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**The Origins and Evolution
of the Korean-American Alliance:
A Korean Perspective**

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July 1998

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The Origins and Evolution of the Korean-American Alliance: A Korean Perspective

Byung-joon Ahn

The Korean-American alliance has kept the peace on the Korean peninsula for forty-five years since its inception in 1953. Now that a gradual process for Korean unification has gotten under way as indicated by the beginning of the Four-Party Talks and North-South dialogues, it is important to reexamine the origins and evolution of this alliance in order that its future challenges in the changing strategic environment in the Asia Pacific region can be met.

In addressing this issue, we must examine the alliance's origins in the Cold War and the Korean War, for the alliance was established to deter another war after the Korean War was halted in an armistice. In tracing its evolution, we must explain how the shifting strategic environment and the allies' responses have affected its transformation by analyzing the impact of such important events as the Vietnam War, the Sino-Soviet dispute and the Nixon Doctrine, the Reagan and Bush years, the end of the Cold War and North Korea's nuclear challenge, the prospects for unification, and regional rivalry between major powers. Finally, we should speculate on the future of the Korean-American alliance after the unification of Korea. It is difficult to ascertain the Korean perspective on these questions. Hence it should be made clear at the outset that what follows is only one Korean perspective as I see it in light of the available material.

From an Alliance against War to an Alliance for Unification and Stability

The Korean-American alliance originated from the Korea-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1953 as a bilateral alliance against another war. Since then, it has evolved into an alliance for peace, unification, and stability. The threats from North Korea to the security of

South Korea and the United States prompted these asymmetric countries to form the alliance. As long as the threats from North Korea remain real, the alliance is able to be maintained robustly. When such threats are reduced or gone, however, the alliance must be redefined for other purposes.

Even though the threat from North Korea has remained constant, the specific ways in which the Korean-American alliance evolved were constrained by changes and shifts in the strategic environment involving such major powers as the United States, Japan, China, and Russia (the Soviet Union), and by changes in the political and economic situations that South Korea and the United States encountered in conducting their bilateral relations. As the endgame seems to be approaching in North Korea and major-power rivalry is on the rise again in East Asia, it is time for South Korea and the United States to reshape their security relationship to meet the challenges of the future beyond unification.

The origins, evolution, and future of the alliance can be investigated both chronologically and analytically. Doing so will reveal a central theme: when the global and regional interests of the United States have converged with South Korea's local interests, the state of their alliance has been relatively smooth; when they have diverged, it has been strained. One effective way to bridge this gap is to view peace and security in Korea as a regional challenge and to foster a Korean-American regional alliance for accomplishing peace, unification, and stability to meet the common challenges in North Korea and East Asia that may result from the end of the Cold War and the transformation of North Korea.

In general, South Koreans have supported the alliance as long as there were threats from North Korea, but have doubted its viability whenever the United States took unilateral action toward the North without sufficient consultation with the South. The shape of the alliance from now on will depend more on the future of North Korea and on the evolution of domestic politics in South Korea and the United States, as in the post-Cold War era domestic politics is going to influence foreign policy more than foreign policy is going to influence domestic politics.

This overall thesis can be addressed in several steps. In the following section, I explain how the Korean-American alliance originated from the Korean War in 1950–1953 as a bilateral alliance against another war when the two countries signed the Mutual Defense Treaty to contain communism globally and North Korean threats locally.

The third section is devoted to analyzing the evolution of the alliance from a Cold War arrangement against North Korea to an alliance for peace, unification, and stability not only on the peninsula but throughout the Northeast Asian region as a whole. To elaborate on this process, I first account for the emergence of a robust Cold War alliance during the 1960s that culminated at the peak of the Vietnam War when South Korea dispatched two infantry divisions to South Vietnam in 1965. Second, I explain the background to the American troop withdrawal and the resulting adjustments and tensions created in the alliance after Richard Nixon issued the Guam Doctrine in 1969 and especially after Jimmy Carter announced a phased troop withdrawal plan in 1977. Third, I deal with the process through which the Korean-American security partnership was renewed after Ronald Reagan put a halt to the troop withdrawal plan in 1981. Fourth, I investigate how the end of the Cold War and North Korea's nuclear challenge resulted in another series of strains in the alliance, especially when the Clinton administration focused the priority of its Korea policy on global nuclear nonproliferation while Seoul was primarily concerned with deterring local threats. Fifth, I argue that as the deteriorating situation in North Korea increases the prospects for unifica-

tion and big-power rivalry, South Korea and the United States must redefine their alliance for political unification in the peninsula and for regional stability in Northeast Asia.

The fourth section is the conclusion. I speculate on the future of the Korean-American alliance after unification and advocate a regional alliance that will enable Korea to maintain a token American military presence as an insurance policy against hegemony and nuclear weapons, and for peacekeeping and stability in East Asia.

Origins of the Alliance: The Korean War and the Korea-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty

The Korean-American alliance originated from the American intervention in the Korean War in 1950–1953 to defend South Korea and Japan as part of its containment strategy directed against Soviet and Chinese communism. It was formalized largely as an army-to-army relationship when the two countries concluded the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) in 1953. Since this treaty officially committed the United States to the defense of the Republic of Korea (ROK) by stationing ground troops to deter another war on the peninsula, the republic has been unilaterally dependent on the United States for security.

It is important to note that the Korean War was a by-product of the Cold War that was escalating during the late 1940s and early 1950s, and that the Korean-American alliance was cemented during this limited war, the first in which the United States intervened after World War II. The outbreak of the war in June 1950 compelled the United States to sign a series of defense agreements with Japan, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand in San Francisco in September 1951. The U.S.-Japanese security treaty in particular gave the United States the right to use bases in Japan for the purpose of contributing to the security of Japan and to “the maintenance of peace and security in the Far East.” By implication this provision made it clear that the Japanese-American and Korean-American alliances were interdependent. The MDT was another important treaty added to these bilateral treaties that the United States signed to support its containment strategy in Asia.

