INSS Special Report

The U.S.–ROK Alliance: Building a Mature Partnership

by James J. Przystup and Kang Choi

This report presents two views on the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea and its future. It was prepared as a part of an ongoing dialogue between the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University and the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses. In the first contribution, James Przystup looks at the implications of American military transformation for security on the Korean Peninsula and the alliance. In the second, Kang Choi presents a South Korean roadmap to a mature and comprehensive security alliance. Both recognize the need for the U.S. and Republic of Korea (ROK) governments to articulate a common strategic vision that would adapt the alliance to an increasingly complicated security environment, reflect a more mature partnership, and develop a regional and global orientation.

The U.S.–ROK alliance, a pillar of East Asia security for more than 50 years, is faced with a complex set of challenges that will test its continuing relevance. The attacks of September 11 and the American commitment to wage a global war on terrorism have accelerated the transformation of the U.S. military from a static Cold War defense posture to a globally deployable and employable strike force. Meanwhile, on the Korean Peninsula, the threat posed by North Korea has become more dangerous as its nuclear challenge has become manifest. In South Korea, a new generation has come into political power over the past decade, and a generational fault line now divides the country on issues related to North Korea and relations with the United States. In this context, transforming the Armed Forces and the U.S. military presence globally and on the Korean Peninsula will require significant restructuring of alliance roles and missions. The challenge to the two partners is either to adapt to new realities or watch the alliance wither away.

Przystup contends that transformation of the U.S. military will leave a less intrusive American presence in South Korea, with enhanced capabilities to deter a range of threats from the North. U.S.-led transformation can maintain alliance solidarity and make the relationship more equitable, sustainable, and better able to undertake bilateral security cooperation off the peninsula. Achievement of this outcome requires commitment to the Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative and development of a strategic vision for the U.S. presence across the Asia-Pacific region over the next decade.

Choi argues that the alliance should not be confined to deterrence of North Korea but should evolve in ways that will allow it to deal with a range of new security challenges on and off the peninsula and contribute to promotion of common values. He sees the need to articulate a common U.S.–ROK strategic vision for the future of the alliance and to develop appropriate new military plans. To take on more responsibility, South Korea needs to enhance air and naval capabilities and to develop lighter and more mobile ground forces. Choi also urges that U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula be restructured to deal with a range of regional contingencies, while their relocation should proceed in close consultation with their South Korean allies to avoid raising political anxiety about a lessened U.S. commitment.

—Stephen J. Flanagan
Director
Institute for National Strategic Studies

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Military Transformation: Enhancing Capabilities and Commitment

by James J. Przystup

In thinking about the future direction of the alliance between the United States and South Korea, one needs to start in the past. For in this case, the past is truly prologue.

More than a decade ago, as President George W. Bush came into office, structural changes in the security landscape of Asia were becoming evident. The Cold War was winding down. Congress and the American public were looking for returns on the “peace dividend.” There was a clear expectation that cuts would be coming across the board—and in Asia, these cuts would begin with the Korean Peninsula.

To anticipate change, the Bush administration in 1999 launched the Asia Strategy Initiative, which laid out a 10-year, 3-stage plan for force reduction and mod-

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pines, toward greater reliance upon access basing, such as the U.S. presence at Clark Air Force Base and Subic Bay in the Philip-\n
es, toward greater reliance upon access basing arrangements across the region, the first hold because of the emergence of the North Korean nuclear threat.

In November 1991, however, Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney put the plan on hold because of the emergence of the North Korean nuclear threat.

Now, yet again, the United States and its allies face a transitional moment. The September 11 attacks have refocused attention on new threats emanating from Eurasia’s southern periphery. Pressures are rising to realign and transform U.S. forces.

