

# Revamping the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Guidelines and Strategies for the Early 21st Century

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## I. Introduction

Formed in the aftermath of the Korean War, the ROK-U.S. alliance has been transformed into one of the most successful bilateral alliances in the post-World War II era. The primary mission and *raison d'être* of the alliance remains relatively unchanged since its inception: maintaining a robust deterrence and defense posture vis-à-vis North Korea. Nevertheless, the conditions for maintaining this central mission and the issues which the alliance confronts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have changed considerably over the past two decades with particular reference to the changing requirements for stability. Although it is difficult to predict when and how the condition for stability are likely to shift on the Korean Peninsula, and by inference, the ability of the alliance to adapt itself to emerging dynamics, the following convergence of forces are likely to impinge heavily on alliance management requirements well into the 2020s and beyond. In order to assess the parameters of alliance transformation in the 2010s and beyond, this paper seeks to address the following key points. First, a brief overview of the alliance's key achievements and guideposts from the end of the Korean War until 2010. Second, a strategic assessment of critical trends and issues on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia and a corresponding overview of core issues and emerging challenges with special reference to revamping the ROK-U.S. alliance. And third, policy guidelines and potential strategies going into the 2010-2020 period.

## II. The Alliance at 60: A Strategic Assessment

None of the principal architects and proponents of the alliance in the early 1950s could have possibly imagined the overall trajectory of the ROK-U.S. relationship over the past six decades. Indeed, one of the most interesting dimensions of the

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alliance lies in its “unnatural partnership”—an alliance that was triggered by the onset of war and one which both the United States and a nascent Republic of Korea didn’t expect nor prepare for. Even though the alliance has been maintained for nearly six decades, one could argue that it has gone through four distinct phases: (1) Inception and Structural Formation (1950s-1960s); (2) Growth and Accommodation (1970s-1980s); (3) Democratization and Pluralization (1990s-2000s); and (4) Globalization and Transformation (2010s – today). The overall matrix, including exogenous factors, could be depicted as follows.

**Table 1: ROK-U.S. Alliance Matrix, 1950s - Today**

Year/Issues	1950s-1960s	1970s-1980s	1990s-2000s	2010s- 2020s
Deterrence/Defense Mission	↑	↑	↔	↑
Alliance Cohesion	↑	↘	↔	↑
Democratic Values	↓	↓	↑	↑
U.S. Influence	↑	↑	↘	↔
Domestic Support	↑	↗	↘	↑
Globalization	↓	↓	↗	↑

(↑): High (↓): Low (↗): Relative Growth (↘): Relative Decline (↔): Status Quo

## Alliance Formation

During the initial phase that can be said to have lasted until the late 1960s, the alliance was focused primarily on reconstructing and reconstituting the ROK armed forces after the Korean War. The United States continued to maintain two divisions (the 7<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division) until 1971 when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division was removed as part of the so-called Nixon Doctrine (also referred to as the Guam Doctrine). The growing U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese War from the mid-1960s resulted in three main changes for the ROK-U.S. alliance. First, the de facto coupling of U.S. military assistance and force modernization programs for the ROK with South Korean assistance to the U.S.-led war effort in South Vietnam. As a result, South Korea gradually committed three infantry divisions from the mid-1960s until the withdrawal of ground troops in 1973. Second, the ROK continued to be heavily reliant on the United States for key warfighting materiel given the growing military disparity between South and North Korean forces. Third, the

United States dominated the strategic discourse and attendant policy options given the preponderance of U.S. influence on the alliance and South Korea's heavy reliance on U.S. economic and military assistance.

Militarily, the primary mission was focused on deterring North Korea's growing conventional warfighting capabilities and assisting the ROK armed forces' modernization efforts in the post-Korean War era. Politically, the alliance had to make adjustments in the face of key political transitions in South Korea such as the downfall of the Syngmann Rhee government in April 1960 and the military coup d'etat of May 1961 which ushered in the Park Chung Hee government that subsequently ruled South Korea until the assassination of President Park in October 1979. But the predominant feature of the alliance until the late 1960s was one of critical dependence on the U.S. security umbrella which left little margin for strategic independence but at the same time, an arrangement which allowed the ROK to devote most of its energy towards rapid economic development that began to take off in earnest from the mid to late 1970s. This period was also marked by military provocations by the North such as the attack on the Blue House in 1968, the Pueblo Incident of 1969, and numerous infiltrations by North Korean special forces.

