Korea – West Coast Strategic Forum
December 11 and 12, 2006
Seoul, Korea

Executive Summary

The first Korea – West Coast Strategic Forum held in Seoul on December 11-12, 2006, convened policymakers, scholars and regional experts to discuss the North Korean nuclear issue, the state of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and notions of a formalized mechanism for security cooperation in Northeast Asia. Participants engaged in lively and frank exchanges on these issues.

Participants were concerned that North Korea's drive toward nuclear weapons has exposed disparate interests among the five parties committed to arresting this ambition, including differences in threat perception between the United States and South Korea. But they also believed that multilateral dialogue still offers the best possibility for resolving the DPRK nuclear issue through peaceful means. Participants argued that in the wake of the nuclear test, pressure and use of force should be discounted as viable options and "rollback" through negotiations should be pursued. Such an approach necessitates clearer articulation of North Korea's options, a new consensus on mutual priorities, hard work on sequencing, and a more developed vision for alternative policies should diplomacy fail.

The U.S.-ROK alliance has entered a new era characterized by new American security imperatives, such as nonproliferation and counterterrorism, as well as a new Korean policy of engagement toward the DPRK. These factors, coupled with domestic political challenges and an evolving regional security environment, call for serious, strategic discussions on the state of the alliance. Though the U.S. and the ROK have exhibited diverging threat perceptions of North Korea—the core of the strategic rationale for the alliance—the instructive precedent set by NATO demonstrates that alliances can survive redefinition of the primary security threat, though not the absence of a common threat.

Participants discussed the prospects for greater regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, including the possibility of converting the six-party talks into a new institutional mechanism for multilateral security cooperation. However, there are serious obstacles to deeper integration in the region, not least unresolved historical issues that still elicit passionate responses. But if understandings on these issues can be reached, a regional security organization could address critical traditional and non-traditional security issues and mitigate uncertainty about China's rise.

The North Korean Nuclear Issue

After three years of multilateral talks on North Korea's nuclear development programs, the country conducted a 'partially successful' test of a plutonium device on October 9. It is estimated that the DPRK has produced six to eight bombs worth of material, and that six kilograms was used in the nuclear test. According to one expert participant, the biggest current threat is export of weapons, components, plutonium fuel, and/or nuclear technology, and this equal-opportunity danger should be the single, unifying concern of the U.S., the ROK and China. There are also safety concerns, as the closer the weapons are to readiness, the greater the chance of an accident. Looming threats include a two to three year window in which miniaturization may be achieved (though sufficient confidence could only be realized through additional tests) and a primitive HEU program that may take some years to develop. North Korea is facing technical obstacles to continued fuel fabrication and in construction of its 50-megawatt reactor, which could produce up to ten nuclear bombs per year if completed (currently, the DPRK can produce one per year).

Participants felt that North Korea's nuclear weapons development has been driven in part by its sense of insecurity, a condition fed by the serious economic problems it has faced. Korean participants pointed out however that predictions of North Korean collapse, frequently made by American analysts, have proven unfounded. The regime and its resolve have proved more durable than the will of its neighbors to reverse these circumstances.

Since the collapse of the 1994 Agreed Framework, the Bush administration has pursued a confused approach toward North Korea, participants said. It is not entirely clear whether Washington is seeking to punish Pyongyang, or if it has the political will to aim for denuclearization—an end not achievable without concessions from the United States.

According to an American presenter, if we assume the desired course is denuclearization, which is the aim of six-party talks, there are three possible approaches: first, a freeze may be sought, leaving North Korea with less than ten nuclear weapons; second, inaction may perpetuate the status quo, which would essentially accept a North Korea with uncontrolled nuclear production; and third, an attempt to "rollback" nuclear weapons production and institute the CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement) formulation. Because force is a nonstarter and pressure is unlikely to be effective and may even be counterproductive, negotiations are the "least bad option."

However, negotiations on North Korea's denuclearization are an extremely challenging proposition. There are serious discrepancies in priorities and approaches not just between the U.S. and the ROK but among all parties. While the U.S. is foremost concerned by nuclear materials falling into the hands of terrorists, China is most interested in preserving stability on the Korean peninsula. Both the U.S. and China are secondarily concerned with denuclearization—that is, they regard it as relatively less pressing than their primary concerns.

