



**“New Beginnings” in the
U.S.-ROK Alliance:
Recommendations to the
Obama Administration**

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Executive Summary

Members of the New Beginnings policy study group of American experts on Northeast Asia, led by Stanford University's Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center and The Korea Society, believe that U.S.-South Korean official and people-to-people relations today are broader, deeper, and stronger than ever due to the leadership of the two governments. They welcome the prospect that the U.S. Congress may approve the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement on the eve of President Lee Myung-bak's upcoming state visit to the United States. Implementation of the agreement will significantly expand economic ties between our two countries, increase jobs, and reinforce strategic ties.

New Beginnings members remain concerned that North Korea may engage in further military and nuclear provocations, and they support continued close U.S.-South Korean coordination on diplomatic and military means to deter North Korea and to limit and eventually end its nuclear programs. Members also support continued implementation of existing plans to rationalize and realign United States Forces Korea (USFK), allow USFK personnel to be accompanied to Korea by their family members, and transfer wartime operational control over South Korean forces to South Korean authorities in 2015. With presidential elections scheduled in both the United States and South Korea in late 2012, members believe that the United States should focus on implementing existing policies rather than undertake major new initiatives regarding the alliance or North Korea policy.

Key Recommendations

The members of the New Beginnings policy study group on U.S.-Korean relations offer the following major recommendations to the Obama administration:

- Increase cooperation with South Korea to correct weaknesses in deterrence; engage in further joint planning on responses to North Korean provocations
- Support the strengthening of South Korea's response to North Korean missile programs, consistent with the credibility of the Missile Technology Control Regime
- Use the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee to underline to the South Korean government the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear umbrella

- Continue implementation of existing plans to realign USFK, allow accompanied tours, and transfer wartime operational control over South Korean forces to South Korean authority as scheduled in 2015
- Continue efforts, in close coordination with South Korea, to engage North Korea diplomatically to limit, reduce, and end North Korea's nuclear programs
- Provide any U.S. food aid to North Korea on a humanitarian basis, depending on needs there, competing needs elsewhere, and acceptable monitoring arrangements
- Seek to resume the search in North Korea for the remains of American missing-in-action from the Korean War
- Encourage early South Korean legislative approval of the Free Trade Agreement.





“New Beginnings” in the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Recommendations to the Obama Administration

Introduction

Stanford University’s Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center and The Korea Society established the New Beginnings policy study group three years ago to enhance the United States’ important alliance with the Republic of Korea. Differences of approach toward North Korea had created significant tensions between the two governments in preceding years. The New Beginnings group, comprised of former senior U.S. policy makers and experts on U.S.-Korean relations, believed that the inauguration of a new government in South Korea in early 2008 and the election of a new U.S. president later that year could lay the basis for a fresh start in the bilateral relationship. Both individually and collectively, members engaged intensively with American and South Korean policy makers, and together we have issued annual reports and recommendations to the U.S. administration regarding bilateral developments and ways to strengthen the alliance.

The hopes of the New Beginnings group have largely been fulfilled. South Korean President Lee Myung-bak entered office in February 2008 making it clear that he placed top priority on relations with the United States. Similarly, the Obama administration has placed renewed focus on East Asia as a region and on strengthening alliance relationships there. The two leaders and their administrations shared similar perspectives on the major challenge to the alliance—dealing with North Korea—and they cooperated closely on regional and global issues as well. President Lee has further enhanced Korea’s role and image in the world through successful economic policies amidst global crises and by accepting a leadership role in the G-20 and other international bodies. As a result, U.S.-South Korean official and people-to-people relations today are broader, deeper, and stronger than ever before. This is a significant policy success, especially considering the importance of the alliance to American interests and the often-difficult history of U.S.-Korean relations.

North Korean Challenges

Since publication of the previous New Beginnings report in May 2010, the U.S.-South Korean alliance has faced major tests. Following North Korea's sinking of the South Korean Navy corvette *Cheonan* on March 26, 2010, an attack that resulted in the loss of 46 sailors, North Korea launched an unprecedented artillery attack on the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong on November 23. Four South Koreans were killed, including two civilians, and nineteen were wounded. New Beginnings members visited Seoul immediately after the attack on Yeonpyeong and consulted with top South Korean officials and representatives of the ruling and opposition camps.

On November 12, the North Koreans revealed to American experts from Stanford University that they had constructed a full-scale uranium enrichment facility at the Yongbyon nuclear center. The development was deeply troubling, as it offered the regime another route, in addition to its existing plutonium program, to construct nuclear devices. Moreover, the North Koreans' long history of official denials of any interest in uranium enrichment and their secret construction of the facility in Yongbyon (apparently without the knowledge of U.S. authorities) underlined both the North Korean commitment to a nuclear capability and their ability to conceal their efforts from outside eyes, making the verifiability of any future denuclearization deal extremely challenging.

