

KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

Adapting the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance to Strategic Competition in Robotics

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Many aspects of the Asian security landscape are as they have been for more than a decade. China is still rising, U.S. alliances are still central to regional stability, and North Korea's threatening rhetoric still outpaces its behavior. Asia's many potential flashpoints—from the East and South China Seas to the Korean peninsula—are well known and have, to date, been managed in a way that has prevented crisis from becoming conflict. As a result, a kind of precarious Asian peace persists, and commerce continues to flow predictably.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake for the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance to find comfort in evidence of the familiar, because a different, more disruptive kind of evidence has emerged in recent years. Far from affirming existing alliance policies, this new evidence suggests that the U.S.-ROK alliance will need to adapt to an evolving global and regional context in order to prosper.

At the global level, robotics technologies are spreading in the commercial and military sectors. At the regional level, strategic hedging has become commonplace because trust in the Asia Pacific is generally low and uncertainty about the future generally high. The intersection of these trends, robotics and strategic hedging, makes military robotics a burgeoning domain of strategic competition in Asia that the U.S.-ROK alliance cannot ignore.

The Age of Robotics

Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—commonly called “drones”—are only one type of robotics technology, but have become the most visible and potentially controversial type of robotics technology to spread around the world. As of 2011, 76 countries possessed UAV technology of some kind, and at least 23 countries have invested in armed UAVs. Even nonstate groups like Hezbollah have joined the game, employing UAVs against Israel earlier this year. By 2018, global spending on UAVs alone is expected to exceed \$8 billion.

Scholars and pundits have declared that a global “robotics revolution” is in the making, partly because of the growth demonstrated by these numbers but also because the multiple factors driving the robotics trend seem likely to continue in the foreseeable future. First there is the commercially driven diffusion of the technology. Experimentation with drone-based logistics and product delivery systems by Amazon and Google are highly visible examples of the eagerness of the commercial sector to invest in the development and application of UAV technology. There are also cost- and labor-based incentives driving robotics investments in the global commercial market and militaries around the world. For instance, the training required to support the operation of even the most complex UAVs is only a fraction of the training required of pilots manning even the most basic military aircraft. Then there are operational benefits for the defense sector in particular. The Predator UAV has been a staple in the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in part due to its ability to loiter in a given airspace for long periods of time without needing crew rest or refueling.

Strategic Hedging in Asia

In Asia, the general robotics trend coincides with shifting relational patterns among states—namely the rise of hedging strategies in the foreign policy approaches of governments in the region. During the Cold War, the U.S. “hub-and-spoke” system of alliances contributed to a predictable scheme of regional alignments among Asian states. Confrontations and rivalries were numerous, but they were out in the open.

Today, indicators of strategic hedging, in contrast to outright confrontation, are pervasive. U.S. allies occasionally raise concerns about U.S. staying power in the region. Asian states gravitate toward China for economic prosperity, but rely on the United States more than ever for the security and stability of the region. Asian states are engaged in a flurry of security-related activities, with the United States and with each other, but there seems to be little prospect of either new alliances or a NATO-like mechanism coming to Asia anytime soon. And the region is engaged in military modernization even though most states lack declared adversaries. These trends are motivated as much by low trust among neighbors as by uncertainty about what the future security environment will hold.

Adapting the Alliance

The U.S.-ROK alliance creates its security policies in the context of these and other emerging trends, whether it chooses to acknowledge them or not. As a step toward not just acknowledging but adapting to compelling trends, the close cooperation forged between American and South Korean politicians, diplomats, and military operators now needs to be replicated between strategists on both sides. By routinizing engagements between American and South Korean strategists, the alliance can develop the habit of foresight, conducting those activities that too often fall off the crowded agenda of alliance managers dealing with crises and pressing policy issues: mapping alternative futures; scenario-based analysis; risk assessments of current policies; and net assessments of military balances in the region. These strategic planning tools and

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activities will aid the alliance in anticipating and adapting to strategically significant changes in the security environment (like the robotics trend).

Such an initiative may not be as easy to pursue as it seems: the ROK Ministry of National Defense does not even have a strategic planning office at last check; policy officials on both sides typically work on much shorter timelines than strategic planning requires; and discussions about the future risks tread into areas that government-to-government Track I channels may find uncomfortable or taboo. But these constraints on strategic cooperation only accentuate its importance.

Regularized strategic-level consultations by their nature constitute a longer-term process. In the near term though, the alliance is already facing the aforementioned convergent trends to which it must adapt. China's Xi Jinping and Japan's Abe Shinzo have both publicly declared a goal of gaining a dominant share of the robotics market in Asia. North Korean UAVs—reportedly of Chinese origin—have begun appearing in South Korea; North Korean media has even reported a novel practice of exercising “kamikaze drones” to be used against South Korean targets. Regional strategic competition has begun, and it includes military robotics.

The U.S.-ROK alliance should develop, field, and exercise “counter-drone” capabilities and operational concepts. The alliance will eventually need counters to medium- and high-altitude UAVs capable of performing at the level of Chinese-made UAVs, but the more urgent need is for radars capable of detecting small, low-speed, low-altitude systems. Defense against UAVs is only one dimension of the challenge. Other dimensions include alliance development of robotics technologies, alongside concepts of employment. Earlier this year, South Korea and Israel entered into a joint research and development partnership on UAVs. If South Korea can enter into such an agreement with Israel, why not with the United States? Both allies stand to benefit from technological advances made—commercially and militarily—and joint development should help ensure that emerging U.S. and ROK capabilities are interoperable.

Survival in any system demands adaption to changing rules and patterns. The convergence of the global “robotics revolution” with regional-level lattices of latent rivalries and pervasive feelings of uncertainty about the future produces a space for strategic competition in Asia. The future of the U.S.-ROK alliance demands adaptation to these changing circumstances. This is possible if we use the tools of strategic planning to try and peer beyond the horizon, preparing together for whatever comes next.

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