Korean participants who specialize in China pointed out that the Chinese find themselves caught between two conflicting policy goals – stability and denuclearization – and have tended in the past to favor the former. Korean participants noted that since the nuclear test, there has been a good deal of debate within the PRC Government, and that the Chinese position is not fixed. These participants pointed to the contrast between the Foreign Ministry's initial harsh rebuke of the DPRK test and statements days later in which the language had been significantly toned down, as evidence of internal arguing. Also, some influential scholars in China have recommended that red lines should be drawn on nonproliferation issues rather than on denuclearization, arguing that China has lived with—and even gone to war against—nuclear powers, and deterrence has ensured stability. At the same time, some Chinese officials have sympathy for North Korea, recalling the similarities between its present circumstances and their own situation in the 1960s.

One Korean participant expressed worry that China's prime concern over stability may translate to a timeline of 7-10 years to resolve the conflict, while the U.S. recently said it would press for tangible progress within 18 months, and the ROK is hoping for resolution within 2-3 years. American presenters emphasized that although China may play a helpful role, Washington should not rely on Beijing to resolve this issue.

Participants also suggested a variety of ways in which the Bush administration should alter its approach to North Korea. Several felt strongly that the administration must appoint a high-level policy coordinator to reconcile competing views within the administration, formulate systematic plans to achieve clearly articulated ends, and channel sustained, focused U.S. attention to this problem. Current chief negotiator and Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill must negotiate in two directions—for authority from his own government as well as with the other parties. The new American proposal for an "early harvest," which aims to freeze DPRK nuclear activities in exchange for economic incentives and the establishment of a bilateral working group on financial sanctions, might produce quick results that would allow Hill to continue negotiations with increased authority.

Korean participants urged the U.S. to demonstrate more trust in ROK policy toward the North and to pursue tighter policy coordination with Seoul. Participants from both sides agreed that President Bush and President Roh had reached a new understanding in a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the recent APEC summit in Hanoi. In this meeting, President Bush told his Korean counterpart that he was willing to sit down at a table with Kim Jong-Il to sign a treaty officially ending the Korean War and bringing peace to the peninsula. That personal pledge convinced President Roh that Bush now has a stronger commitment to reaching a peaceful resolution to the nuclear crisis. Yet, Korean officials are skeptical over whether this increase in political will can yield results if it is not accompanied by a parallel change in diplomatic process.

There was deep concern that North Korea may have only returned to six-party talks to seek short-term gains, specifically a resolution to financial sanctions that have had a stinging impact. News of the sanctions, originally intended to be used as a quiet tool in negotiations, were leaked to the press immediately after the announcement of the Joint Statement in September 2005. One creative resolution offered by a conference participant suggested that all six parties could use this opportunity to sign an agreement on financial transparency. This would provide a face-saving way for North Korea to change its behavior, and the U.S. would be pleased to get China to sign onto such an agreement.

Some participants argued that the Joint Statement is a "jumbled" mix of concepts that has yet to really spell out a concrete sequence of linked steps. But this represents the best basis at this time to try to reach a "rollback" agreement. Participants felt that the U.S., the ROK, and the other parties need to articulate the options to North Korea and to force a decision rather than allow continued drift. If negotiations aimed at rollback fail, these parties must clearly define alternatives to the status quo—an exercise that will certainly involve serious discussions about containment and deterrence. Parties should feel a sense of urgency, as pressure on the DPRK is already deteriorating in the wake of its nuclear test and North Korea is likely to want to carry out subsequent nuclear tests to have confidence in the deployment of a reliable warhead capable of being mounted on its ballistic missile systems.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance

In both Korean and American political discourse, the alliance is said to be troubled on a variety of levels, and many believe this perception alone can have real consequences. The conventional wisdom in both capitals is that the current administrations have mismanaged alliance policy to some degree, conveying a sense of crisis and misaligned goals to their respective publics. Yet conference participants asserted that the alliance is stronger and more durable than four and five year presidential tenures, and that survey data indicates there may

be more support for the alliance among the American and Korean publics than there seems to be in policy circles.

In the more than fifty years since the inception of the alliance, the relationship has become significantly broader. Together, the allies have weathered past crises, overcome differences on thorny policy issues, and working-level cooperation has steadily improved. The two also share fundamental values related to democracy and the rule of law. Democracy, however, also means that both governments are very mindful of domestic politics when they conduct foreign policy. According to one Korean presenter, his government's difficulty in handling domestic pressures on foreign policy has been quite harmful (though he maintained that this comes nowhere near 'ruining' the alliance, as some critics have charged).

A second presenter urged participants to make the distinction between a deep, solid bilateral relationship and an alliance—a solemn agreement which by definition is military in nature. If alliances exist on the basis of mutually perceived common threats as well as mutual obligations in response to those threats, then the U.S. and the ROK must reconcile their disparate threat perceptions in order to perpetuate the alliance. Given the ROK's changed approach toward North Korea since the 2000 summit and the institution of President Kim's Sunshine Policy, in addition to the counterproliferation imperative that has become central to the U.S. security strategy since 9/11, this will require serious discussions on the strategic landscape and each nation's interests.