These events caused great concern in both Washington and Seoul about peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The North Korean conventional attacks in 2010 suggested that North Korean leaders might have begun to feel freer to intimidate and even attack the South after their successful test of a nuclear device on May 25, 2009. North Korea's naming of Kim Jong Il's son Kim Jong Un as a four-star general on September 27 confirmed earlier reports that the son was Kim Jong Il's heir-presumptive, and prompted speculation that the attacks on the South might also have been intended to bolster domestic solidarity in the North as the succession process continues.

The administrations of President Barack Obama and President Lee Myung-bak have continued to consult and coordinate extraordinarily closely in response to these events. The U.S. government participated in the South Korean-led international investigation that concluded that North Korea had sunk the *Cheonan*, and worked with South Korea to stage major exercises to signal alliance solidarity and bolster deterrence. The allies reviewed procedures and defenses and took steps to ensure joint deterrence in the Yellow Sea (West Sea) where both of the attacks took place, including agreeing to prepare plans for a combined response in case of another North Korean attack.

Concerned that North Korea might engage in further military provocations, the United States has sought to facilitate diplomatic talks between North and South Korea as part of the basis for U.S. bilateral talks with North Korea and a resumption of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing to end North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. It remains to be seen when the Six-Party Talks will resume and we are realistic about their prospects given North Korea's apparent intention to hold on to at least some nuclear devices for the foreseeable future, but we support U.S. and South Korean efforts to engage North Korea with the aim of managing and reducing the nuclear and other challenges posed by North Korea and, eventually, resolving them. We also support the provision of U.S. food aid to North Korea on a humanitarian basis, i.e. depending on needs in North Korea and competing needs elsewhere, and contingent upon North Korean agreement to allow monitoring as in other recipient countries. We endorse U.S. humanitarian efforts to resume the search for the remains of Americans missing-in-action from the Korean War.



Alliance Military Arrangements

North Korea's recent actions have led some South Koreans to call for major changes in alliance military arrangements, including South Korea's development of nuclear weapons or at least the reintroduction of tactical U.S. nuclear weapons into South Korea. Some have demanded that the United States also permit South Korea to develop missiles with a range covering all of North Korea. We believe that South Korea's development of nuclear weapons would undermine the political basis of the alliance, and that the re-introduction of tactical nuclear weapons would do nothing to bolster South Korean security but would greatly complicate diplomatic efforts to induce North Korea to abandon its nuclear programs. Instead, we support U.S. efforts, through the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee, to reassure the ROK about the credibility and effectiveness of the American nuclear umbrella. Given the North's deployment of long-range missiles, we understand the South Korean desire to develop and deploy extended-range missiles, and we support steps to strengthen the South's response to North Korean missile programs to the extent this can be accomplished without undermining the Missile Technology Control Regime.

Partly in response to the *Cheonan* sinking, the United States and South Korea agreed last year to postpone for three years the transfer of wartime operational control over South Korean forces from the United States to the South Korean government, until December 2015. By all accounts, the two governments are firmly committed to keep to the new schedule. The New Beginnings group believes that the new date should be kept. South Korean forces are highly capable, and South Korea should take the lead in its own defense, with full support from its American ally. Doing so will enhance South Korean military leadership and capabilities, and strengthen the domestic political basis of support in Korea for a continuing alliance relationship with the United States.

Meanwhile, some Members of Congress have raised objections, on financial and other grounds, to United States Forces Korea (USFK) plans to allow most USFK personnel to be accompanied by their families in coming years. We understand these concerns, but believe that accompanied tours should be realized as soon as possible. They will allow USFK personnel to serve three years in Korea, rather than the current one year, which will increase USFK's effectiveness and morale. Stable three-year assignments will mean that USFK personnel will remain in-country two more years after "getting up to speed" on their mission through exercises and other training. Thus, the training now being conducted every year will, for most personnel, be reduced to training once every three years, greatly increasing overall USFK readiness. The presence of families should also help to improve relations with host communities, as has been the case in countries such as Germany. We also support the efforts of U.S. and South Korean officials to implement agreements to realign and rationalize U.S. bases in South Korea, including moving USFK headquarters south of Seoul. We understand that the complexities of that move have delayed it until 2016, and hope that all concerned will redouble their efforts to accomplish it as soon as possible. This, too, will increase political support in South Korea for an enduring alliance.