## **Transitions and Challenges**

As the alliance entered its second phase in the 1970s, three key factors dominated alliance management: domestic politics under the Park Administration, South Korea's accelerated economic development, and rapidly changing East Asian security dynamics. Political strains began to mount in the early 1970s after President Park Chung Hee introduced the so-called Yushin Reforms in 1971 or authoritarian rule by allowing virtually unlimited presidential powers through indirect elections. Human rights emerged as one of the major stumbling blocks in ROK-U.S. relations and worsened considerably in the late 1970s with the eruption of the so-called "Korea Gate" scandal. On the security front, the ROK's force modernization program received a major boost concomitant with South Korea's rapid economic growth through its Five Year Plans and dividends flowing from the ROK's involvement in the Vietnamese War.

The 1970s also resulted in significant changes in East Asia such as the first step towards the normalization of Sino-American relations in 1972, the downfall of South Vietnam in 1975, and heightened concerns of eventual "abandonment" by the

United States. In 1977, the Carter Administration announced a series of graduated troop reductions from South Korea which heightened Seoul's acute concerns. Bilateral relations were frayed significantly owing to Jimmy Carter's mounting pressure on South Korea for human rights violations coupled with his initial plans to implement a graduated reduction of ground troops. By the time Park was assassinated on October 26, 1979 and following the military coup of December 12, 1979, bilateral relations were complicated by high levels of uncertainty in the South as well as the potential for North Korean exploitations. Additionally, the coming to power of General Chun Doo Hwan in a military coup on December 12, 1979 and the crackdown in Kwangju by the army in May 1980 resulted in severe disruptions in the alliance.<sup>2</sup>

## **Democratization and Pluralization**

With the return to democracy in 1987, the alliance entered a new phase with three key developments. First, the growing role of the National Assembly, media, and civic society in assessing the state of the alliance and greater scrutiny of the decision-making process. Second, the growing role of public opinion and enhanced politicization of alliance politics. And third, unprecedented change in the international scene marked by the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, German unification, and collapse of the former Soviet Union. For the first time, the alliance would also be affected by Seoul's direct ties with Moscow and Beijing with full normalization of diplomatic relations in 1991.

The end of the Cold War coincided with two other major issues—the advent of North Korea's nuclear problem in earnest from the early 1990s and coping with expanding the alliance's mandate above and beyond deterrence and defense missions on the Korean Peninsula. The outbreak of the North Korean nuclear problem in early 1992 when Pyongyang first broke away from the NPT persists to this very day in the aftermath of North Korea's two nuclear tests in 2002 and 2006. At the same time, the inauguration of the Kim Dae Jung Administration in February 1998 resulted in a major shift in South Korea's policies towards the North through the so-called "Sunshine Policy" which emphasized sustained engagement with the North.

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive review of U.S. policy responses during this period of acute crisis in South Korea, see John A. Wickham, *Korea on the Brink*, (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1999), chapter 3.

Détente with the North continued into the Roh Moo Hyun Administration (2003-2008). Inter-Korean relations would enter a new phase with the first-ever inter-Korean summit in 2000 between President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il. At the tail-end of the Roh Administration in November 2007, a second inter-Korean summit was held in Pyongyang.

## **Globalization and Transformation**

With the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak Administration in February 2008, the alliance would enter its fourth and current phase—globalization and transformation. Alliance transformation was also a major topic during the Roh Administration given the focus on three key issues: the reversion to South Korea of full operational control over its armed forces, long-term force modernization and consolidation programs, and the assumption of greater South Korean latitude in alliance management. The Roh Administration also committed non-combatant forces to stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan and supporting anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia which were politically costly given President Roh's core base of support from South Korea's progressive forces.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the Roh Administration concluded the KORUS FTA on June 30, 2007 although the Bush Administration and the Obama Administration have been unable to ratify the FTA owing to opposition in the U.S. Congress. Notwithstanding the Roh Administration's efforts in upgrading the alliance, however, tensions were never too far from the surface owing to contrasting views on North Korean threat assessments and Seoul's desire for a more independent strategic posture vis-à-vis the United States. The change in administrations following the election of President Lee Myung-bak resulted in a major qualitative change in Korean-American relations. During his first trip to Washington, D.C. in April 2008, President Lee remarked in an interview with the *Washington Post* that he wanted to expand the alliance above and beyond peninsular issues. Specifically, Lee stated that:

I intend to develop our relationship with the United States so that we can achieve a strategic alliance...As you know, the Korean economy is now the world's twelfth or thirteenth largest economy in the world. I intend to

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<sup>3</sup> Nirav Patel and Lindsey Ford, "The Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Global Perspectives," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 21, no. 4, (December 2009), p. 402.

contribute and take part in internal efforts and talk about global concerns commensurate with our economic stature. And also I will work closely with the United States to that we can tackle global concerns such as eradicating terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, drug problems, [and] fighting poverty.<sup>4</sup>

As South Korea marks the 60th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War throughout 2010 and the de facto beginning of the ROK-U.S. alliance, the relationship is entering into a new phase marked by three main drivers. First, domestic dynamics in North Korea have been complicated by the on-going succession from Kim Jong Il to his 27-year old third son, Kim Jong Un. While the North Korean leadership remains stable and prospects for any sudden collapse are low, Kim Jong Il has been declining health since 2008. Coupled with an acute economic crisis and perturbations within the party and the armed forces, the possibility of non-linear transitions in North Korea cannot be ruled out.

Second, the rise of China and Beijing's omnidirectional forays suggests that Chinese influence in and around the Korean Peninsula will continue to expand in the years and decades ahead. South Korea's largest trading partner is China while its closest ally and security partner is the United States. Even as Seoul continues to strengthen its alliance with the United States, accommodating Chinese interests is going to pose increasingly demanding challenges for South Korea.

Third, as evinced by Seoul's successful hosting of the G-20 summit in November, South Korea's increasing international presence will likely entail greater responsibilities and commitments over a range of regional and global issues. Even as the alliance has been shifted into a "strategic alliance" under the Lee Administration, operational challenges are going to be tougher than ever before. During a visit to the White House in June 2009, the two leaders declared that:

[W]e will build a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust. Together, we will work shoulder-to-shoulder to tackle challenges facing both our nations on behalf of the next generation. Through our Alliance we aim to build a better future for all people on the Korean Peninsula, establishing

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<sup>4</sup> "South Korean President Discusses U.S.-South Korea Relations," *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2008.

a durable peace on the Peninsula and leading to peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy. We will work together to achieve the complete and verifiable elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs, as well as ballistic missile programs, and to promote respect for the fundamental human rights of the North Korean people.<sup>5</sup>

This particular joint statement was a significant milestone in the Korean-American alliance. For example, while the United States always publicly supported peaceful unification between the two Koreas, this was the first time that the U.S. president agreed to a roadmap that included "peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy." As soon as this statement was released, however, leftists and liberals in South Korea attacked the statement as de facto support for "unification by absorption" given that it explicitly emphasized democracy and market economy as important unification principles. Nevertheless, it is the height of hypocrisy to argue that Koreans on both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel should somehow not live in democratic societies or have access to the market economy. For the first time since the end of the Korean War, the ROK and the United States have spelled out the type of unified Korea that they both seek to achieve: a reunified, peaceful, democratic and a country that remains closely tied with the global economy.

In essence, while the alliance continues to grapple with a range of threats emanating from the North as evinced by the November 23, 2010 attack on Yeongpyeong Island, maintaining deterrence and defense postures vis-à-vis the North has been complicated by a confluence of new forces including China's increasingly robust footprints in and around the Korean Peninsula. Moreover, if internal dynamics in North Korea begins to shift in earnest during the period of transition from Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un, China could choose to severely constrain and contest ROK and U.S. strategies and policies. Above and beyond peninsular issues, the alliance is also going to require new skill sets as it grapples with key out-of-area concerns and threats. If the alliance was dominated by meeting and maintaining major military tasks, these very tasks have been complicated by

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<sup>5</sup> "Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea," June 16, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/).

political and strategic factors that were not present or if they were, in only limited fashion, until the early to mid-1990s.

