

## Briefing Memo

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### **Redefinition of a US-ROK Alliance Constrained by Regional Awareness**

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The US-ROK alliance, which has had deterrence of North Korea as its central role, is approaching a period when its reason for existence needs to be redefined from a broader perspective than just that of the Korean Peninsula. But South Korea, which continues to be beset by the North-South confrontation issue, does not yet have the luxury to look around at issues in other parts of East Asia outside the area of the Korean Peninsula. Its regional awareness is limited to issues directly related to the North Korean situation. In this paper, I want to examine the possibilities for redefinition of a US-ROK alliance constrained by this focus on the part of South Korea.

In February 2007, the United States and South Korea agreed to transfer wartime operational control of ROK forces under the US-ROK Combined Forces Command (CFC) to South Korea by 2012. The two countries are currently engaged in consultations over the method for controlling the Military Demarcation Line after the transfer of operational control. This impending dramatic change in the US-ROK alliance is mainly due to two factors. One is that the peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is becoming a target for discussion in the multilateral talks on North Korea, while the other is that US interest in North Korean conventional war capabilities is fading rapidly.

First, the peace regime mainly involves converting the Korean War Armistice Agreement into a peace treaty. Establishment of such a regime could shake the basic objective for US involvement in South Korea's security. US forces were originally stationed in South Korea to provide a fighting capability for the UN Command (UNC) that was established at the time of the Korean War. The wartime operational control over the combined US-ROK forces held by the current CFC derives its authority from the UNC's UN forces command structure. Establishment of a peace regime would not only decisively weaken the rationale for the

UNC's existence, it would also constitute an opportunity for re-studying the framework for the current US-ROK alliance that revolves around the CFC.

It was at the Six-Party Talks on the nuclear issue that calls were issued on the need for discussion of a peace regime, and this, in fact, was the impetus for discussions between the United States and South Korea regarding CFC wartime operational control. The joint statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks held in September 2005 called for "directly related parties" to hold separate talks regarding a peace framework. In response, at the US-ROK Security Policy Initiative (SPI) talks held at the end of that same month, the South Korean government renewed its call for transfer of the wartime operational control of ROK forces under the CFC to South Korea. The Roh Moo-hyun Administration treated the call for the need of a peace regime as a good opportunity for resolving the operational control issue. Many people in South Korea had long felt that assumption of wartime operational control of ROK forces by the CFC commander (a US Army three-star general) constituted an infringement of sovereignty, and the Roh Moo-hyun Administration treated resolution of this dissatisfaction as an important policy issue with the United States.

The South Korean President's Office explained that the US side at these SPI talks also took the stance that studies into the "future of the alliance in relation to a peace regime" needed to be activated (October 13, 2005 issue of *Korea Defense Daily*). Both the United States and South Korea recognized that the peace regime is clearly a factor that would greatly change the alliance. In the 37th Security Consultative Meeting Joint Communiqué between the United States and South Korea that was issued on October 21, 2005, the two sides agreed to "appropriately accelerate discussions on command relations and wartime operational control," and discussions between the two countries began in earnest.

However, a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula is not the deciding factor behind US intentions to make changes to the alliance. More importantly, one major reason that the United States is promoting change in the US-ROK alliance is its desire to dissolve the framework that brings large-scale US forces under control of a CFC that is dedicated solely to opposing North Korea. In the United States, interest in the original objective of the US-ROK alliance, which was to oppose North Korean war capabilities centered on its large land army, is fading. But since CFC wartime operational control falls under US Forces Korea (USFK), the United States has been compelled to remain deeply involved in security on and around the Korean Peninsula. The United States is seeking to dissolve this framework.

The US stance on the future of the UNC, in particular, reveals the extent of its reduced interest in North Korea. As was mentioned above, there is a good possibility that the UNC, which was established for the Korean War, will be dismantled if a peace regime is formed. Yet even though the United States has taken a positive stance toward transfer of operational

control linked to the dismantling of the CFC, it has also advocated a policy that the UNC should continue. In other words, regardless of whether the peace regime is established or not, the United States wants to dismantle the CFC at an early date and to shrink the role of US Forces Korea centered on North Korea.

In fact, the United States has now clarified its stance that the UNC should continue, and has agreed in consultations with South Korea to set a deadline for transfer of operational control without linking it to a peace regime. On March 7, 2006, UNC commander General Burwell Bell (who also serves as CFC Commander and as Commander of US Forces Korea) told the US Senate Committee on Armed Services that the policy is to make the previously mainly US-staffed UNC more multinational in nature, and to widen international participation in the UNC through the permanent stationing of personnel from various countries to manage the road and railroad links now crossing the Demilitarized Zone. It goes without saying that such a policy presumes the continued existence of the UNC. By August 2006, the United States and South Korea had commenced consultations on setting the deadline for transfer of control for sometime from 2009 to 2012 without reference to a peace regime. As a result, the major change to the US-ROK alliance represented by the dismantling of the CFC became detached from the building of a peace regime.

As can be seen, the proposal by the South Korean side to transfer wartime operational control even as a peace regime becomes the target of multilateral consultations, and the intentions of the US side to dismantle the CFC at an early date because of waning interest in North Korean conventional war capabilities, are both linked to the changes in the US-ROK alliance. If the objective of the US-ROK alliance, i.e., to oppose the North Korean threat, is shaken, then continuation of the close alliance relationship requires that the two countries redefine its significance. In other words, the US-ROK alliance needs to expand its objectives beyond North Korea to include responses to other threats in East Asia outside of the Korean Peninsula. However, South Korea's regional awareness is limited to a issues directly related to North Korea, and this limits the possibilities for redefinition of the alliance. From here on, I would like to proceed with an examination of the significance of the US-ROK alliance in the future as viewed from the perspective of the United States, and to contrast that with South Korea's regional awareness.