NATO provides a precedent for security alliance survival through threat redefinition. In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union and debate of whether the alliance should continue given the absence of its common enemy, the U.S. urged the organization to redefine what constituted threats to security. Members agreed to continue their cooperation to guard against destabilizing ethnic conflict and international terrorism and to expand operations to "out-of-area" locations. The alliance also continues to serve as a hedge against restored Russian power. Though there continues to be debate within the alliance, it has survived dramatic redefinition of threat and has undertaken important operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan.

The example of NATO may be instructive for the U.S.-ROK alliance, in the face of fundamental disagreement over the threat represented by North Korea. The allies must have in-depth consultations on the role of containment and deterrence in the alliance. Policymakers may also consider prioritizing a counterproliferation mission and formalizing an out-of-area role. The ROK has sent troops to support U.S. foreign policy goals in Iraq and Afghanistan, and this is not new—the ROK also made sacrifices on behalf of its ally in Vietnam. Policymakers in Seoul must take a detailed accounting of their nation's strategic rationale for these contributions and decide whether that rationale is congruous with an expanded purpose for the alliance, one that looks outward, beyond the peninsula.

The U.S. and the ROK have three options: first, maintain the status quo, where tensions persist in the face of disparate attitudes toward North Korea policy; second, undertake strategic discussions in hopes of finding new bases for cooperation and alliance revitalization; and third, agree to dissolve the alliance in favor of a close bilateral relationship based on shared values and strong economies ties. A revitalized U.S.-ROK alliance is one that maintains military cooperation at its core.

The U.S.-ROK alliance does not exist in isolation, and in addition to being influenced by perceptions of North Korea, the two countries' relationships with China and Japan are also important factors. Korea's insistence on being a "balancer" between the U.S. and China has created a good deal of consternation in Washington, in light of its pledges as a treaty ally and the implicit U.S. hedge against rising Chinese power. While more than one American participant said that the U.S. and the ROK should privately, quietly discuss the alliance's role in hedging against a China that may become more aggressive in the future, a Korean

participant asserted that the American side "overstresses" hedging against China as well as underestimates Korean resolve to sincerely pursue peace and reconciliation in Northeast Asia.

Several additional Korean participants elaborated on this, emphasizing that the ROK does not view the U.S.-China dichotomy in zero-sum terms, but rather foresees a positive-sum outcome of cooperation with both countries toward peace and stability in the region. Indeed, Chinese-Korean ties are still developing and are principally economic in nature. This burgeoning relationship has limits – unlike with the U.S., China and Korea do not share a commitment to democracy and the free market. In addition, Korea's geopolitical position has led to victimization by powerful neighbors, and this history gives the nation a strong incentive to seek outside help to reduce its vulnerability.

Territorial and historical issues have put Korea at odds with Japan, the other U.S. treaty ally in Northeast Asia, and because of this trilateral cooperation has largely broken down. In a practical and provocative presentation, an American participant suggested that potential ROK efforts to improve relations with Japan could contribute to the health of the U.S.-ROK alliance, by strengthening the Korea-Japan side of the triangular "virtual alliance," which might prevent the future alignment of the U.S. and Japan on one side and the ROK and China on the other, as feared by some analysts. An improvement in Korea-Japan relations would also serve to reassure the U.S. that the ROK is not being drawn into the Chinese orbit.

This presenter further argued that improvements in the Korea-Japan relationship would not have to be at the cost of vital interests, though this would mean putting aside, for now, inflammatory issues such as the Japanese Prime Minister's visits to Yasukuni Shrine. Instead, the two countries should focus on mutually beneficial initiatives such as a bilateral free trade agreement. In addition, U.S.-ROK-Japan security cooperation could be a basis from which to build a multilateral security organization. This presentation sparked lively debate with some Korean participants expressing skepticism about Japan's commitment to regional harmony and concern about a revival of Japanese militarism.

Overall, participants were hopeful that if South Korea and the United States engage in serious discussions in a spirit of true mutual consultation, the alliance can be redefined and revitalized. Policymakers on both sides must decide whether there should continue to be a military security pact (as distinct from other forms of partnership)—that is, whether domestic political forces and evolving national interests can abide in the framework of an alliance that is based on a clear sense of purpose and mutual obligation.

The Regional Order in Northeast Asia

While increasing trade among Northeast Asian nations has promoted regional economic integration in a bottom-up fashion, there has not been much movement among the governments of the region toward creating new institutions. Indeed, participants broadly agreed that in the wake of the Cold War, a shared vision of a new regional order is conspicuously absent.

