

Principles for planning a US alliance with a unified Korea

by David F. Helvey

David F. Helvey (David.F.Helvey.CIV@ndu.edu) is Visiting Distinguished Research Fellow at the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs of the U.S. National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies. He served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for East Asia from December 2012 to April 2015. This article also appeared in the Korea Times; a longer version was published by NDU Press and is available [here](#).

North Korea's fourth nuclear test this past January and its long-range missile launch in February underscore the fact that the reclusive regime remains, in the words of Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, an "up close, dangerous, and continuing threat to the security of the Peninsula and the region." Pyongyang's actions highlight the role of the US-ROK alliance in deterring North Korean aggression and contributing to stability and security on the Korean Peninsula, in Northeast Asia, and the world.

While focusing on deterrence and responding to the immediate threat from Pyongyang, we should also recognize that the ultimate source of the threat lies in the regime itself and that the path to long-term security and stability on the Korean Peninsula lies in reunification. The US-ROK alliance can play an important role in support of Korean reunification. Retaining the alliance after reunification would also serve the interests of both nations and the region by reinforcing the existing international order, assisting a unified Korea to meet its security needs, and facilitating regional stability. However, for the alliance to endure, it must be considered as part of advance planning for Korean unification today.

Four principles should guide planning for an alliance between a unified Korea and the United States.

First, alliance planning should begin with a solid grounding in common values and ideals, along with a set of shared interests. Ranking high among these would be a commitment to democracy, open societies, and free market economics; respect for human rights and the rule of law; and, support for peaceful resolution of disputes.

The two countries would share an interest in preserving the security of a unified Korea and its political and economic systems, as well as in maintaining regional peace and stability, access to the maritime, air, space, and cyber commons, and the capacity to respond to global security challenges such as natural disasters, terrorism, proliferation, organized crime, and infectious disease.

Second, in planning for a future without North Korea, the alliance should do nothing that undermines the deterrence, military capabilities, and readiness needed today. Continued alliance investment in interoperable intelligence, surveillance,

and reconnaissance systems; air and missile defense capabilities; and command, control, communications, and computers (C4) which enhance alliance readiness to "fight tonight," if necessary, and strengthen the foundation for combined, coalition-style operations in the future.

Likewise further development of trilateral cooperation among the United States, the ROK, and Japan will sustain habits of cooperation and better integrate elements of each alliance into a larger multilateral construct reinforcing international rules, norms, and standards.

Third, a future US-Korea alliance should emphasize the principle of respect for and protection of sovereignty. This is important not only for the defense of Korea, but also to signal to the region that the alliance would not become a platform for territorial expansion. Planning, in this context, should include diplomatic efforts to assure China, Japan, and Russia that a future US-Korea alliance would respect territorial boundaries and support regional and global stability. This does not mean, however, the alliance should not respond to aggression or coercion that disrupts the regional order.

Fourth, leaders on both sides would need to ensure that the alliance is designed for long-term political sustainability in both capitals. This will require a foundation of equality and a mutual commitment to sharing the responsibilities and resourcing the military capabilities needed for security on the Korean Peninsula, and alliance cooperation in the region and across the globe.

Washington and Seoul have strengthened the alliance in recent years by redoubling efforts to counter the North Korean threat and by setting an affirmative agenda for security cooperation regionally and globally. This vision enables the two sides to imagine a future of alliance cooperation between the United States and a unified, global Korea in the absence of a clearly defined threat and in support of a safer and more secure regional and international order. Simply having the vision, however, is insufficient.

That vision must inform and be informed by detailed planning, exercises, and contingency responses to enable the allies to demonstrate the value of such cooperation and to evaluate mechanisms for alliance coordination and action, as well as the US military presence (if any) on a unified Korean Peninsula.

Although answers to larger questions concerning the nature of the future security environment and a unified Korea's role in it are fundamentally political and will take time to be debated and resolved, it would be a mistake for either country to abandon the alliance or to wait until those questions are answered before analyzing options for an alliance between the United States and a unified Korea, and the pathways to achieve them.

The US-ROK alliance, and the stability and security that it provides, have enabled the Korean people in the South to realize the remarkable political, economic, social, and cultural achievements that give new meaning to the idea of “the Miracle on the Han River.” There is no reason that an alliance between the United States and a unified Korea – properly structured and supported – cannot bring the same benefits to the Korean people across the peninsula.

The views expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of National Defense University, the Department of Defense, or the US government.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.