No less important is the fact that the lack of U.S. strategic interests in Korea during the last phase of the Pacific War was partially responsible for the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 and that the precipitous withdrawal of American occupation troops from Korea in 1949 made it easier for North Korea to invade South Korea in 1950. The subsequent events that unfolded in Korea and the expansion of the Cold War throughout the world paved the way for the formation of the Korean-American alliance in addition to the Japanese-American alliance in Northeast Asia.

During the last phase of World War II in the Pacific the United States was primarily concerned with the goal of occupying Japan, and had no well-defined policy toward the Korean peninsula. At the Cairo conference in 1943, for example, the Allies declared that Korea would be free and independent “in due course,” but did not specify how that goal could be accomplished. At the Yalta conference in February 1945, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Josef Stalin to enter the Pacific War to secure an early Japanese surrender because he could not send American forces to China and Korea. Some Koreans suspect that Roosevelt and Stalin actually agreed at this conference to divide the Korean peninsula. In hindsight, the entry of Soviet troops into the Korean peninsula on August 9, 1945, did have a lot to do with the division, for the U.S. War Department decided to demand on August 15,

1945, after a discussion of thirty minutes among low-ranking officials, that the Red Army stop marching at the 38th parallel so that American forces could accept Japanese surrender in the south. When the Soviet Union complied with this request, the peninsula was divided, with far-reaching implications for its future. Only on September 8, 1945, did the first contingent of the U.S. Seventh Infantry Division arrive at Inchon.

Thus, the 38th parallel which Washington proposed as a purely military demarcation gradually turned into a political line after the Soviet forces began to fortify along the line. The political division was completed when the two states were launched in one nation, Korea: the Republic of Korea under President Syngman Rhee on August 15, 1948, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Prime Minister Kim Il Sung on September 9, 1948. Despite President Rhee's staunch objections, by June 1949 the American troops had departed Korea, even as poorly equipped South Korean troops were fighting "North Korean invaders" at Ongjin. Despite these frequent border clashes and North Korea's Soviet-assisted military buildup, the United States resisted proposals to increase military assistance to the ROK. In his famous speech to the National Press Club on January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson excluded the ROK from America's strategic "defense perimeter," saying that those excluded nations should look to the United Nations for deterring communist aggression. On June 25, 1950, the North Korean People's Army crossed the 38th parallel, opening the Korean War.

Quite contrary to the revisionist view that "no one and every one" was responsible for this war,¹ and that "'who started the Korean War?' is the wrong question,"² we now know that Kim Il Sung started the war with the approval of Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong by telling them that the United States would not intervene in the war. According to a prominent historian of the Cold War, President Harry Truman "had not accepted the recommendations of NSC-68 at the time the fighting in Korea broke out; but he soon changed his mind and approved the document, which became the basis for foreign and military policy throughout the remainder of his administration."³ Thus, Truman's decision to dispatch American troops from Japan to Korea by implementing the strategy of containment was crucial to forming the Korean-American alliance in the subsequent period.

The prolongation of the war after China's intervention prompted Stalin to propose a truce, but South Korean president Rhee was opposed to this idea on the grounds that it would hinder the prospects for reunification. Most of the Korean people rallied behind Rhee on this point. After two years of arduous negotiations, the armistice was finally signed between the UN Command and the North Korean People's Army, with a Chinese delegate participating, on July 27, 1953, to end the war that had cost America some 54,246 lives including non-battle deaths, 103,284 non-fatal casualties, and \$75 billion.⁴ As a condition for accepting the armistice, however, President Rhee demanded that the United States sign a defense pact with South Korea. President Eisenhower agreed to do so. Thus on October 1, 1953, the MDT was signed and in January 1954 it was ratified by the legislatures and went into effect.

Since this treaty became the basis document for the alliance between the ROK and the United States, its two most important articles deserve full quotation here:

Article 2. The Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of either of them, the political independence of either of the Parties is threatened by external armed attack. Separately and jointly, by self-help and mutual aid, the Parties will maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack and will take suitable

measures in consultation and agreement to implement this Treaty to further its purpose.

Article 3. Each party recognizes that an armed attack in the Pacific area on either of the Parties in territories now under their respective administrative control, or hereafter recognized by one of the Parties as lawfully brought under the administrative control of the other, would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.

Many people in South Korea have expressed concerns about the provision of “constitutional process” in this treaty by pointing out that it differs from the NATO or the U.S.-Japan security treaty, which have an automatic or prompt response provision.

Evolution of the Alliance: From a Cold War to a Regional Alliance

The Korean-American security relationship began as a Cold War alliance but gradually developed into a regional alliance as the two countries sought to cope with North Korean threats and strategic shifts emerging on the peninsula and the surrounding environment. While South Korea was participating in the American-led Vietnam War, it was possible for the unequal partners to demonstrate a collective defense operation and by doing so to maintain a robust Cold War alliance. But after President Nixon issued the Guam Doctrine and especially after President Carter began to withdraw American troops, South Korea's confidence in the U.S. security commitment was shaken and the alliance relationship had to be readjusted. When Reagan suspended the withdrawal plan, however, the alliance was reinvigorated. After Clinton sought to negotiate directly with North Korea to secure a nuclear freeze even when North Korea refused to negotiate peace with South Korea, the alliance was strained again. As South Korea and the United States coordinate their contingencies for the deteriorating situation in North Korea and for the responses of other powers after the Cold War, their security cooperation is slowly heading for a regional alliance for unification on the peninsula and for stability in the surrounding area.

A Robust Cold War Alliance: The Vietnam War

Once Washington embarked upon an active containment strategy in Asia and the Pacific, it was natural that South Korea and the United States build a robust Cold War alliance to deter another war and communist expansionism during the 1960s and especially during the Vietnam War. In 1965, South Korea took two crucial steps to consolidate its alliance with the United States: diplomatic normalization with Japan and dispatch of two infantry divisions to Vietnam. Without question, Washington actively encouraged Seoul to take these decisions by providing more than \$3 billion in military aid between 1953 and 1969 so that South Korea could share the costs of waging the Cold War in Northeast and Southeast Asia.

