



Decision Time for the U.S.-ROK Alliance

by Scott Snyder and Brad Glosserman

The U.S.-ROK alliance is at a turning point. South Korea has become a modern, vibrant democracy and a dynamic economy with global reach. Despite the nuclear crisis with North Korea, inter-Korean reconciliation has taken root and South Korea feels confident enough to seek a more independent stance vis-à-vis its neighbors. This confidence has exposed a real divide in views in Washington and Seoul about China, North Korea, and Japan. Ironically, at a time when the two societies have converged and have the capacities to be real partners based on shared democratic and free market values, many wonder if the glue that binds them has dissolved and whether their alliance will survive.

Mounting questions about the utility, relevance, and survivability of the U.S.-ROK alliance have stimulated the Roh and Bush administrations to launch two major initiatives early this year – U.S.-ROK FTA negotiations and a strategic dialogue process – that together provide a creative vision for modernizing and reconfiguring the bilateral partnership. Such a grand vision is needed, but it will not succeed if the two countries fail to agree on fundamental questions about threats to national and regional security.

The U.S.-ROK FTA envisions a revitalized economic relationship among allies that has too long been neglected in U.S. thinking toward Korea. Instead, this relationship has overly focused on security for too long, having neglected the expanding and deepening economic ties between the two countries and a seeming convergence in values among the two societies. The FTA negotiations envision greater integration of the U.S. and Korean economies to enhance competitiveness and promote a more open global system.

The U.S.-ROK Strategic Consultation for Allied Partnership, a foreign minister-level dialogue initiated at the request of the two presidents at their meeting last November in Gyeongju, resulted in a joint statement by Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that envisions a significantly broader scope for the relationship. It emphasized coordination to promote democratic institutions and human rights worldwide, plus cooperation to fight terrorism, counter the spread of weapons of mass destruction, fight pandemic diseases, and reinforce peace and stability through support for multilateral peacekeeping, crisis responses, and disaster management. This vision of the alliance seeks to address 21st century threats and provide both countries with new rationales for cooperation. It also attempts to create common ground on “strategic flexibility,” a concept that allows the U.S. to use its Korea-based forces other than on the Peninsula (perhaps in a Taiwan contingency) and has raised alarms in Seoul, even though it states that Seoul “shall

not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.”

These two initiatives are ambitious and controversial steps for a South Korean administration perceived as anti-American. Why has the Roh administration taken steps to expand its alliance partnership with the U.S.?

One reason Seoul is able to pursue dialogue on a redefined vision for the U.S.-ROK security relationship and an expanded economic partnership is the new status for Seoul that is implied: these discussions are based on the premise that South Korea’s economic and political accomplishments merit a more equal, broader, and deeper cooperative approach. In addition, cooperation with the U.S. enables South Korea to extend its reach and expand its standing abroad. Without this platform, South Korean efforts to secure its regional and global interests – especially when flanked by neighbors such as China and Japan – is like swimming upstream, requiring greater effort to achieve similar results.

The U.S. willingness to broaden the scope of the relationship is based on recognition of South Korea’s enhanced regional and global standing. The economic benefits of an FTA are large (as they are for South Korea), but more important, revitalizing the bilateral relationship strengthens U.S. engagement with the region and facilitates achievement of key national security objectives: expanding the alliance of democratic nations, promoting human rights and the protection of human dignity, and helping ensure peace, stability and prosperity in Northeast Asia.

The Roh administration also views an FTA with the U.S. as a tool to defeat opposition by special interests to additional opening of the Korean economy, such as revision of the Korean screen quota. This strategy can succeed only if both governments lessen the hardships imposed on domestic sectors threatened by an agreement. Overcoming powerful cultural and economic obstacles to greater economic integration will be extraordinarily contentious. The two governments cannot simply redirect domestic anger and blame the other for losses incurred during negotiations. Incentives, both political and financial, will be required.

The new vision for the security relationship is also fraught with challenge. One of the Bush administration’s core assumptions is that countries with shared values can work together to expand freedom worldwide and that fellow democracies have an interest in doing so because democracy promotes stability and peace. By definition, therefore, the U.S. and South Korea, as fellow democracies, should see North Korea’s totalitarian government through the same lens. But South Korea’s pressing (and understandable) interests in stability and reconciliation with North Korea have kept it from conforming to this base assumption about how a democratic South Korea should define its interests.

The joint statement does not address this critical divergence. Where the U.S. sees potential new threats – an uncertain environment that requires strategic flexibility – and seeks to maintain its dominance in Asia, the South Korean strategy anticipates that the creation of structures for regional cooperation and removal of great power mistrust will diminish the prospects of conflict among regional powers.

Without a combined strategy for dealing with North Korea, any vision for refashioning the alliance is premature. Until U.S. and South Korean leaders can have an honest conversation about their hopes and fears for the future of North Korea and design a combined and coordinated policy to address Pyongyang, this issue will remain a potentially fatal stumbling block for their alliance. North Korea is certain to seek to exploit the gaps among the policies of allied governments. At the same time, the FTA negotiations will be bitter and tough. Both governments must be prepared for wrenching and invasive discussions. *Most significantly, no government in Seoul should think that an FTA can serve as a quid pro quo for U.S. concessions on security matters. This view could endanger the alliance.*

Even the apparent agreement on “strategic flexibility,” the starting point and prerequisite both for maintaining alliance partnership and expanding that partnership on a global scale, remains contested and misunderstood. The consensus reached is a practical recognition of the scope of independence for either side: Seoul does not have the capacity to keep Washington from using its own forces as it likes and the U.S. can not compel South Korea to enter a regional conflict contrary to its own interest.

But there remains considerable potential for misunderstanding and distortion in the Korean public debate.

“Strategic flexibility” is not aimed at China, but rather at uncertainty regarding the source of future threats and the desire to enhance efficiency of any response. Likewise, those South Koreans who posit a false choice between the alliance and Korean unification see “strategic flexibility” and the accompanying vision that it represents as a setback to their cause: the end of the alliance in pursuit of the illusory dream of a powerful, independent, reunited Korea that has the ability to “balance” and say “no” to all its larger neighbors. A domestic consensus in South Korea remains an essential prerequisite to establishing a long-term vision for the alliance.

It is most important that the U.S. and South Korea identify long-term common interests that transcend the Cold-War rationale for their alliance. But failure to address near-term differences on North Korea will prevent the long-term potential of the relationship from being realized.

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