### III. Emerging Tasks and Hurdles

For nearly six decades the penultimate mission of the ROK-U.S. alliance has been focused on deterring another outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula. The premium attached to maintaining stability and peace on the peninsula makes eminent sense given the unparalleled destruction that would result from another major conflict between the two Koreas. Nevertheless, stability has already been adversely affected by a convergence of developments over the past decade including North Korea's de facto nuclear weapons capability based on two nuclear tests (2002 and 2006) and more recent revelations of a Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) nuclear program on top of its existing reprocessed plutonium program. Moreover, as the March 26, 2010 sinking of the ROKN *Cheonan* and the November 23, 2010 artillery attacks on Yeongpyeong Island illustrated, North Korea's penchant for serious military provocations remains unchanged.

Thus, even as the alliance expands its mission menu and jointly tackles a range of transnational threats and issues such as climate change, international terrorism, trade protectionism, economic and financial imbalances, WMD proliferation, and global poverty, it still has to grapple with outstanding security challenges posed by the clear and present danger from the North. At the same time, growing Chinese influence globally and regionally attests to the need for incorporating the "China Factor" not only in the context of the Sino-American relationship but alliance management between Seoul and Washington. How China evolves over the next two to three decades cannot but have significant repercussions for the international system and although China faces huge domestic challenges, China's footprints are already present throughout East Asia. As one U.S. academic has written, "what we are living through now is the end of 500 years of Western predominance. This time the Eastern challenger is for real, both economically and geopolitically."<sup>6</sup> Co-managing these two major tasks—responding more effectively to North Korea's expanding threat envelope and coping with a more assertive China—is going to complicate and test alliance management capabilities as never before.

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<sup>6</sup> Niall Ferguson, "In China's Orbit," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2010.

## Core Pillars and New Agendas

From an alliance management perspective, bilateral relations are arguably the best that it has ever been between the Lee and Obama Administrations—a point which has been put to the test over a sequence of crises on the Korean Peninsula including North Korea’s conduct of a second nuclear test in May 2009.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, while many expected the incoming Obama Administration to be much more accommodating to adversaries such as Iran, North Korea, Burma, and even Venezuela—an expectation that the new administration did not discourage—there has been significant continuity in U.S. foreign and security policies. This is not an insignificant point considering the influence the United States has on the conduct of South Korea’s own foreign and security policies. More importantly, for the first time in a decade, South Korea and the United States saw eye-to-eye on the North Korean threat. Indeed, the most recent North Korean attack on Yeongpyeong Island attests to the fact North Korea’s threat towards the South remained unchanged even with the sunshine policy.

Like all political-military partnerships, the ROK-U.S. alliance is a byproduct of the prevailing security climate and more importantly, the perceptions and policies of their respective policymakers. In this respect, three key developments from the 1990s can be seen as turning points in the ROK-U.S. alliance. First, and as alluded to above, one of the most critical reasons that resulted in a decade of strategic unease between Seoul and Washington was the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun government’s excessive attention to “positive North Korean change” despite on-going threats from the DPRK. Despite the fact that North Korea continued to threaten the South with maritime intrusions and incursions, a nuclear test (2002), modernization and expansion of its ballistic missile capabilities, etc., Seoul’s insistence on sunshine policy from 1998-2008 resulted in a politicization of intelligence vis-à-vis North Korea and skewed assessments of military and political developments in the North. With the change in government with the inauguration of Lee Myung-bak Administration in February 2008, bilateral ties have been strengthened and put back on track. Indeed, U.S. officials have stated privately and publicly that the ROK-U.S. alliance is the strongest bilateral relationship it has with key allies in Asia-Pacific.

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<sup>7</sup> David E. Sanger, “Tested Early by North Korea, Obama has Few Options,” *The New York Times*, May 25 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/26/world/asia/26nuke.html>.

Second, the globalization and transformation of the alliance is a significant driver of the alliance given the expansion of agendas the alliance has to cope with. Nevertheless, this also places additional demands on the alliance since its first and primary mission lies in meeting and defeating North Korea across the full spectrum of threats. Balancing South Korea's increasing global security commitments or out-of-area commitments such as the deployment of an ROK PRT in Afghanistan with critical on-the-ground missions is a delicate task but there is no doubt that Seoul's and Washington's principal focus is on deterring war and strengthening interoperable defense capabilities between South Korea and the United States.

