



## **The Beginning of the End of the U.S.-ROK Alliance?** by Scott Snyder

President George W. Bush recently announced that up to 70,000 U.S. forces worldwide, including 12,500 of 37,500 troops stationed on the Korean Peninsula, may be coming home from overseas deployments. The planned troop reductions in Korea have drawn pointed criticism from Kerry campaign advisors who seek to dramatize the Bush administration's failure to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis.

The emergence of differing priorities between the United States and South Korea at a time of global military transformation for the U.S. and domestic political transformation in South Korea suggests that these changes are long overdue regardless of North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship. But the need to manage these adjustments sensitively with adequate consultation is more important than ever. The announcement and the domestic political debate about the relationship in both countries demonstrate the core challenge: to effectively manage the redefinition of an alliance that has been central to Asian security for half a century while preserving U.S.-ROK cooperation to ensure stability in Northeast Asia.

The alliance appears demonstrably less important to both Americans and South Koreans than it was during the Cold War. This reflects a growing divergence in perspectives on North Korea. The South Korean public's negative response to President Bush's rhetoric about Kim Jong-il is the clearest evidence of those differences. South Korea's own economic performance, political development, and resulting sensitivities toward perceived U.S. unilateralism have also resulted in frictions with the United States.

Strategically, the second North Korean nuclear crisis illustrates the predominant influence of nonproliferation concerns over regional strategy in shaping U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula. Alliance considerations are no longer preeminent in shaping U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula at the same time that the United States has become the world's only superpower.

For South Korea, economic opportunities with China – the PRC is the ROK's number one trade and investment partner – are an emerging factor in viewing Korean commitment to the U.S.-ROK alliance. Formerly, the United States was predominant as both an economic and military partner to South Korea, but South Korea's trade and diplomatic relationships have diversified since the end of the Cold War, resulting in greater South Korean independence from the United States. Korea's multifaceted trade and political relationships will require Americans to adjust their expectations for a more independent South Korea, although

the ROK still leans toward the United States as the ultimate guarantor of peninsular stability.

Psychologically, the U.S. and South Korean publics have grown apart even as the two societies have greater shared values and more common experience. In South Korea, the inter-Korean summit in June 2000 had a deep emotional and psychological effect on views of North Korea, while the American public was not focused on the summit and certainly did not feel the emotional pull of the event. Likewise, the Korean public has not fully absorbed the deep psychological significance of 9/11 for the American public, which, after the initial shocks, seemed to many Koreans more like a movie than a real event.

One result of these divergences has been the emergence of a public debate in South Korea over the future of the U.S.-ROK security alliance. The relationship with the U.S. has become a central issue in South Korea's domestic political debate in many aspects: from the reconfiguration of U.S. military forces and closure of Yongsan base to assessments of the quality and effectiveness of government-to-government consultations to incidents involving personnel reshuffles in which people are fired for being "too close to the United States" or categorized as "America worshipers." The politicization of the alliance has been corrosive to the relationship. The effects are now spreading to U.S. politics as Kerry and Bush square off over policy toward the Korean Peninsula and the future of U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation.

The proposed U.S. troop reductions highlight the challenges of managing an alliance whose role as the strategic centerpiece of the U.S.-ROK relationship is shrinking while preserving the relationship as a whole. U.S. troop reconfiguration will mitigate U.S. dependence on alliance cooperation in favor of efforts to maximize a robust, flexible, efficient military capacity. The need for flexibility – to be able to deploy off the peninsula – may conflict with the traditional operational concepts of the alliance, in which the two countries have solely focused on taking joint action against a common threat. However, the Future of the Alliance talks have not yet addressed the strategic context in which the reconfiguration is taking place or the new stresses on cooperation that are imposed by developing U.S. strategic imperatives.

Although the U.S.-ROK relationship is characterized by a comprehensive economic partnership, strong people-to-people ties, and growing respect for Korea and its economic capacity among Americans, maintaining strong political and security ties will take a greater investment than has been the case. If the security relationship is to be managed successfully, both governments will need to take bold steps to publicly reaffirm the viability and relevance of alliance cooperation, following

the example of the reaffirmation of the U.S.-Japan alliance in the mid-1990s.

The absence of a shared strategic framework by which the Korean and American publics can judge the long-term sustainability of U.S.-ROK cooperation has become the primary constraint on the future of the relationship. Yet it is essential to any joint strategy for dealing with North Korea. A strategic review and affirmation of the future of the alliance relationship that gains support of both the American and South Korean publics is urgently needed to sustain U.S.-ROK security cooperation and to effectively renew joint efforts to ensure peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia.

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