In March 2006, then-Commander of the US Pacific Command Admiral William Fallon said in testimony before the US Senate Committee on Armed Services that the US-ROK alliance must be adaptable to the changing security environment, including the modernization of China's military, adding that he welcomed South Korea taking a more regional perspective regarding safety and stability. Such a comment can surely be taken as calling for the future US-ROK alliance to have an expanded role in East Asia outside of the area of the Korean

Peninsula. This expression of expectations for a South Korea that currently maintains a purely regional focus within the alliance was repeated by Fallon's successor, Admiral Timothy Keating (April 24, 2007, Senate Committee on Armed Services). In addition, the United States has since 2003 been calling for strategic flexibility (missions to regions other than the Korean Peninsula) for US Forces Korea. After transfer of CFC operational control, the framework will shift so that ROK forces take the lead in operations versus North Korea with US forces limited to a support role. This makes clear that the weight held by North Korea in the objectives of US Forces Korea is to steadily decrease. In other words, with the notable exception of nuclear nonproliferation, the Korea issue will hardly have a very high priority in the United States' East Asia policy.

Meanwhile, any regional awareness that has been apparent in security policy concepts announced by South Korea's Roh Moo-hyun Administration has been limited to Northeast Asia with the assumption that international relationships are centered on the Korean Peninsula. In other words, the Roh administration understood that the stability of the US-China and Japan-China relationships were dependent variables of the security issue on the Korean Peninsula. For example, the "Era of Peace and Prosperity for Northeast Asia" announced by the President's Advisory Committee in August 2004 postulates that the most likely source of conflict between the maritime powers of Japan and the United States and the continental power of China was the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the "Northeast Asia Balancer Theory Briefing Materials" announced by South Korea's National Security Council in April 2005 viewed the situation on the Korean Peninsula as the main cause of past confrontations between surrounding countries. As long as South Korea's regional awareness remains rooted on the Korean Peninsula, security issues that are not dependent variables of the Korea issue will be neglected.

As a result, it had been difficult for the Roh Moo-hyun Administration to conceive of a role for South Korea as a US ally in East Asia outside of the area of the Korean Peninsula. At the very least, in regards to strategic flexibility, President Roh Moo-Hyun has been extremely cautious about domestic apprehensions toward South Korea's relationship with China. For example, in a speech at the Korea Air Force Academy in March 2005, the president asserted that "many voices of alarm have been raised in regard to an expanded role for US Forces Korea," and emphasized that avoiding entanglement in conflicts that the Korean people do not desire "is a firm principle that we cannot brook compromise, no matter what the situation."

Security in the East Asia region is not necessarily always centered on the Korean Peninsula, and this links to US attempts to reposition the significance of the US-ROK alliance. On the other hand, South Korea concentrates its interest on the immediate issue of coexistence with North Korea, and is hardly aware of the importance of security issues outside of the area of

the Korean Peninsula. As a result, South Korea quickly reacts to any moves that change the role of the US-ROK alliance away from its limited role of opposition to North Korea by saying it wants to avoid entanglements. The North Korea threat that originally gave birth to the US-ROK alliance is even now a constraining factor on moves to continue that alliance.

In the area of military capability as well, there are limits to the cooperation that South Korea can give the United States. Dismantling the CFC while the North Korea threat is still alive will thrust the issue of “Koreanization” of national defense onto the ROK forces, who will have to take up the role previously played by US Forces Korea. While the ROK military has in recent years reinforced its naval and air strength to boost its ability to respond to regional threats, strengthening deterrence against North Korea for the time being remains the priority issue for South Korea. At present, South Korea remains too tightly bound by the North Korea issue to play any significant role in East Asian security outside of the Korean Peninsula region.

If in these circumstances the US-ROK alliance were to be given a regional mission, what direction would be most feasible? Working from the assumption of South Korea’s regional awareness and constraints on its capabilities, one likely possibility would be for South Korea to concentrate on defense within the area of the Korean Peninsula while at the same time providing bases for US forces engaged in missions in East Asia away from the Peninsula. For a US-ROK alliance with no so-called “Far East clause” like the Japan-US security treaty, this too would probably be a change big enough to constitute a re-definition of the alliance.

However, in an agreement signed on January 20, 2006 regarding the strategic flexibility of US Forces Korea, then-Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Ban Ki-moon inserted a reservation that South Korea “shall not be involved in a regional conflict in Northeast Asia against the will of the Korean people.” Ban Ki-moon thus added reservations to an otherwise general assent to strategic flexibility within the United States’ global military strategy, emphasizing the reluctance of South Korea in regard to the strategic flexibility of US forces stationed in Korea. While the US side expressed respect for the South Korean position, as we have seen above, what the US needs in order to station its armed forces continuously in Korea is to create a framework allowing a response to threats aside from North Korea. Since that time the United States and South Korea have not made any additional agreements in public on this issue.

We could say that, regarding the regional role of the US-ROK alliance, which connects directly to the possibility of a re-definition of the alliance, all that the United States has asked of South Korea is strategic flexibility. However, the South Korean government’s reservations specifically concern strategic flexibility in this regional context. As a result, the future of the US-ROK alliance depends on how these differences based on regional awareness are adjusted,

and whether a certain degree of security roles can be played in East Asia outside of the area of the Korean Peninsula.

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