Third, the alliance has to take into consideration differing time pressures and timelines such as the need to deploy longer-term assets such as more modernized naval platforms, PGMs (such as advanced cruise missiles), unmanned vehicles (air, ground, and naval), and more sophisticated intelligence platforms. At the same time, if circumstances in North Korea changes substantially including the possibility of non-linear scenarios, the ROK Armed Forces have to also take into consideration two critical missions: stabilization operations following a North Korean collapse and dismantling the KPA and formulating a new defense force with matching doctrines and capabilities. Crucial in this respect is to retain the ROK's full commitment to a non-nuclear posture and full adherence to all non-proliferation treaties and regimes. Nevertheless, navigating these three key areas is going to necessitate the highest degree of alliance cohesion and management, not to mention the closest of cooperation with other key allies such as Japan. It goes without saying that accommodating, constraining, and deterring China all at the same time is going to emerge as the most important strategic issue facing the United States, Japan and South Korea in the 2010s and beyond.

## **Responding to North Korean Aggression**

The March 2010 *Cheonan* attack that killed 46 South Korean sailors and the November 2010 artillery attack on Yeongpyeong Island brought to the fore three core issues. First, an urgent need to upgrade the ROK's defense's throughout the so-called "Five Western Sea Islands" in the Yellow Sea (referred to in Korea as the Western Sea) but particularly on Baekyeong and Yeongpyeong Islands. Second, new rules of engagement for the ROK's Armed Forces that includes preventative deterrence and much more direct and aggressive responses to North Korean attacks

and provocations. And third, upgrading significantly the ROK's crisis management capabilities from the highest levels of national policy to greater jointness and readiness within the ROK's services.

To begin with, there is no daylight between the ROK and the United States on the nature and depth of the North Korean threat. Whereas previous South Korean governments downplayed and politicized intelligence assessments (such as the initial 2002 revelation by the North Koreans that they were working on a second nuclear program or a Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program), the Lee and Obama Administrations have seen eye-to-eye on all major strategic issues. For example, during a visit to Seoul for the November 2010 G-20 summit, President Obama spoke to some of the 28,000 U.S. forces stationed in South Korea on the stark contrasts between the South and the North. He stated that:

This is not an accident of history. It is a direct result of the path that has been taken by North Korea -- a path of confrontation and provocation; one that includes the pursuit of nuclear weapons and the attack on the *Cheonan* last March...In the wake of this aggression, Pyongyang should not be mistaken: the United States will never waver in our commitment to the security of the Republic of Korea. The alliance between our two nations has never been stronger, and along the with the rest of the world, we have made it clear that North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear weapons will only lead to more isolation and less security.<sup>8</sup>

As noted above, a North Korean torpedo attacked and sunk the ROKS corvette, the *Cheonan*, on March 26 killing 46 ROK sailors. While Seoul suspected from the very onset that this attack was perpetrated by North Korea, it was only after the major findings of the official investigation was released in May 2010 that the South Korean government officially condemned the North for the torpedo attack.<sup>9</sup> Just eight months after the sinking of the *Cheonan*, North Korean artillery fired some 180 plus rounds at Yeongpyeong Island on November 23, 2010—only 13 km from North Korea's shores and one of South Korea's closest islands along the maritime

<sup>8</sup> "Obama Calls for North to Change Course," *UPI*, November 10, 2010. [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2010/11/10/Obama-arrives-in-South-Korea-for-G20/UPI-45031289392092/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2010/11/10/Obama-arrives-in-South-Korea-for-G20/UPI-45031289392092/).

<sup>9</sup> For additional details see *Joint Investigation Report: On the Attack Against ROK Ship Cheonan*, (Seoul: Ministry of National Defense, September 2010).

boundary known as the Northern Limitation Line (NLL). Notwithstanding the rationale for expanding the alliance's missions, the string of provocations instigated by the North was a crucial reminder that South Korea's core defense and security commitments had to be focused on managing the expanding North Korean threat. For its part, Washington has continued to provide unequivocal political and military support to the ROK. As a case in point, in May 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in a visit Beijing just prior to landing in Seoul that the U.S. fully supported President Lee's handling of the crisis and the "objective investigation" that followed the sinking of the Cheonan and furthermore, that the ROK could count on the unwavering support from the United States. Clinton also announced four related measures.