It took almost fourteen years for South Korea to normalize its diplomatic relations with Japan. In order to lessen its defense burden in Northeast Asia, the United States persuaded President Park Chung Hee to reach a negotiated settlement of the enduring disputes with Japan in 1965. For Park, Japan's economic cooperation was urgently needed to finance his

first five-year economic development plan begun in 1962. It should be pointed out here that the special demands created by the Korean War had boosted Japanese economic recovery. It is also true that the advent of Japanese credits and the special demands resulting from the Vietnam War helped South Korea to transform its subsistence economy into a newly industrializing economy.

As the United States escalated its military operation in Vietnam, South Korea was seriously concerned that the war would undermine the credibility of American security commitments to Korea. Under these circumstances, it was difficult for Seoul to eschew Washington's demands that it send combat troops to Vietnam. But, worried that the United States would reduce its forces in Korea, President Park asked President Lyndon Johnson to give him clear assurance that this would not be done. To allay these worries, Ambassador Winthrop G. Brown provided such assurance in a note to the South Korean government in July 1965 that stated that there would be no reduction in U.S. force levels and that no U.S. troops would be withdrawn from Korea without prior consultation with the ROK.⁵ When President Johnson visited Korea in November 1966, he promised that the United States would undertake "prompt and effective assistance" to defeat an armed attack against the ROK.

South Korea dispatched the Tiger Infantry Division in 1965, the Ninth Infantry Division in 1966, and a marine battalion in 1967, sending a total of 50,000 troops to Vietnam. By doing so, it came to share the burden of fighting communist aggression in Asia, thereby turning the one-sided alliance into a reciprocal security relationship and gaining some measure of self-confidence in its military capabilities.

South Korea's confidence in the United States declined, however, when Washington carried out a direct negotiation with Pyongyang after the latter seized the U.S. intelligence ship *Pueblo*, even after a North Korean commando team made an assassination attempt on President Park in January 1968. The South Korean public worried that Seoul was being left out of the negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang over release of the ship's crew from North Korean prisons. President Johnson's pledge to provide further military assistance and to hold an annual Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) between the defense ministers and military commanders of the two countries reassured Seoul of Washington's firm security commitment and kept the alliance from eroding further.

Adjustments in the Alliance: The Nixon Doctrine and the Carter Plan for Troop Withdrawal

When the Nixon administration undertook a disengagement of American troops from Vietnam in the name of the Guam (or Nixon) Doctrine and set out to seek détente with both China and the Soviet Union by taking advantage of the deepening Sino-Soviet dispute, South Korea had to make adjustments in its alliance with the United States. After the Carter administration began to actually withdraw American troops from Korea after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, South Korea's anxiety increased. In response to these American actions, President Park tried to keep the alliance relationship intact by all means while seeking better relations with North Korea and exploring ways of building self-reliant defense capabilities by launching heavy and chemical industries at home.

The announcement in July 1969 that the United States would reduce its forward deployed troops in Asia and ask Asian countries to assume greater defense roles had a profound impact on the state of South Korean-American military relations. When Nixon met with Japanese prime minister Eisaku Sato in 1969, he agreed to return Okinawa to

Japan but asked Sato to increase Japan's role in Korean security. This was why Sato stated that the security of Korea was essential to the security of Japan itself. South Korea welcomed the reassurance of this statement.

In 1971 the Nixon administration withdrew the 20,000-troop Seventh Division from Korea, leaving only the Second Division. To compensate for this withdrawal, Washington planned to help Seoul's force modernization programs by delivering advanced fighters like the F-16 and missiles, but their deliveries were behind schedule, causing more anxiety in Seoul.

Nixon's visit to China in February 1972 caught President Park by surprise. It was inconceivable to think that Nixon could go to China, an ally of North Korea, without prior consultation with South Korea. As a result of this incident, Park opened secret dialogues with Kim Il Sung. On July 4, 1972, Seoul and Pyongyang issued the famous Joint Statement pledging to reconcile their differences and to work toward unification through their independent efforts. On the other hand, President Park announced on June 23, 1973, what would be the harbinger of South Korea's later policy of *Nordpolitik*, its intention to normalize relations with non-hostile communist countries. Park also attempted to develop nuclear weapons as an independent deterrent, but abandoned the program under heavy pressure from Washington.⁶ By promising to provide a nuclear umbrella with tactical nuclear weapons deployed in Korea, Washington kept Seoul from procuring a plutonium separation system from Canada in 1976. To reassure Seoul of America's security commitment, the two militaries began to conduct the annual Team Spirit exercises in 1976 to demonstrate their joint deterrence and defense capabilities against North Korean threats.

Carter's quest, announced in March 1977, to withdraw all 33,000 ground forces from Korea by the end of 1978 and to apply an active human rights policy directed against the repression of the Park regime caused more tensions in the Korean-American alliance. After objections from Congress, especially from senators Hubert Humphrey and John Glenn, and U.S. intelligence reports that North Korean forces were far more and stronger than previously known, only 3,600 troops were actually withdrawn. In November 1978 the two countries agreed to establish the Combined Force Command (CFC) so that the Korean side could gradually assume operational control over the armed forces. Under this new arrangement, South Korean officers came to participate in military decision making and operations during peacetime. Finally, in 1979 Carter decided to "hold in abeyance" any further withdrawal of combat forces until 1981.

Against this background, President Park apparently authorized a lobbying campaign to buy influence for Korean security in the U.S. Congress. His efforts, which resulted in the so-called "Koreagate" scandal, further weakened confidence in the U.S.-ROK alliance. As the U.S. Justice Department and the Congress demanded the testimony of Pak Tong-son, who allegedly dispensed several million dollars to buy influence, and of Kim Dong-jo, a former Korean ambassador to the United States who allegedly cooperated with Pak, there was genuine fear that this might adversely affect the Korean-American security relationship. Eventually, a compromise was struck to avert confrontation between the two governments.

