

A Korean Perspective on the Future of R.O.K.-U.S. Relations by Jaeho Hwang

Jaeho Hwang (jaeho@kida.re.kr) is a research fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses. The views expressed in this article are his own.

The regional security dynamic surrounding the Korean Peninsula is in flux. Former U.S. President Bill Clinton trekked to Pyongyang to free the two captive journalists, creating for the first time since the North's May nuclear test an atmosphere conducive to dialogue. But Seoul has security concerns surpassing those of North Korea, including all of Northeast Asia and greater Asia, both in the short- and long-term. Here, I will lay out the future of the ROK-U.S. alliance amidst turbulent change in the security environment.

The core of Korea anxiety in the mid- to long-term is the prospect of change in the status of U.S. and China. Specifically, while U.S. leadership is in relative decline, China is rapidly rising. Thus, the U.S. ability to maintain international order is limited due to the "rise of the rest," and China in particular.

Korea's anxiety lies in the difficulty in recognizing the intentions and nature of risen and rising powers. How will China act? Royal or hegemonic? Will the U.S. keep its alliance commitment to South Korea indefinitely? Korea is afraid of being "abandoned" as a result of the competition between the great powers. To Korea, the key issue is how to recognize the nature of the changing framework.

A short-term concern is the fierce competition between the U.S. and China for taking initiative. The Bush doctrine weakened cooperation with great powers, with allies, and friendly nations. But the Obama administration has gotten a good start with smart power, leadership, and morality. His "diplomacy of listening" even extends to hostile countries through the logic of "we will extend a hand." Obama's diplomacy is a chance for a new initiative by the U.S. and a reconfiguration of a "battle line" in Asia that can woo states that the U.S. wants in its camp.

The short-term bilateral competition for the hearts of regional states will be fierce especially if the U.S. reconfigures its Asia strategy and taps its smart power. Then, the question of how to balance a U.S.-centric order and China's harmonious world becomes a hot issue; conversely, if Obama's strategy fails to "show its color," China's harmonious world may last as long as the Energizer Bunny.

In my view, Japan has not been up to par in its role. Japan lacks initiative and creativity in its diplomacy. Despite the potential for change in domestic politics, a lack of leadership, difficulty in gaining trust and fulfilling expectations from neighboring countries in the region will keep Japan from being a player equivalent to China. This lack

of an alternative is pushing South Korea to place greater emphasis on the ROK-U.S. alliance.

ROK-U.S. bilateral relations are moving toward a 21st century Strategic Alliance. As embodied in the June 2009 ROK-U.S. summit and the Joint Vision for the Alliance, both states share the values of liberal democracy and market economics while cooperating on many issues. Ultimately, both are geared toward a future-oriented reciprocal partnership.

South Korea does entertain some worries, however. The first is uncertainty about the U.S. commitment and will. The two nations are on different wavelengths when it comes to understanding the other's North Korea policy. South Korea is eager for active denuclearization of the peninsula and is worried that the U.S. will simply settle for nonproliferation. That is, the U.S. may accept North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear power, thereby not providing the level of security guarantee South Korea wants. Moreover, there exists the possibility of withdrawing USFK post-OPCON and after the deactivation of Combined Forces Command.

South Korea has similar concerns when it comes to China. The possibility of "Korea Passing" is an example. This possibility will make the ROK cautious in unilaterally supporting the U.S. amidst repeated conflicts and compromise between the powerful states. But passive support could bring about disadvantages for the ROK-U.S. alliance. The possibility exists of a Grand Bargain between the U.S. and China that includes the North Korean nuclear issue.

Therefore, concerns that Seoul harbors about the ROK-U.S. alliance remain unanswered. Korea's fantasy of China dissipated after the historical manipulation by China in 2004 of *Goguryeo* history, which, like the two sides of a coin, made the ROK-U.S. alliance bounce back. After former President Roh Moo-hyun's "Northeast balancer" diplomacy faced the difficult reality of the balance of power, the Lee Myung-bak government adopted a "New Asia Diplomacy." South Korea has returned to its familiar role in the alliance system.

However, some questions remain that the U.S. must consider. How much importance does the U.S. place on the 21st century Strategic Alliance with the ROK? Will the U.S. recognize and treat the ROK as a strategic ally? In what fields does the U.S. request "strategic" cooperation? If the U.S. really wants to strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance, the U.S. should recognize local sentiment and provide psychological and physical support to allay fears among states regarding a change in the framework. In addition, while the U.S. views the Korean Peninsula as part of a larger picture, the ROK sees a tangible threat. Therefore, efforts to close the gap in perceptions between the U.S. and ROK are required. Finally, cooperation at the Track 1.5 level is needed to frame a more long-term picture.