First, we endorse President Lee's call on North Korea to come forward with the facts regarding this act of aggression and, above all, stop its belligerence and threatening behavior. Second, our support for South Korea's defense is unequivocal, and President Obama has directed his military commanders to coordinate closely with their Korean counterparts to ensure readiness and to deter future aggression. As part of our ongoing dialogue, we will explore further enhancements to our joint posture on the Peninsula. Third, we support President Lee's call to bring this issue to the United Nations Security Council. I will be working with Ambassador Rice and our Korean counterparts, as well as Japan, China, and other UN Security Council member states to reach agreement on a way forward in the Council. Fourth, President Obama has directed U.S. Government agencies to review their existing authorities and policies related to North Korea, to ensure that we have adequate measures in place, and to identify areas where adjustments would be appropriate.<sup>10</sup>

In Seoul, Clinton alluded to the key role that China could play in persuading North Korea to pursue a different route and stated that "we believe it's in everyone's interest, including China, to make a persuasive case for North Korea to change direction" and that "there is profound frustration with North Korean behavior and

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<sup>10</sup> See P.A. Aroon, "Clinton: U.S. 'Fully Support S. Korean President's Response to Cheonan Attack,'" *Foreign Policy*, May 24, 2010. [http://hillary.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/05/24/clinton\\_us\\_fully\\_supports\\_s\\_korean\\_presidents\\_response\\_to\\_cheonan\\_attack](http://hillary.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/05/24/clinton_us_fully_supports_s_korean_presidents_response_to_cheonan_attack).

with the way in which it complicates China's own security calculations."<sup>11</sup> For the first time, Seoul and Washington held a "two plus two" meeting between their respective foreign and defense ministers which highlighted the following points: (1) reaffirmation to meet any and all North Korean threats; (2) completion of a new plan, the Strategic Alliance 2015 by this year's Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) including the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) to the ROK military by December 2015; (3) reaffirmation of the earlier joint condemnation of North Korea for the sinking of the Cheonan; (4) urging North Korea to abandon all nuclear programs in a complete and a verifiable manner; and (5) combining efforts over a range of critical global issues.<sup>12</sup>

In the aftermath of the Yeongpyeong Island attack the Chinese foreign ministry basically repeated its stance following the March sinking of the Cheonan, i.e., that both sides should restrain from escalating tensions on the peninsula without alluding to North Korea's responsibility. It announced that "we have taken note of the relevant report and we express concern over the situation" and that "we hope the relevant parties will do more to contribute to peace and security on the peninsula."<sup>13</sup> On November 28, the Chinese foreign ministry announced the need to hold an emergency session of the Six Party Talks. State councilor for foreign affairs Dai Bingguo visited Seoul from November 27-28 and reportedly conveyed Beijing's proposal to restart the Six Party Talks but the South Korean government responded that it was inappropriate to hold the Six Party Talks without first resolving North Korea's responsibilities for the Cheonan and the Yeongpyeong attacks.<sup>14</sup>

Officially, Beijing continues to support Pyongyang since it fears that abandoning North Korea would be a strategic liability for China since the alternative would be a unified Korea under the auspices of the ROK. As North Korea's only real ally and sole patron, the PRC is highly unlikely to significantly alter its ties with the North—not because China is enamored by North Korea, but exploiting the North as a buffer against the United States, Japan and South Korea. Despite China's critical economic ties with all three powers or precisely because of such ties, Beijing's strategic

<sup>11</sup> "U.S. Stands With an Ally, Eager for China to Join the Line," *The New York Times*, May 27, 2010. <http://nytimes.com/2010/05/27/world/asia/27clinton.html?ref=southkorea>.

<sup>12</sup> "Full Text of 2+2 Joint Statement," *The Korea Herald*, July 21, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Keith B. Richburg, "North Korea Fires Artillery at South Korean Island of Yeongpyeong," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, November 23, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> "China Proposes North Korean Nuclear Six Party Talks Early Next Month," *The Donga Ilbo*, November 28, 2010. <http://news.donga.com/Inter/3/02/20101128/32920756/1>.

calculation is premised on the belief that Washington, Tokyo and Seoul can't afford to rupture their economic ties with Beijing. And while North Korea is a liability, it is a liability that China can maintain at minimal economic cost. Although there's an opportunity cost for China as well in terms of loss of international credibility for coddling the North Korea, China is more than willing to bear such political costs so long as stability prevails and Beijing's core interests are covered. Just how long China can continue to subsidize and support North Korea virtually unconditionally remains unknown.