A Reinvigorated Alliance: The Reagan and Bush Years

President Reagan's decision to invite President Chun Doo Hwan to the White House in March 1981 as his first state guest was a deliberate action intended to demonstrate his policy of placing security ahead of human rights in American foreign policy. By and large, President

George Bush also followed this example. Consequently, the Reagan and Bush years from the 1980s to the early 1990s saw a reinvigorated alliance between South Korea and the United States. To a certain extent, this was possible because Reagan resurrected the policy of global containment against the “evil empire” of the Soviet Union, and South Korea shared this perspective insofar as it pertained to North Korea.

From Seoul’s point of view, the invitation of Chun was itself a great political boost to the legitimacy of the military regime. The Chun-Reagan summit issued a joint communiqué stating that the United States had no plans to withdraw any more ground forces from Korea. Furthermore, the Reagan administration made it clear that the United States would continue to provide its nuclear umbrella and advanced military hardware and technologies to enhance South Korean defense capabilities. South Korea, on the other hand, began to bear more of the burden of maintaining the U.S. forces. In 1987, for example, South Korea paid a total of \$1.6 billion in indirect contributions of rent-free land and other subsidies in addition to a cash payment of about \$200 million as part of the new burden-sharing arrangement. In this manner, the alliance evolved into a give-and-take partnership.

The Bush administration continued the Reagan administration’s Korea policy by carrying out close consultation with the Roh Tae Woo government. In doing so, President Bush sought to make adjustments in the number of U.S. troops in Korea by linking it to the state of North–South Korean relations. In accordance with the Nunn-Warner amendment to the Fiscal 1990 Defense Authorization Act, for example, Washington let Seoul play the lead role in defense while professing to assume only the supporting role. Under this plan, the first phased withdrawal of 5,000 ground and 2,000 air forces was completed by 1992. In order to enhance the status of South Korea relative to North Korea, a Korean general was appointed in January 1991 as a senior member of the UN Command’s Military Armistice Commission at Panmunjom, an act which prompted North Korea to boycott the Commission and to undercut the armistice. Seoul signed a new Status of Forces Agreement with Washington that required American soldiers in Korea accused of committing crimes to be tried in Korean courts. The two countries also signed an umbrella agreement on Wartime Host Nation Support in August 1991, concluding six years of negotiation over how to facilitate deployment of U.S. forces in times of crisis.

During the 1991 Gulf War, South Korea sent a contingent of engineers and nurses and contributed \$400 million. Since then Seoul has sent peacekeeping forces to the Middle East and Africa as part of its contributions to international peace and security. At the end of 1991 the Korean military took over from the U.S. Second Division the responsibility of guarding the rear areas of the truce village of Panmunjom. In 1992 a Korean general began to command ground elements of both Korean and American troops. These measures were taken to “Koreanize Korean defense” under an agreed schedule between Seoul and Washington.

Washington and Seoul abided by the principle that Washington would talk with and eventually normalize relations with Pyongyang only when Pyongyang signed a nuclear safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), resumed dialogue with Seoul, suspended terrorism, and returned the remains of American soldiers. The Bush administration lent active support to Seoul’s negotiation of the Agreement on Nonaggression, Cooperation and Reconciliation (the Basic Accord) as well as the Joint Denuclearization Statement concluded with Pyongyang in 1991, and to the *Nordpolitik* of normalizing South Korea’s diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1990 and with China in 1992. Right after the United States announced in 1991 the decision to withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from overseas, President Roh volunteered to abandon any repro-

cessing or enrichment of fissile material, hoping that North Korea would do likewise. But the discovery of North Korea's nuclear weapons program after the end of the Cold War was bound to complicate the South Korean alliance with the United States.

A Strained Alliance: The North Korean Nuclear Challenge after the End of the Cold War

The increasing threat of a North Korean nuclear capability after the end of the Cold War created a crisis atmosphere in Korea, especially when North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993, two years before the United States was prepared to lead the effort for the treaty's indefinite extension. Faced with this dire situation, the first Clinton administration was more concerned with the imminent task of ensuring global nuclear nonproliferation than anything else. The Kim Young Sam government, however, was more concerned with the need to deter nuclear and conventional military threats from the North, especially after Kim Il Sung refused to implement the Basic Accord and the Denuclearization Statement by seeking to negotiate directly with Washington. As the gap between Washington's global interests and Seoul's local interests widened, the alliance was further strained.

The nuclear challenge came into the open when it was revealed that North Korea was operating a 5-megawatt and constructing a 50-megawatt reactor and a 200-megawatt reactor along with a large reprocessing plant. Had Pyongyang been allowed to proceed with these programs, it would have been able to produce dozens of atomic bombs. It was to blunt this trend from continuing that Washington was seriously considering economic and other sanctions against Pyongyang at the UN. Faced with the danger of another military confrontation and possibly even war, President Kim Young Sam agreed to de-link North-South Korean relations from U.S.-North Korean relations by telling Washington to go ahead with a separate negotiation on nuclear issues with Pyongyang in New York and Geneva, and by suspending the annual Team Spirit exercises in 1994.

As North Korea posed not merely nuclear but also conventional threats, the first Clinton administration put a halt to troop-withdrawal plans and consolidated the war-fighting capabilities of the American forces in Korea by bringing new helicopters and Patriot missiles into South Korea. To continue the policy of Koreanizing defense, at the end of 1994 a Korean general assumed operational control over Korean land forces during peacetime. As former assistant secretary of defense Joseph S. Nye pointed out, "North Korea is a clear and present danger. Not only is it on the brink of a nuclear weapons capability, but it has also 1.1 million under arms, with two-thirds of them deployed along the Korean Demilitarized Zone. Moreover, it is developing a new generation of ballistic missiles."⁷ We can also add biochemical weapons to this list.