Economic Relations

Domestic politics in both countries delayed legislative approval of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) for far too long. However, we are heartened by prospects that the U.S. Congress will approve the KORUS FTA on the eve of President Lee's upcoming state visit to the United States and urge the Korean government to seek National Assembly approval soon thereafter so that the agreement can be implemented by the end of this year. Implementation is crucial as South Korea's similar FTA with the EU went into effect on July 1, 2011, to the disadvantage of American businesses and workers. There are also strategic implications, as South Korea's trade with China, already more than double that with the United States, continued to grow dramatically. The Free Trade Agreement will not only create jobs in America and bolster our trade relations, but also add an important new dimension to the alliance.

Looking Ahead

Despite the extraordinary efforts of the Obama and Lee administrations, many issues for the alliance loom on the horizon. North Korea will likely pose even greater challenges in the future. Even if the Six-Party Talks resume soon, prospects are practically nil that North Korea will fully negotiate away its nuclear programs. The United States will need to consult closely with South Korea on ways of managing and limiting the North's nuclear weapons programs while countering any misperception that the United States will eventually "accept" the North's possession of even a limited nuclear arsenal.

North Korea may engage in further provocations using conventional military forces. The United States should strongly encourage and support South Korean efforts to identify and correct weak links in its defenses that North Korea may again seek to exploit. The United States and South Korea must continue diplomatic and security coordination on appropriate alliance responses to incidents such as *Cheonan* and Yeonpyeong. North Korea must not be allowed to think itself immune from meaningful retaliation for provocations, but the allies must also take care not to respond in ways that risk a major escalation of conflict on the peninsula.

Effective U.S. management of relations with the PRC will be increasingly important for South Korea and for the U.S.-ROK alliance. South Koreans have welcomed the huge growth in economic and popular ties with China, but are wary about becoming too dependent on their giant neighbor. Many South Koreans favor a strong security alliance with the United States and passage of the KORUS FTA, especially given China's growing influence in the region. At the same time, South Koreans are concerned that any increase in tensions between the United States and China could threaten their security.

A factor increasing uncertainty in the coming year is the expected leadership changes in all or nearly all of the countries surrounding the Korean Peninsula. In particular, the succession process in North Korea is continuing, and there is considerable speculation that Kim Jong Un will be further elevated as the country celebrates the one-hundredth anniversary of the late Kim Il Sung's birth on April 15. South Korea and the United States, too, are already in the midst of legislative and presidential election campaigns, with South Koreans to choose the members of their unicameral national assembly on April 11 and their president on December 19, 2012. (President Lee cannot run for re-election, as the Korean constitution limits the president to a single, five-year term.)

Depending on the election outcome, the new South Korean government could return to an approach similar to the "sunshine policy" pursued by South Korea from 1998 to 2008. This would require the Obama administration to make significant adjustment to its approach to



North Korea and alliance management. As in recent decades, however, it will be important to meticulously avoid, and, as necessary, counter any misperception that the U.S. government favors a particular party or candidate. The record of 1998–2008 demonstrates that, despite difficulties, the United States can maintain the alliance in cooperation with whomever the Korean people elect as their representatives.

With the U.S. and South Korean presidential elections scheduled for just over one year from now, we recommend that the Obama administration not undertake major new initiatives regarding the alliance or North Korea policy. History suggests that negotiations pursued against an electoral deadline are unlikely to succeed and that even the effort engenders intense opposition at home. Instead, we urge the Obama administration to focus with President Lee’s administration on implementing existing policies and setting the stage for cooperation with the new political leadership in Seoul.



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About the New Beginnings Project

The New York-based Korea Society and Stanford University's Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center launched the nonpartisan "New Beginnings" policy study group on January 10, 2008, to offer recommendations on how U.S. policymakers could expand and strengthen the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea). Composed of former senior U.S. government officials, scholars, and other American experts on U.S.-Korean relations, the New Beginnings project team premised its efforts on the belief that the inauguration of a new South Korean president in February 2008 and a new American president in January 2009 would provide a special opportunity for the two countries to increase mutual understanding and transform the alliance into a global partnership. In a coincidence occurring only once every twenty years, the two new presidents' terms of office would overlap for a full four years. Moreover, the alliance needed renewal and revitalization after years of strain and tension that arose from divergent worldviews of progressive governments in Seoul and a conservative administration in Washington.

Since its establishment, the New Beginnings policy study group has issued a report to the U.S. administration each year. New Beginnings' reports and recommendations reflect insights gained from group conferences as well as individual members' continuing engagement with U.S.-Korean affairs.

Further Information

For more information about the New Beginnings policy study group for strengthening U.S.-South Korean relations, please visit <http://ksp.stanford.edu> or <http://koreasociety.org>.

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