China's official media hues very closely to the party line so that alternate views rarely appear in the major propaganda organs but it also cannot be denied that support for North Korea is thinning from the perspective of the Chinese public. "No matter whether it be within the party, among the people, or even within the military, China has grown increasingly sick and tired of North Korea's rogue politics," said a senior Chinese media commentator, who asked not to be named because of the delicacy of the issue. "But strategically, China's kidnapped by it."<sup>15</sup> Such sentiments are unlikely to be shared by the apex of China's political and military leaderships but at the very least, China's "North Korea dilemma" is likely to deepen in the months and years ahead.

The South Korean government and the armed forces in particular were criticized for an overtly cautious response to the artillery attack. As a case in point, according to an opinion poll conducted by the East Asia Institute (EAI) and the Korea Research on November 27, some 72% of the respondents said that the South Korean government is doing a poor job in handling the crisis and only 24.7% that they were doing a good job. 36.5% percent responded that the government's crisis management system was problematic.<sup>16</sup> While opinion polls are extremely situation specific, this poll illustrated a change in the public's perception after the culmination of two major North Korean attacks since March and the perceived mishandling of the situation. On November 28, the ROK and the United States began a four-day joint naval exercise in the Western Sea with the participation of the nuclear aircraft carrier USS George Washington which North Korea condemned as an "act of war."

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<sup>15</sup> Ian Jonhson and Michael Wines, "China Faces a Nettlesome Neighbor in North Korea," *The New York Times*, reprinted in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/10327/1105834-82.stm?cmpid=nationworld.xml#ixzz16a57IF6Q>.

<sup>16</sup> "72% of Public Says Government Responded Poorly to the Yeongpyeong Attack," *The Chosun Ilbo*, November 28, 2010. [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2010/11/28/2010112800481.htm?Dep0=chosunnews&Dep1=related&Dep2=related\\_all](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/11/28/2010112800481.htm?Dep0=chosunnews&Dep1=related&Dep2=related_all).

South Korean sources reported that North Korea had deployed SA-2 SAMs along the Western coast in order to deter ROK and US aircraft.<sup>17</sup>

On November 29, President Lee Myung-bak addressed the nation and stated that “I am responsible for not having been able to protect the lives and property of the people. I understand very well that you were greatly disappointed with how we responded to the shelling of Yeongpyeong Island by North Korea.” The president also emphasized that while the North had perpetrated numerous provocations “it has never launched a direct attack onto our territory before.” President Lee promised to upgrade the ROK’s overall defense posture with particular emphasis on bolstering defense capabilities in the so-called “Five Western Sea Islands” but drew a firm line on future ties with the North.

At long last, we came to a realization that it no longer makes sense for us to anticipate that the North would abandon its nuclear program or its policy of brinkmanship on its own. The South Korean people now unequivocally understand that prolonged endurance and tolerance will spawn nothing but more serious provocations. Those who have so far supported the North Korean regime might now see its true colors. We are aware of the historic lesson that a disgraceful peace achieved through intimidation only brings about greater harm in the end. Only courage that defies retreat under any threat or provocation will bring about genuine peace. If the North commits any additional provocations against the South, we will make sure that it pays a dear price without fail.<sup>18</sup>

Although the ROK’s comprehensive responses to the Yeongpyeong Island attack and the earlier sinking of the Cheonan will be part of an on-going process, press reports suggested that according to government sources, the MND plans to base surface-to-surface cruise missiles, multiple rocket launchers, and other weapons systems in order to significantly beef up the ROK’s defense capabilities. At the same time, the MND has been tasked to change the armed forces’ rules of engagement (ROE) so that immediate military responses can be made in the event of another North Korean military attack. The Defense Committee of the National Assembly has received an emergency budget request from the MND to bolster defenses at Yeongpyeong Island.

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<sup>17</sup> “North deploys SA-2 SAM after artillery attack on Yeongpyeong,” November 28, 2010, *The Chosun Ilbo*, [http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2010/11/28/2010112800061.html](http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/11/28/2010112800061.html).

<sup>18</sup> “Address to the Nation by President Lee Myung-bak on the Shelling of Yeongpyeongdo by North Korea,” November 29, 2010, Office of the President, Seoul.