In response, President George W. Bush has moved to transform the U.S. military to enable it to meet the threats of the new era. What do these developments imply for the Korean Peninsula, for the U.S.–ROK alliance, and for the stability and security of the Asia-Pacific region? Initial answers can best be developed from an understanding of the strategic vision of the Bush administra-

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America’s Strategy

The National Security Strategy, issued by the Bush administration in September 2002, defines the defense of the United States as “a new and fundamental commitment” of the American government.4 At the same time, the strategy postulates that the task of defending the United States has “changed dramatically.” Today, the threats come from “terrorists of global reach” and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

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Planning Guidance, issued in April 2005, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote: Some believe that with the United States in the midst of a dangerous war on terrorism, now is not the time to transform our armed forces. I believe that the opposite is true. Now is precisely the time to make changes. The war on terrorism is a transformational event that cries out for us to rethink our activities and to put that new thinking into action.

The guidance makes the following key points:

- The United States “cannot afford to react to threats slowly or have large forces tied down for lengthy periods.” One lesson of history is that merely attempting to hold on to existing advantages is a short-sighted approach and may prove disastrous.

- U.S. strategy requires transformed forces that can take action from a forward position and rapidly reinforce from other areas.

- U.S. strategy also requires that adversaries be defeated “swiftly and decisively” while protecting the American homeland.

- Transformed forces are essential “for deterring conflict, dissuading adversaries, and ensuring our commitment to a peaceful world.”

Earlier, at the end of September 2001, the QDR Report defined the overarching programmatic objective of transformation as the development of joint forces that “must be lighter, more lethal and maneuverable. . . . more readily deployable and employed in an integrated, joint fashion.” U.S. forces must not only be capable of “distributed and dispersed operations, but also to force entry in anti-access or area denial environments.”

The deployments of the Cold War era, concentrated in Western Europe and North-East Asia, were found 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.” This judgment has generated a search for “addi-
tional basing advantages” “beyond” Western Europe and Northeast Asia because in the post–September 11 world, the United States will no longer be able to deploy forces to deal with “a specific adversary in a specific geographical area” but will have to antic-
pate dealing with “unexpected crises against opponents over a range of capabilities.”

Thus, transformation shifts force planning from “optimizing” for conflicts in

Restructuring the Alliance for Regional and Global Challenges

by Kang Choi

A s the Northeast Asian security environment and strategic landscape change, new issues and challenges appear. For the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States, this means that adjustment is both necessary and desirable.

As a response to the inconclusive outcome of the Korean War and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the ROK-U.S. alliance has served its objectives—peace and security in the Pacific area—well for the past five decades, and it will do so into the future. While the threats posed by North Korea, the primary rationale for the security alliance, have not yet diminished, it is desirable for us to have a common vision, or roadmap, for the future of the alliance.

New Objectives?

The most important feature of any roadmap is the destination. The primary objective of the ROK-U.S. alliance has been the deterrence of North Korean armed attack against South Korea. By doing so, it has contributed to regional peace and security in the Pacific area.

But what if North Korean threats diminished? What would be the rationale of the alliance? Many have asserted that it should be transformed into a regional alliance to meet new security challenges in the Pacific area: a geographical expansion of the scope of the alliance without a redefinition of its concept of security.

New types of security challenges that transcend geographical boundaries have appeared in the past few years. These chal-

ges include not only terror and the prolif-

eration of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but also so-called nonconventional security issues—such as human and environ-

mental security, drug trafficking, organized crime, and more—requiring regional and international cooperation. The development of communication/computer technologies and networks has made societies vulnerable to cyberterror and information warfare. All these security issues go well beyond geographical boundaries and affect shared human values. Thus, it would be unnecessary and undesir-
able to define clearly a geographical limit of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

The alliance should not be confined necessarily to deterrence of armed attack; it must be able to deal with both military and nonmilitary threats and concerns. The future of the alliance should be designed to deal with various sources of potential threats. The objectives could be:

- realization of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in the Asia-Pacific region
- prevention/deterrence of any regional conflict that may challenge the national interests of South Korea and the United States
- realization of common and cooperative security by eliminating or deterring various sources of potential threats at various levels
- promotion of common values, such as freedom, democracy, human rights, and a free-market economy

In sum, the ROK-U.S. alliance should become a stepping stone for the development of a more comprehensive and effective system for regional as well as global peace and security as stated in the preamble of the Mutual Defense Treaty.

