

Fifth US-ROK Strategic Dialogue
Maui, Hawaii, Feb. 4-5, 2013
Key Findings

The Pacific Forum CSIS, with support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, held the Fifth US-ROK Strategic Dialogue on Maui, Hawaii on Feb. 4-5, 2013. Twenty-five experts and officials and nine Pacific Forum Young Leaders attended, all in their private capacities. They examined the impact of the 2012 elections in both countries on their relationships and the alliance, compared assessments of China and North Korea, and focused on ways to strengthen extended deterrence. While the dialogue enjoyed its usual candor, ROK participants in some cases seemed hesitant to get too far out in front of their new incoming government. Key findings from this meeting include:

There was general agreement that the 2012 elections in the US and ROK will have little, if any, significant impact on the bilateral relationship, which remains strong. Some participants suggested that the ROK may want to carve out a “more independent” role for itself under incoming President Park, but the alliance would still be central to her foreign policy outlook.

ROK participants suggested that the US and ROK negotiate upcoming key issues (nuclear cooperation agreement, host nation support, missile defense cooperation, etc.) in a basket. When US participants countered that this would be difficult, it was recommended that, even if negotiated separately, they be presented to the ROK public together, so that “losses” in one area would be offset by gains in another. The US-ROK Bilateral Nuclear Cooperation Agreement is of particular concern since it has been framed as a test for the alliance or a “trust issue” by the ROK. This negotiation represents an immediate challenge for the relationship.

ROK participants expressed concerns about the impact of the US rebalance to Asia on China. They evidenced great sensitivity to Chinese anxieties, fearing that they might be asked to choose between the US and China, that China might overreact to US moves, or that it might foreclose options to deal with Pyongyang via Beijing.

All participants agreed that US extended deterrence works at the macro level. The US defense commitment to the ROK has been and will continue to be sufficient to dissuade Pyongyang from trying to reunify the Peninsula by force and America’s overwhelming military superiority will deter Pyongyang from invading the South or using its nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, some questioned whether US declaratory policy was sufficient going forward and argued for a more explicit nuclear commitment from the US; e.g., a consensus statement on when the US would use its weapons to protect the ROK. Americans argued that some ambiguity was essential on this issue.

Unlike last year, there was no mention of the need for the ROK to develop nuclear weapons and/or for the US to reintroduce tactical nuclear weapons on ROK territory. Concerns remain, however, about “nuclear blackmail” or about DPRK isolated acts of provocation which fall below the extended deterrence threshold.

There is great frustration among ROK participants (and among their domestic population) about Seoul’s inability to respond to provocations. Some believe their country needs to exert “dominance” over North Korea. Related to this is a belief that the US is preventing them from acquiring necessary military capabilities.

There remain significant uncertainties and misunderstandings about the ROK's "Proactive Deterrence" doctrine, how it has been integrated into the country's national security policy, and how it can be coupled with alliance mechanisms. Some still worry that "proactive" really means "preemptive." One reassuring ROK definition focused on "proactive" merely entailing the identification of "proportionate, appropriate responses to a variety of contingencies" to ensure that the response to future North Korean provocations would be swift but not troubling to the US.

ROK elites and the public must be better prepared to deal with crises; ROK participants worried that reactions to an immediate crisis might undermine long-term strategies. As the ROK's power grows, a strong effort is needed to educate the public about the ROK role and place in the region and beyond; more information should also be made available about US plans and purpose on the Peninsula.

Although there was little agreement over how best to deal with North Korea, all agreed that denuclearization is unlikely in the near future. At issue, notably, is Pyongyang's insisting on normalization of relations with the US as a precondition of talks on denuclearization, which is totally unacceptable. Few, if any, saw an early resumption of the Six-Party Talks and all doubted that Pyongyang could be deterred from conducting its threatened third nuclear test (although all believed we – and Beijing – should still try).

There was general agreement that a new policy toward North Korea is needed. Some participants feared that "strategic patience" allows the North to develop its nuclear weapons, gives China more influence in Pyongyang, and contributes to a sense of drift. On the other hand, no one supported rushing into dialogue with the North and all recognized that the anticipated nuclear test, if conducted, will make it difficult for either Washington or Seoul to make new overtures toward Pyongyang. North Korea policy should not be allowed to drive a wedge between the US and South Korea

China's response to a third DPRK nuclear test will reveal a lot about Beijing's assessment of North Korean behavior. Efforts should be made to reinforce the growing belief in China that its current coddling of the North is damaging China's national security interests and will hurt Beijing both in the near and long-term.

Koreans saw little value added in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and preferred to focus on pursuing economic agreements with China and Japan, both bilaterally and trilaterally. Americans believed that a ROK expression of interest in TPP would compel Japan to join but Koreans were doubtful Japan would join regardless. If Japan were to join, however, the ROK might reconsider.

In theory, ROK participants recognize the need for trilateral cooperation with Japan and the US to better address a range of national security issues. Growing resentment of Japan (as a result of territorial issues and nationalism, notably) prevents this, however.

Informal Trilateral Dialogue

On Feb 6, a small number of current and former ROK, Japan, and US officials (10 in all) held an informal trilateral dialogue to further discuss the prospects for trilateral cooperation as key figures change on all three sides. A few notable observations:

All agreed that Prime Minister Abe would make no dramatic gestures between now and the conclusion of Upper House elections in July. Americans and Japanese believed that a more moderate and cooperative Abe was likely to emerge once the elections were over, especially if the LDP, as anticipated, regained a majority. Koreans feared that the “real” Abe that emerged post-July would be more nationalistic and confrontational, even while acknowledging that his past performance as Prime Minister should provide cause for a more positive assessment.

Koreans believed that incoming President Park would seek to improve relations with both China and Japan but was likely to start with Beijing. The opposition would be watching her closely and would be quick to accuse her of emulating her father, who they branded as a “traitor” as a result of his close association with Japan. This would limit her flexibility, at least initially.

Koreans were worried about the usual cycle of irritations: text books, disputed claims over Dokdo/Takeshima, Yasukuni Shrine visits, and Comfort Women denials and other attempts to revise history or recant past apologies. They exhibited increased awareness and some flexibility on the first two issues: they would be watching how many districts adopted what textbooks and what kind of guidance Tokyo would provide, and recognized the difference between prefecture territorial claims and those endorsed or amplified by Tokyo. An Abe visit to Yasukuni or an attempt to walk away from earlier apologies or the Kono Statement regarding Comfort Women would set the bilateral relationship on a collision course, however. Americans amplified and endorsed these concerns.

One Korean participant expressed the hope that the two leaders could reach some form of informal understanding or make a joint pledge to refrain from inflammatory statements (by themselves or their ministers and hopefully even parliamentarians, although the difficulty regarding the latter was fully appreciated) and avoid overreaction to comments and declarations by those they could not control.

All participants understood the value of improved trilateral cooperation both in dealing with North Korea and China and for the greater cause of regional stability.

For more information, please contact Ralph A. Cossa [Ralph@pacforum.org] at the Pacific Forum CSIS. These are preliminary findings aimed at providing a general summary of the discussion. They are the result of research supported by the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) Project on Advanced Systems and Concepts for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction (PASCC). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of NPS or imply endorsement of the US government. A more detailed summary of the dialogue will soon be available upon request from the Pacific Forum.