The *East Asian Strategy Report* published by the Pentagon in February 1995 clearly stated that the United States would maintain the level of 37,000 troops in South Korea as part of the forward deployment of 100,000 troops in East Asia. The Pentagon justified this plan by stating that "in thinking about the Asia-Pacific region, security comes first, and a continued United States military presence will continue to serve as bedrock for America's security role in this dynamic area of the world."⁸

At the height of the nuclear crisis in June 1994, the United States was close to preparing for war with North Korea, but President Carter's visit to Pyongyang contributed to averting this confrontation. According to William Perry, then secretary of defense, only Carter's call from Pyongyang stopped President Clinton and his advisors from going ahead with a plan of

sanctions against North Korea, thereby paving the way for the Washington-Pyongyang negotiation in Geneva.⁹

On October 21, 1994, the United States and North Korea concluded the Agreed Framework in Geneva, under which the United States agreed to provide two 1,000-megawatt light-water reactors and 500,000 tons of fuel oil annually and in return North Korea agreed to freeze the reactors and the reprocessing plant. By signing another agreement in Kuala Lumpur in June 1995, the United States also agreed to create the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) to negotiate contracts with South Korea for building the light-water reactors. South Korea welcomed these as avenues to open dialogues for negotiating peace and cooperation with North Korea.

In sharp contrast to this expectation, however, the Agreed Framework encouraged North Korea in its refusal to deal directly with South Korea. The North implemented only the nuclear portion of the Agreed Framework but refused to implement the ambiguously worded peace and dialogue portion, thus driving a wedge between the United States and South Korea. And yet Washington tried to engage Pyongyang in bilateral talks on missiles and MIA and liaison offices, and provided \$62 million in humanitarian food aid as of July 1997.

Many South Koreans were unhappy that South Korea was being shut out of the nuclear negotiation in Geneva. Some felt that North Korea was rewarded with light-water reactors and heavy oil despite its violation of international norms while South Korea was forced to shoulder the cost of building the reactors even when there was direct negotiation with the North. As Pyongyang continued to refuse to talk with Seoul, South Korea's fear that Washington could strike a deal with Pyongyang behind its back increased.

Having obtained the official channels of negotiation with Washington by playing a game of nuclear brinkmanship, Pyongyang set out to destroy the armistice in its attempts to accomplish the goal of negotiating a peace agreement with Washington. In April 1993 it expelled the Czechoslovak delegation to the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission (NNSC) from Panmunjom. In November 1994 Beijing pulled out its representatives from the MAC in deference to Pyongyang's request. In March 1995 Pyongyang forced the Polish delegation to the NNSC to leave Panmunjom by cutting off its supply of food, water, and electricity. In May 1995 Pyongyang sealed off the northern part of the joint security area at Panmunjom by banning officials of the NNSC and American personnel and journalists from crossing the demarcation line without its permission. Despite repeated warnings from Washington, its campaign to rupture the armistice machinery was almost completed.

It was to counter this move that President Clinton and President Kim jointly proposed in April 1996 the Four-Party Talks involving the two Koreas, the United States, and China. At their summit meeting on Cheju Island, they agreed that South Korea and North Korea should take the lead in a renewed search for a permanent peace arrangement. The North was reluctant to accept these talks, however. Against this background, the submarine incident took place in September 1996 and tensions once again rose between North and South. As tens of thousands of South Korean troops searched for the missing crew of the spy submarine, Secretary of State Warren Christopher called for "all parties [to] avoid taking any further provocative action," without distinguishing which side provoked the incident.¹⁰ Many South Koreans took these remarks as America's attempt to remain neutral by not acknowledging the existence of the U.S. alliance with South Korea. An outburst of complaints resulted, and distrust of the United States in South Korea rose, especially in the press.

It was clear that while U.S.–North Korean relations were somewhat improving, North–South Korean relations were worsening, for the North had yet to reduce military tensions and to resume good-faith dialogue with the South. At the height of these tensions Seoul blocked a KEDO survey team from going to North Korea and Washington had to confirm a “pause” in the implementation of the nuclear accord. Pyongyang then threatened to reactivate the frozen reactors and to stop the canning of the removed fuel rods. President Kim and President Clinton issued another joint statement in Manila in November 1996 at the APEC forum stating that they supported the nuclear accord but demanding that North Korea take acceptable steps to resolve the 1996 submarine incident and avoid such provocation in the future. Now that Washington was standing firm by its ally, Pyongyang expressed “deep regrets” at the end of December 1996 and that it would make efforts to ensure that such an incident would not recur and would work with others for durable peace and stability on the Korean peninsula. Only then was a measure of trust restored to the Korean-American alliance.

The worsening food crisis deriving from fundamental structural defects, coupled with two consecutive years of flood in 1995 and 1996 and drought in 1997, compelled North Korea to accept preparatory meetings for four-party talks in August and September 1997. After nineteen months of contacts, the first round of the Four-Party Talks was convened in Geneva on December 9 and 10, 1997, with a broad agenda of building a lasting peace and confidence in Korea; this really was the beginning of the beginning of the Korean peace process, but, because the North persisted in its calls for direct negotiation of a peace agreement with the United States, ostensibly to replace the armistice and U.S. troop withdrawal, little progress was made beyond a promise to continue the talks in March 1998. The North made these nonnegotiable demands to extract maximum concessions on food aid and economic cooperation from the United States and South Korea. But Washington made it clear that the United States was not a neutral actor but an ally of the South, and that therefore the issue of American troops could not be negotiated with the North.

Since Washington recognized that neither the Agreed Framework nor a “soft landing” of North Korea could be accomplished without North-South peace and cooperation, it was imperative for the ROK and the United States to sustain a common agenda in coping with the North Korean challenge.

An Alliance for Unification and Stability: The Future of North Korea and Major-Power Rivalry

As the collapse of North Korea and the unification of Korea has already begun and the surrounding powers are seriously concerned with the implications of these changes, it is imperative for the ROK and the United States to strengthen their alliance by all means—not only for peace and unification on the peninsula, but also for stability in Northeast Asia, where the interests of four major powers, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States, intersect. The second Clinton administration and the new Seoul government that came to power on February 25, 1998, must prepare for the endgame in North Korea and work out a comprehensive agenda for peace, unification, and stability, and regard the Four-Party Talks only as a means for accomplishing these ends.