Prerequisites of Change

To achieve these ambitious objectives, the alliance will have to change considerably, in at least four notable ways.

From Military to Comprehensive Security. Based on the common values mentioned above, the scope of the ROK-U.S. alliance should go beyond the military field since there will be many more common concerns in emerging nonconventional security areas. In particular, South Korea will become more involved with regional and global issues in various fields. These concerns and issues require coordinated collective responses/approaches among allies with common responsibilities and visions. Thus, the alliance should be trans-

formed and upgraded to a comprehensive security alliance.

From Geography-based to Issue-based. Twenty-first-century security chal-

lenges are not confined within geographical boundaries and will be immune from what happens in other parts of the world. The limit of cooperation among allies should be based on the nature and scope of emerging issues rather than geography. While the alliance is mainly limited to the Korean Peninsula in particular and the Pacific area in general, this definition will change in the future.

The ROK contribution and assistance to East Timor, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Western Sahara are just a few examples. ROK capabilities are still limited, however, and are prima-

tely tied up with North Korean issues. As these capabilities are enhanced and North Korean threats diminish, the Republic of Korea can and should focus on its own geographic parameters. Such an approach will make the future ROK-U.S. alliance more flexible and responsive to emerging security concerns.

From Threat-driven to Profit-generating. The alliance has been working effectively to cope with North Korean military threats. The primary rationale of the alliance is to deter North Korean armed attack vis-à-vis South Korea. By doing so, it has con-

tributed to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia.

But what if North Korean threats do not exist, or do not constitute a major concern? What if there is no identifiable clear and present threat? Instead of reacting to threats, the future alliance must be directed toward a profit-generating alliance by creating and trading strategic land-

scape under which the national interests of both countries will be protected and pro-

moted. Leading the strategic landscape will be much more profitable than following it.

From Reactive to Proactive. While threat-driven alliances tend to be reactive, strategic alliances can be proactive. The alliance is more likely to be proactive in nature. Rather than being subject to the environment, the alliance should lead the environment. In other words,
Northeast Asia and Southwest Asia to "build- ing a portfolio of capabilities that is robust across the spectrum of possible force requirements, both functional and geographical"; in short, capabilities-based forces. The QDR Report calls for "new combinations of immediately employable forward stationed and deployed forces, such as Guam, or on the territory of reliable allies. However, the current network of large over- seas bases will be thrown into favor of smaller ones and "forward operating locations" that can serve as staging areas for rapid deployment. Prepositioning of equip ment along major sea lanes will also be an integral part of the operational picture.

**Multifaceted Threat**

That this conflation of transformation poses a direct challenge to business as usual in Korea could not be clearer. Rumsfeld has repeatedly expressed his concerns with respect to forward deployments in Europe and Asia that date back to the Cold War era. He has also observed that the United States still has "a lot of forces in Korea, arranged very far forward... where they really aren't very flexible or usable for other things." At the same time, he has expressed confidence that South Korea "has all the capability to provide the up-front deterrent that is needed"; meanwhile, the U.S. comparative advantage rests in its reinforcement capabilities via air or sea basing.

The threats posed by North Korea, however, have not stood still. For the United States, North Korea poses multiple security challenges, both on and off the peninsula. North Korea is a declining state, with attendant risks extending across a broad spectrum from impoverished neighbors to nuclear proliferation. Clearly, the exposure of the greater Seoul metropolitan area to large, forward-deployed North Korean ground forces remains a paramount problem for the United States and South Korea in any escalation scenario. North Korea is also a state engaged in the development of weapons of mass destruction and their proliferation. During his February 13, 2005, appearance before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Secretary Rumsfeld argued that the challenge posed by North Korea was more as a proliferator than as a nuclear threat on the peninsula.

Face with a multifaceted threat, the United States and South Korea have little choice but to prepare for multiple contingencies. In the context of the National Security Strategy and the QDR Report, U.S. forces on the peninsula are to assume a multitask role: maintain deterrence on the peninsula and be prepared to deploy off the peninsula in the global war on terror. At the same time, South Korea is to assume a greater role in its own defense.