North Korea's nuclear development presents the most daunting obstacle to regional security cooperation, as it exposes divergent interests among key actors. Yet at the same time, the six-party talks aimed at denuclearizing the Korean peninsula and resolving current tensions intimate a nascent forum for institutionalizing regional security cooperation. The divergent responses to the North Korean nuclear problem suggest that forming a multilateral security structure will be difficult but not impossible, if there is sufficient political leadership.

If the six-party process can succeed, the forum's momentum and legitimacy may make it an appropriate "core" for a regional security system. Of course, such success assumes that the countries involved can reach a consensus on the nature of the danger presented by North Korea's nuclear capability. This would require mutual recognition all parties security concerns

vis-à-vis the North, including the danger of transfer of fissile material, risks to the nonproliferation regime, potential for an expanding arms race, the dangers of a precipitous collapse of the North Korean regime, and the degree to which North Korea's economic isolation exacerbates security problems and puts it dangerously out of step with the growing economic integration among its neighbors.

Several participants also felt strongly that it would be extremely difficult to move forward in a regional context without first addressing issues of history and resultant territorial disputes, both of which remain in the public consciousness and continue to impact policy. After World War II, unlike Europe, Asia experienced only "thin" reconciliation, largely owing to the role of great powers in the region and particularly, a U.S.-led focus on rebuilding countries' economies that forsook diplomatic discussions on history and the colonial past. One Korean participant argued that the current tensions reflect a long historical conflict between continental and maritime powers in Northeast Asia.

Though Japanese Prime Minister Abe's recent overtures to China and South Korea provide some hope of moving past regional rivalries, some participants suspected these efforts were more tactical than strategic. They felt historical issues must be more thoroughly addressed in a forum that includes the U.S., which has vital interests in the region and is not immune from history issues itself. Though there was broad agreement that the U.S. should play a role in resolving historical issues, some participants were skeptical that this would actually happen in the near term, owing to the current lack of Asia specialists in the Bush administration and the fact that the U.S. Government is consumed by the situation in Iraq, allowing limited (if any) political initiative for projects beyond the six-party talks. Indeed, participants regretted that the Bush administration does not have a clearly articulated vision for regional integration in Northeast Asia.

As the great power and emerging power in the region, the United States and China will play important roles in facilitating any regional cooperation. Korean participants expressed concern over U.S. views that China represents a threat to national security. American participants reassured their Korean counterparts that although the debate on China's rise continues, the "China threat camp" and those who seek to create alliances to "contain" China are in the minority, including in government and even inside the Pentagon. The inertial drift of American policy favors continued engagement. The U.S. is a stability-oriented power, as was recently evidenced by American policymakers' private warnings to Tokyo on the growing Sino-Japanese rift. The U.S. simply does not have an interest in rising tension.

Participants pointed to changes in China's identity and the resultant evolution of its foreign policy as factors that could be conducive and helpful to the creation of a regional security organization. As evidenced by Beijing's role in the first North Korean nuclear crisis versus the second crisis, the PRC has adopted a more active, outward-looking diplomacy and seeks to reach consensus on problems through multilateral cooperation. Though there is still some uncertainty as to whether Beijing's new forward-leaning stance will take constructive forms or yield greater uncertainties in the long term, thus far it appears that the rising nation is indeed acting as a responsible stakeholder in the global system. Participants agreed that China's inclusion in new, inclusive structures of regional economic and security cooperation would mitigate concerns about its rise as a great power, reassure the United States, South Korea and Japan, and foster peace and prosperity.

About the Korea – West Coast Strategic Forum

The first Korea – West Coast Strategic Forum was convened in Seoul on December 11-12, 2006. Drawing policymakers, scholars, and regional experts from the Republic of Korea and the United States, the forum promotes diversification of dialogue and extends networking to a new generation of South Korean policy elites and American experts based outside Washington, DC. The North Korean nuclear problem, the state of the U.S.-ROK alliance, and a potential regional security architecture in Northeast Asia are all issues of great importance to Korea as well as the United States, a Pacific nation with vital interests in Asia. The forum seeks to facilitate enhanced mutual understanding of these issues, as well as to generate new visions and policy options.

The Forum was co-hosted by the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asian Cooperation Initiative of the ROK and the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center of Stanford University. The committee is a presidential advisory body that was established to plan long-term visions and practical strategies to achieve the national goal of promoting cooperation in Northeast Asia. The center is an inter-disciplinary research institution focused on contemporary Asia and American involvement in the region, gathering scholars and policymakers in a wide variety of fields. It works within the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies.

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