At their June 1998 summit meeting in Washington, President Kim and President Clinton shared common perspectives on engaging North Korea while they prepared a series of contingency plans in the event that the policy of engagement fails. Kim’s “sunshine policy”

toward the North is premised on three principles: the South will never tolerate armed provocation by the North, has no intention to undermine or absorb the North, and will seek reconciliation and cooperation with the North. With these ideals he urged Washington to ease the economic sanctions against Pyongyang. President Clinton responded to this by saying, "I would encourage the leaders of North Korea, and all those in influence there, to respond to [Kim's] farsighted overture. And let's get this show on the road, as we say in America."¹¹ Insofar as the policy of engaging North Korea in North-South dialogue and the Four-Party Talks are concerned, Seoul and Washington have shared converging views since the Kim Dae-jung government assumed office in February 1998.

In all probability, the future of North Korea will determine the prospects for Korean unification and Northeast Asian security in the short run. North Korea faces three options: the status quo and military confrontation; a "soft landing" (meaning survival through reform and opening) and unification by mutual consent; and collapse and unification by absorption. If we see collapse not as one "big bang" but as a protracted process of several steps starting with an economic collapse or what others call "muddling through,"¹² we can say that this process and hence the third option are proceeding now.

As happened in Germany, however, Korean unification also may come about not by design but by default.¹³ More important than unification as such is to take the process of ensuring peace and unification as a regional challenge, not only for the Korean-American alliance but for the U.S.-Japanese alliance and for Sino-American cooperation.¹⁴ It is prudent, therefore, for South Korea, the United States, Japan, and all other concerned parties to prepare for the endgame in North Korea with contingency planning and crisis management capabilities. South Korea and the United States in particular should coordinate a comprehensive agenda for peace, unification, and stability to reduce not just nuclear proliferation but also conventional military threats and to foster productive North-South dialogue by focusing their joint efforts on building a larger security strategy. The Four-Party Talks are only a means for building a lasting peace. Ultimately, the two Koreas themselves are responsible for accomplishing peace and unification through North-South dialogue. South Korea should set the general parameters of managing the Korean question including North-South relations. The United States, Japan, China, and Russia must lend active international support and guarantee the results of the two-party talks.

The April 1996 U.S.-Japanese Joint Declaration on Security that President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto adopted has significant implications for Korean and regional security. South Korea expects that this redefinition and the subsequent U.S.-Japanese review of their defense cooperation guidelines published in September 1997 should contribute to Korean unification and regional security. Because of many lingering historical legacies, however, many Koreans are worried about a revival of Japanese militarism. Hence, there are urgent needs for promoting security cooperation between South Korea and Japan to meet their common security challenges.

When the United States and Japan reaffirmed their alliance as "the cornerstone for achieving a common security objective, and for maintaining a stable and prosperous environment for the Asia-Pacific region as we enter the 21st century,"¹⁵ this meant that Japan must share a regional security role with the United States. In fact, this alliance is equivalent to NATO in Asia by anchoring U.S. military presence as a stabilizing force in Asia and the Pacific. Specifically, when Washington and Tokyo agreed to review their 1978 defense cooperation guidelines to enhance coordination and cooperation to deal with "situations that may emerge in the areas surrounding Japan and which will have an important influence

on the peace and security of Japan,”¹⁶ they actually had the Korean peninsula in mind. A crisis in Korea requires Japan to make its ports, airports, and other facilities available for American use. If that support is not forthcoming because of the prevailing interpretation of Article 9 of the Japanese constitution to avoid the notion of “collective self defense,” the U.S.-Japan alliance may well collapse.

Japanese assistance for a Korean emergency may include minesweeping, air and naval surveillance, intelligence gathering, and enforcement of sanctions by stopping and inspecting ships on the high seas, as the new U.S.-Japanese defense cooperation guidelines indicate. The new guidelines state that Japan will conduct all its operations within the limitations of its constitution; it is not clear, however, whether Tokyo can form a domestic political consensus to enable Japan to share a regional security role with the United States and South Korea.

In South Korea, most security specialists view the U.S.-Japan alliance as complementing the U.S.-Korean alliance by jointly anchoring 47,000 American troops in Japan and 37,000 in Korea for peace and stability in this volatile region. To them, the U.S.-Japanese security treaty constitutes a sort of guarantee that Japan will not resume its old militarism or develop power-projecting capabilities. So long as the North Korean threats continue, these forces provide the most effective deterrent against war and instability.

In these perspectives, therefore, the U.S.-Japanese alliance is vital to meet a security crisis including war on the Korean peninsula. This is why Seoul does not favor the removal of the U.S. Marine forces from Okinawa as some specialists are suggesting now to defuse local protests in Japan.¹⁷ Besides, Tokyo’s crucial role in supporting KEDO and humanitarian aid for North Korea reinforces the role of the U.S.-Korean alliance by increasing pre-crisis preventive action and post-crisis response. In a similar vein, it would be difficult for Japan to maintain a robust U.S.-Japanese alliance without the U.S.-Korean alliance; the very credibility of the former will be difficult to sustain without the latter.

The remaining task for South Korea and Japan is to upgrade their security cooperation. This is easier said than done, for most South Koreans have an ambivalent attitude toward the redefined U.S.-Japanese alliance and the new guidelines. They support it if it can contribute to Korean security and unification, but worry that it may trigger Japanese rearmament. In order to overcome this ambivalence and to prepare for their common challenges, it is imperative for South Korea and Japan to dispose of the contentious issues deriving from Japan’s past record in Korea, to settle pending territorial and fishery disputes that are being politicized on both sides, and to launch a truly future-oriented relationship.

In addition to the U.S.-Japan alliance, the key to Korean unification and East Asian stability is cooperative Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations. Successfully integrating China as a rising power into the regional system of security and economic interdependence is a long-term challenge for the United States and Japan, as Sino-American and Sino-Japanese rivalry is bound to arise. There is an urgent need for Washington and Beijing to conduct substantive strategic dialogue on the Korean question.