This division of labor is not really new. Indeed, it comports with a long-term alliance objective, dating at least to 1995, of transiting South Korea to a leading role with respect to security on the peninsula. Even so, since early 2005, the United States has begun to push forward on specific initiatives. The Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative, launched in December 2002, has as its major component the pullback of the 2nd Infantry Division from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to locations south of Seoul, and relocation of the United States Forces, Korea, headquarters from Yokota Air Base on Japan to South Korea. North Korea already has the vast majority of forward defense between Seoul and the DMZ. At the same time, the United States announced an $11 billion investment in over 150 military enhancements on the peninsula, including the deployment of unmunited air combat units (UCAVs) and non-nuclear cruise missiles.

**Alliance Implications**

Without question, the political context for these moves is not very auspicious. The ROK body politic is deeply divided over the terms of engagement with Pyongyang and the northward expanded alliance on America for security. This view is balanced by the recognition of the importance of the alliance to South Korea's economic prosperity—in particular, foreign investor confidence—and, among a strong majority of alliance supporters, a recognition of the threat still posed by North Korea. Over the longer term, however, the four pluses of transformation discussed below should out weigh any negatives.

First, U.S.-led transformation should not be a threat to alliance solidarity. Done right, in fact, it will reinforce deterrence and strengthen the military effectiveness of the alliance in performing a range of vital tasks. It will do so by maximizing the unique capabilities that the United States can bring into play with respect to the peninsula while maximizing the conventional strength of South Korea. As the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has explained with respect to transformation of the peninsula, "No other force will make the capability...in South Korea less than it is today; it will only improve it." Also, in a speech delivered in Singapore, the Deputy Secretary of Defense explained that the purpose of transformation was to "take advantage of new technology to counter North Korean ballistic and nuclear capabilities and to strengthen defense."

The focus of transformation is not more people, and it is not numbers as a measure of commitment. Rather the focus of transformation is capabilities. It is about technology and organization. Both Iraq and Afghanistan stand to benefit from transformation in warfare. As a result, forces on the Korean Peninsula can be enhanced and capabilities built to bear that will serve to strengthen deterrence, and adjustments are being made to how forces are deployed and armed.

Much of the concern voiced early on in South Korea has been over the meaning of a U.S. pullback in the DMZ, in particular over the loss of the trip-wire presence of U.S. forces. This reflects the legacy of Cold War-era security logic. In reality, the U.S. commitment to Korea is a robust commitment based on a paper, the Mutual Defense Treaty between the two to be proactive, the ROK-U.S. alliance should be foresighted—that is, based on a shared assessment of strategic trends in which we can identify likely problems and issues together. To do so, we must be able to identify probable causal relations between symptoms and causes. We also should have a clear strategic vision and determination.

**Elements of Change**

To realize such a comprehensive alliance, there are many things to do on both sides. Overall, a much more sophisticated and well thought-out approach is required. What elements are required?

**Common Vision.** The first requirement is a clear strategic vision for the future based on shared values and trust in each other. Currently, there is no common strategic vision between South Korea and the United States, but one is needed. A joint declaration of the ROK-U.S. alliance for the future would be worth having as a platform or guideline in thinking of the future alliance. A joint declaration would provide a clear direction for any discussion or debate. Further, it would provide a better understanding of and a stronger support for the alliance among the people of both countries. It would also make clear how we should cooperate on particular issues. Lastly, it would enable us to take the lead in shaping the future security environment.

**Threat Assessment.** If we have a com mon strategic vision of where we stand today and what the possible ob stacles are to achieving that vision. In other words, a joint strategic assessment is required. Currently, South Korea and the United States do not share a long-term strategic assessment. But each country has its own long-term strategic priorities. The U.S. therefore has a coordination of long-term strategic planning, comprehensive strategic assessments that focus on the inter nal environment beyond the peninsula and South Korea. For that purpose, it is necessary to strengthen, or upgrade, strategic dialogue(s) and information/intelligence at both high and operational levels, and to establish a joint coordination of long-term strategic planning, comprehensive strategic assessments that focus on the inter nal environment beyond the peninsula and South Korea.