#### IV. Future Guidelines and Strategic Objectives

The ROK-U.S. alliance has grown into one of the most successful bilateral alliances that the United States forged in the aftermath of the Second World War. Notwithstanding a range of bilateral and multilateral challenges, one of the most significant developments of the alliance is the fact that it has been firmly institutionalized and more importantly, that the alliance has been tested—at times quite severely—over a range of contrasting political circumstances. The alliance has survived and has become stronger in the aftermath of key political turbulences such as the so-called “Korea Gate” scandal of the mid to late 1970s, the assassination of President Park in October 1979, the military coup of December 1979, the Kwangju incident of May 1980, a string of North Korean terrorist attacks such as the bombing of a civilian airliner in 1987 and earlier the assassination of 17 ROK officials in Burma in 1983, the overall transition to democracy beginning in 1987, and contrasting assessments of North Korea from 1998-2008. Soon after the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak Administration in February 2008, massive protests erupted in Seoul when the government decided to relax restrictions on U.S. beef imports. Yet despite such tumultuous developments, the alliance has emerged as one of the core pillars of stability and prosperity in East Asia.

Nevertheless, the alliance faces a significantly expanded threat envelope compared to its inception in 1953. Ironically, while the ROK has won the strategic competition with the North from a political and economic point of view, North Korea continues to pose significant threats to the ROK and its neighbors including Japan. The HEU program which North Korea revealed to Dr. Siegfried Hecker on November 12, 2010 included a uranium-enrichment facility with 2,000 centrifuges that was able to produce low HEU.<sup>19</sup> The United States, the ROK, and Japan all expressed deep concern over the most recent revelations about North Korea’s HEU program. For its part, China has continued to skirt the issue and continues to emphasize the need for direct dialogue between the United States and North Korea but “Obama Administration officials have repeatedly stated that they aren’t going to renegotiate agreements with North Korea made and then reneged on.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For full details, see Siegfried S. Hecker, “A Return Trip to North Korea’s Yongbyon Nuclear Complex,” Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, November 20, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Evan Ramstad and Jay Solomon, “North Korea Nuclear Claims Set Off Scramble,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 21, 2010.

The alliance faces a number of hurdles such as ensuring the smooth transition of wartime operational control from the United States to the ROK in 2015, renegotiating the ROK-U.S. Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation Agreement by 2014, and more immediately, ensuring the passage of the KORUS FTA in the U.S. Congress. While negotiations are continuing on the FTA, it remains doubtful if the FTA will be approved by the current lame duck U.S. Congress so that passage is unlikely, if it happens, until late spring or early summer 2011. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the conclusion of the ROK-EU FTA which is going to come into force in the spring of 2011, ensuring sustained U.S. economic competitiveness in the Korean market is going to be inexorably delayed and damaged without early approval of the KORUS FTA.

The successful hosting of the November G-20 Seoul summit and the outbreak of the recent artillery attack on Yeongpyeong Island illustrates the stark strategic realities of a divided Korea. From a war-torn nation destined for poverty and near total dependence on the United States and the international community for its security and economic prosperity, the ROK has emerged as one of the world's most vibrant and successful economies in the post-World War II era. Indeed, the ROK is the only donor recipient to become a member of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC). Yet this very economic success co-exists with a precarious security environment that the ROK has to manage simultaneously. Moreover, ensuring that its core strategic interests can be maintained throughout the process of Korean unification lies at the center of the ROK's looming security and political challenge.

The degree to which the ROK is able to simultaneously cope with four key challenges is going to test its foreign and security policy acumen than ever before. First, the ROK has to revamp its national defense apparatus and matching force modernization and augmentation programs to better meet more immediate threats as evinced by the sinking of the Cheonan and the Yeongpyeong Island attacks. Second, the ROK has to expand and deepen its "diplomatic capital" with all its key neighbors but with special emphasis on China as the Korean Peninsula begins to transition. Third, the ROK has to ensure the highest degree of political and military coordination with the United States over the next decade which is likely to pose a complex array of threats and challenges to the alliance based on potential transformations in North Korea. And fourth, the ROK has to sustain its economic growth and international economic competitiveness during a period of China's and

India's accelerated rise and an increasingly volatile global economy.

These tasks clearly cannot be undertaken solely by the ROK and in a networked world, it is no longer possible to delineate between intrinsically national and international issues. Seen from this perspective, efforts at modernizing the ROK-U.S. alliance for the 21<sup>st</sup> century has already begun but the real task lies ahead. For this very reason, it also stands to reason why the U.S.-Japan alliance remains so essential to the stability and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula and by extension, the critical importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance for Japan's longer term prosperity and security.