With Sino-American rivalry on the rise, the question is how to develop converging interests and to minimize diverging interests. Beijing has regarded the renewed U.S.-Japanese security relationship as being targeted at China itself and the dispatch of two U.S. carrier groups to the Taiwan Strait in March 1996 as an attempt to prevent China from unifying the country. It tends to view Washington’s policy of comprehensive engagement as de facto “soft containment” aimed at subverting the Chinese communist system. As their bilateral relationship becomes increasingly politicized as a result of clashing domestic politics, it is difficult for China and the United States to develop a steady and consistent policy on such contentious

issues as Taiwan, Hong Kong, proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, the WTO, the South China Sea, and human rights. Unless China's domestic politics develop into democracy, it will be difficult for Beijing to fully abide by international norms and the rule of law as Washington expects.

The more the U.S.-Japan alliance is consolidated, the more Sino-Japanese rivalry is going to grow as Beijing sees Tokyo as helping what it perceives to be American hegemony. Beijing only recognizes the role of the U.S.-Japanese alliance in defending Japan proper and is opposed to the expansion of the Japanese security role beyond this scope. It has already begun to question Tokyo's willingness to join the Theater Missile Defense (TMD) system. If the United States were to completely disengage from East Asia and a power vacuum were created, Sino-Japanese rivalry and arms race are likely to intensify. There are some signs that Beijing is capitalizing on American-Japanese and Korean-Japanese friction as if it is replaying its traditional strategic culture of "using barbarians to control barbarians." For example, when Chinese president Jiang Zemin held a joint press conference with President Kim in Seoul in November 1995, he stated that Japanese "militarists" were still a threat to both China and Korea.¹⁸

It is remarkable that, while rivalry is on the rise, the United States and Japan are making serious efforts to foster more cooperation with China not only in the economic realm but also in strategic interaction. Prime Minister Hashimoto went to Beijing in September 1997 to allay Chinese uneasiness about the new defense guidelines. Jiang Zemin went to Washington in October 1997 to have a summit with the president for the first time since Deng Xiaoping's historic visit to the United States in 1979. Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng came to Tokyo in November 1997 to discuss economic cooperation with Hashimoto. Clearly, these reciprocal visits are designed to build confidence by providing reassurance and minimizing misunderstanding about the new U.S.-Japanese defense guidelines and their implications. By these high-level visits, Beijing made it clear that it wants to deepen common interests with Washington and Tokyo while preserving their different values and perspectives on such contentious issues as the Taiwan Strait, human rights, and the WTO.

The October 1997 Clinton-Jiang summit in particular was instrumental in restoring some momentum to Sino-American cooperation, which had been largely frozen after the Tiananmen repression in 1989. Among the agreements they reached were not to share nuclear technology with Iran, to work to maintain peace and stability in Korea by fostering four-party talks, to increase maritime cooperation, and to set up a hot line between the two capitals. Most importantly, "the two presidents are determined to build toward a constructive strategic partnership between the U.S. and China through increasing cooperation to meet international challenges and promote peace and development in the world" by having regular meetings between the two governments at all levels, including the military.¹⁹ During Clinton's June 1998 visit to Beijing, he agreed to work together with Jiang toward strengthening stability on the Korean peninsula.

Despite new signs of rivalry, the United States and China do have converging interests insofar as the goal of keeping peace and stability in Korea is concerned. On balance, China has played a constructive role for this purpose. When North Korea's exit from the NPT in 1993 caused the United States to consider coercive measures against such provocation, for example, China apparently prompted North Korea to come back to the treaty. When Pyongyang went so far as to destroy the armistice itself, as noted above, Jiang Zemin made a public statement in November 1995 in Seoul that China supports the armistice until it is replaced by a peace agreement. The mild statement condemning Pyongyang's involvement in

the 1996 submarine incident issued by the president of the UN Security Council in October 1996 could not have been adopted without the Chinese delegate's approval of its contents. As Jiang Zemin publicly urged North Korea to attend the Four-Party Talks in October 1997, Beijing has been trying to engage North Korea in the talks by acting in parallel, if not in coordination, with Washington.

Better Sino-American relations are in the interests of Korean unification and regional security. While the state of these relations is strained, there is little incentive for Beijing to cooperate with Washington even on Korean issues because, as Foreign Minister Qian Qichen said immediately after Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty, China's "most important relationship in Asia and around the world" is with the United States.²⁰ If Washington succeeds in instituting productive strategic talks with Beijing on Korea, these talks can lead to broader cooperation on other issues as well. These talks are crucial to keeping China fully engaged in the peace and unification process so that it does not create any obstacle to it while seeking its own legitimate security interests.

Beyond Unification: A Regional Alliance for Stability and Interdependence

In conclusion, Korea and the United States must plan for the future of their alliance beyond unification. They need to work out a long-term plan now as to what kind of security relationship they want to maintain after unification. Specifically, they must decide among three scenarios: whether they will terminate the alliance by completely withdrawing American troops from Korea; preserve a reconfigured alliance with U.S. naval and air presence only; or redefine their relationship toward an alliance for stability and interdependence with a token presence of ground forces. In order to ensure that the unification process proceeds in a manner contributing to regional stability and that Sino-Japanese rivalry and nuclear weapons can be mitigated as much as possible in Korea, it is desirable for Korea and the United States to work toward the third option. This requires both countries to build the public support necessary to sustain such an alliance, especially when nationalism is on the rise in Korea as it undergoes a volatile phase of political democratization and industrial restructuring.