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Republic of Korea and the United States of America. Failure to honor that commitment on the Korean Peninsula would soon lead to security failures elsewhere as allies would likely come to terms of the value of an alliance with the United States. Failure in South Korea would almost certainly be translated into failure in Japan.

Trip-wire thinking also overlooks the reality of an American expatriate population in South Korea numbering close to 75,000. This population would be thrown into a welter of overwhelming concentration in the greater Seoul metropolitan area—well within North Korean artillery range. Putting these lives at risk would impose a heavy burden on any President. Second, transformation will make the alliance relationship more sustainable in the long term. At present, the United States has 41 major installations scattered across the peninsula, making the United States an intrusive presence in the everyday lives of many Koreans. The Yongsan base in Seoul is a demonstrable case in point; its relocation was agreed to in 1990. Consolidating the U.S. presence and reducing unnecessary burdens on both sides will make it less intrusive and, hopefully, less a politically divisive issue.

Third, transformation will make the alliance toward greater equality and maturity. This has long been an objective of both governments, going back at least as far as the East Asia Strategy Initiative, and is clearly an essential element of the ROK military and its presence across the globe to regional realities and power balances, as well as to country-specific requirements. What is needed is an East Asia Strategic Initiative for the year 2010.

In this context, the means:

- commitment to the Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative, which is the major vehicle for strengthening the alliance, enhancing deterrence, and shaping the future roles and missions of the alliance partners
- commitment to Yongsan relocation, which is simply long overdue
- development of a strategic vision/roadmap to the future which will define the roles and missions of the alliance partners both on and off the peninsula.

Transformation and restructuring of the American military presence on the Korean Peninsula cannot take place in a vacuum. What happens on the peninsula will have an immediate and direct impact on the U.S.-Japan alliance and the forward-deployed forces in Japan. In short, transformation on the peninsula will lead to transformation of the U.S. presence in Japan, which, in turn, will affect the nature of the American presence across the Asia-Pacific region.

Clearly, operational concerns in the war on terrorism must take precedence in the deployment of U.S. forces, but, at the same time from a policy perspective, it must also be recognized that deployments take place in a political and diplomatic context. For the publics of the United States and South Korea, and for the Asia-Pacific region, it is essential to tie processes now transforming the U.S. military and its presence across the globe to regional realities and power balances, as well as to country-specific requirements. What is needed is an East Asia Strategic Initiative for the year 2010.

Looking Ahead

After an emotionally charged political campaign, which resulted in the election of President Roh, U.S.-ROK relations have transformation will move the alliance toward greater equality and maturity

again gained traction, particularly with respect to the alliance. Shortly after the election, President Roh made clear his recognition of the importance of the alliance to ROK security and has repeatedly returned to the theme. His visits to U.S. bases, including Yongsan, have underscored the message, and his meeting with President Bush in Washington in May 2005 has set a direction for alliance cooperation.

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Notes

5. Ibid., 17.
6. Ibid., 17.
9. The CFC commander has the right to ask for the transfer of control over necessary ROK forces through Combined Delegated Authority.
10. Changes in the defense readiness condition are supposed to be based on good judgment, need, and the current security situation.
11. The United Nations Command should be dissolved if peace replaces the current Armistice Agreement. Until that time, the command should be preserved.

The United States would be wise to pursue the relocation and restructuring of the USFK in close consultation and coordination with its ally rather than unilaterally. Espe-

ically, the United States must closely coordi-
rate with ROK force improvement programs. To help eliminate ROK security worries, complementary measures (for example, deploying additional air and naval assets and upgrading lift capabilities of U.S. forces on the mainland) to ensure the reliability and robustness of a combined defense posture must be part of the overall package.

The ROK–U.S. alliance has matured over the past half century. Old challenges, such as North Korea, remain, but the Cold War structure of international relations is now a decade into history. Today, new challenges confront the alliance partners. Meeting the threat of global terrorism and mov-

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