidents willing to stand up for the alliance.

For the United States, the alliance is a strategic asset, not a transactional instrument. For close to seven decades, the alliance has brought stability, prosperity and security to the United States and the Indo-Pacific region. For the Republic of Korea in a transformed peninsula, it would stand as the guarantor of stability and of a Seoul-led unification process. The Korean Peninsula’s geo-strategic position and history only underscores the centrality of the alliance to ROK security. It is the responsibility of political leadership in both countries to make the case for the alliance to their respective publics.

The U.S.-ROK alliance today is far from the distant future of a transformed Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, the time to begin planning for it is now.

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