1. The End of the Alliance and a Complete Withdrawal

There are some who call for the end of the Korean-American alliance and a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea even before unification. In their view, South Korea has won the economic and military race over North Korea.²¹ After unification, there is no reason why the United States should confront China in a periphery like Korea where it does not have vital interests. Moreover, as long as the United States unilaterally shoulders the costs of maintaining peace and stability in Japan and Korea, these countries will try to "free ride" as long as possible and compete economically with the United States at the expense of American interests.²² In its official rhetoric, China seems to prefer this scenario; some of its strategists state that there is no need for American troops in Korea after unification.²³

Only a minority of South Koreans advocate the withdrawal of American troops, and a majority support their continued stationing for deterrence and stability. According to a poll

conducted in June 1997, 48.4 percent of the respondents said that the American troops should be withdrawn after South Korean defense is greatly strengthened, 30 percent said that they should be withdrawn after unification, and only 14 percent said that they should be withdrawn as early as possible.²⁴

Ending the U.S. alliance with Korea runs the risk of precipitating a power vacuum that is most likely to be filled by either China or Japan, and to trigger Sino-Japanese rivalry and arms race in Korea, where these powers had traditionally competed to secure their sphere of influence. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese empire had regarded Korea as one of its “Eastern barbarian” tributaries. On the other hand, Japan used to liken Korea to “a dagger pointed to her neck.” Because of this geopolitical rivalry, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 was fought over Korea. Having experienced numerous such struggles for power on their own territory, Koreans used to say that “shrimps get busted in battles of whales.” Should Korea be left alone again in the wilderness without any ally to rely on, pressures will mount to develop nuclear weapons as security insurance.

If the end of the alliance results in these consequences, it is not a viable option. Nor is it in America’s interests. And yet it is true that some Koreans vaguely call for a neutralized Korea. But this is not feasible unless the Korean people and the surrounding powers agree upon its realization. As another alternative, some suggest a “political alliance” without any military links at all, but such a purely political alliance without military teeth is almost meaningless.²⁵

2. A Reconfigured Alliance with a Maritime Presence

Another option is to reconfigure the Korea-U.S. alliance with a maritime presence to continue Washington’s security commitment and, at the same time, to keep a measure of flexibility.²⁶ From Washington’s point of view, this is compatible with its policy of enforcing free navigation in the Pacific and of projecting power to prevent a hegemon from rising while preserving the ability to respond to crises without infringing on any other nation’s sovereignty. As long as the United States keeps its naval and air power off the Korean coast, therefore, such an alliance can provide deterrence and reassurance to Korea to a certain degree.

Not only does Korea rely on the U.S. Navy but, more importantly, an alliance without American ground forces loses the “trip wire” value of automatic American involvement in an emergency situation in Korea, for it may signal an end to the army-to-army relationship between the United States and Korea. In this case, the very credibility of the American security commitment will be severely questioned politically. If such an erosion of the credibility of the American willingness and will to sacrifice human lives should materialize, it will also jeopardize the U.S. military presence in Japan.

If the United States increases its naval deployment in the West Pacific and especially in the Yellow Sea near the Chinese coast, Beijing would view this with a great deal of alarm. Having witnessed the American naval intervention in the Taiwan Strait crisis in 1996, the Chinese military is extremely sensitive to any U.S. attempt to project war-fighting capabilities in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. There is reason to believe that this option would cause more suspicions in Beijing about U.S. intentions in Asia.

3. A Korea-U.S. Regional Alliance with a Token American Ground Force

Should the current bilateral Korean-American alliance survive the unification process, it can develop into a regional alliance for stability with a token American ground force and some air force contingents. This is the most desirable of all, for it can become a basis for deterring the rise of hegemony either by China or Japan, and for preventing Korea from seeking a nuclear weapons option. As an effective hedge against these destabilizing forces and the uncertainty they will bring in Korea, it is better to keep a small American ground force far from the Chinese border as an insurance policy for both Korean and East Asian security.²⁷

If indeed this option is realized, South Korea has to exercise operational control over the American forces as Japan does now. The commander of the American forces can be downgraded from a four-star to a three-star general, but these details will be subject to negotiation between the two governments.

It has been Washington's official position that the United States will maintain American troops in Korea as long as the Korean people want this. On his way to Seoul in March 1977, Secretary of Defense William Cohen stated that U.S. troops will remain in Korea after unification. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Kurt M. Campbell also told the Congress that "even after the North Korean threat passes, the U.S. intends to maintain a strong defense alliance with the ROK in the interest of regional security."²⁸ The Korea-U.S. Security Consultative Meeting in December 1997 reaffirmed this policy. President Kim Dae-jung also has endorsed this idea by advocating that U.S. forces remain in Korea after unification.

On the whole, the majority of Korean people support this idea of fostering a regional alliance, provided that the United States closely coordinates its security policy with South Korea through prior consultation. According to the poll cited above, 77.9 percent of South Koreans support the continued presence of American troops at least until the time of unification, and 5 percent support their stationing even after unification.²⁹ From now on, the turn of domestic support in both countries will determine whether or not such American presence in Korea is viable politically.

In the final analysis, such an alliance can only be sustained when the Korean and American people support it with a sense of purpose. Public support can be harnessed as the Korean-American alliance becomes not only a military partnership but also a multidimensional relationship involving common economic and political interests as well as common values. Since 1995 South Korea has become the United States' fifth-largest export market, importing more than Germany does, and the third-largest market for U.S. agricultural products. Equally important is that South Korea shares such universal values as democracy and human rights with the United States. By 2020, according to one prediction, South Korea will become one of eight leading economic powers, along with China, the United States, Japan, India, Indonesia, Germany, and Thailand,³⁰ even though South Korea's economy at the end of 1997 is in deep trouble as it faces the IMF bailout for its financial difficulties. A united Korea will command far more power than this prospect. Once a client of the United States, Korea has now become a more equal partner, working together with the United States to promote security, prosperity, and democracy in Asia.

There is little doubt that a united Korea will become a strategic and economic bridge between China and Japan, and between the Asian continent and the Pacific Ocean. In order for it to enjoy friendly relations with all the surrounding powers, a Korean-American regional alliance with an American presence must be built as a hedge against instability and uncertainty. Such an alliance will contribute to maintaining a balance of power in East Asia, upon which the future of peace, stability, and interdependence depend.

Notes

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