

The US Military Pivot to Asia and Exploring a New Phase of the US-ROK Alliance by Jinho Park

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In 2012, there will be presidential elections in both the United States and the Republic of Korea. Due to its deep and broad nature, it is unlikely that the US-ROK alliance will be altered by who wins either election. Still, leaders of the new governments will craft strategic visions to cope with developments in the Asia-Pacific region. The center of gravity shaping the security environment in Asia revolves around the US military pivot to Asia and China's rising influence.

US leadership in Asia has been the main buttress for regional security and prosperity since the Cold War. The grand strategy of rebalancing US defense, diplomatic, and economic resources toward the Asia-Pacific is a decision to advance US vital interests amid the rise of Asia and significant US defense budget cuts. For Asian countries, the US military pivot to Asia is somewhat ambiguous, but over the long term it will be the most challenging and complex strategic issue. Although it is unclear how the US 'pivot' will influence the defense strategy of regional countries, uncertainty will increase unless the US government takes the initiative to balance the attainment of its strategic interests in Asia and the pursuit of mutual cooperation for resolving top national issues among its allies. This must be accomplished while managing an integral linkage between US defense budget cuts and overall defense strategy – a stronger military commitment – in Asia. Sequestration would impede US capabilities to advance and sustain a stronger defense posture and presence in Asia.

Given uncertainties surrounding the new leadership in North Korea, the rise of China, a potential for low-intensity conflict over disputed territories in Asia, leaders of the United States and the Republic of Korea must examine the role of the US-ROK alliance in this evolving security environment. Our leaders could begin strategic discussions on shaping a new role for their security partnership by examining two critical issues: reunification of the Korean Peninsula and revision of the Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1953.

These two issues might look separate, but they need to be connected to promote the mutual interests of the US and the ROK. The Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States and the Republic of Korea signed by President Barack Obama and President Lee Myung-bak in 2009 states, "Through our Alliance we aim to build a better future for all people on the Korean Peninsula, establishing a durable peace on the Peninsula and leading to peaceful reunification." The Mutual Defense Treaty remains the cornerstone of the US-ROK military alliance and of peace and stability in Northeast Asia.

For Korea, revising the Mutual Defense Treaty, which is quite outdated given the evolution of the regional security environment, provides a better condition – through strong and robust military deterrence – for exploring and promoting political trust with North Korea, and promoting crucial steps toward peaceful reunification. For Washington, revision would demonstrate a strong signal to the Korean people that its commitment to the defense and peace of the Korean Peninsula is firm and abiding. This would give the US government a better opportunity to discuss a new role for the US-ROK military alliance within the context of the US military pivot to Asia. As the Mutual Defense Treaty was signed in the aftermath of the Korean Armistice Agreement in 1953, the nature of the treaty focuses excessively on collective defense for the preservation of peace and security from external armed attack.

Now, the US-ROK military alliance is required to play more diverse roles, ranging from military operations to nonmilitary operations beyond the Korean Peninsula. In this strategic environment, there are strategic factors that we must take into consideration for revising the treaty. First, the US-ROK military partnership should make efforts to promote both regional and global security. In this respect, the part of the Mutual Defense Treaty stating "pending the development of a more comprehensive and effective system of regional security in the Pacific area" is not consistent with the global status of US-ROK military cooperation.

Second, North Korea continues to conduct military and nonmilitary provocations to achieve its political goals. These provocations require us to demonstrate a strengthened combined US-ROK will to deter – extended nuclear deterrence – for preventing both full-scale war and provocations. Third, a military buildup among Asian countries is expected. The two nations should make efforts to mitigate a regional security dilemma which would increase security uncertainty. Last, since the US-ROK alliance has identified peaceful reunification of a divided Korea as a goal in the 2009 Joint Vision Statement, a revision of the treaty should reflect our common vision for the future of the Korean Peninsula. Although revision would not be welcome by North Korea and possibly not by China, adapting the 59-year old treaty to the changing regional and global context would upgrade the alliance and promote regional peace and stability.

Presidential candidates in Korea have not yet introduced their foreign policies. Instead they focus on economic and social welfare issues. President Barack Obama is maintaining the policy line he pursued throughout his first administration. In contrast, the Republican candidate Mitt Romney calls for a stronger and bolder US approach to Asia to increase economic and military competitiveness. It is understood, however, that the two candidates do not have significant differences regarding vital US interests in Asia.

Before leaders of the two nations discuss revision of the Mutual Defense Treaty, the next president of Korea must define a future regional and global role of the ROK. Without a clear vision for the nation, a new leader will face political challenges domestically and in the region. To successfully revise the Mutual Defense Treaty and discuss the US contribution for peaceful reunification of the divided peninsula, the US government must be reminded that pursuing the ROK's strategic interests through the alliance furthers US interests in Asia.

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