4

Continuity Amidst Change: The Korea – United States Alliance

Youngshik Bong

The Republic of Korea (RoK) – United States alliance dates from the signing of the Mutual Defence Treaty on 1 October 1953. Its signing—just two months after the conclusion of an armistice agreement—brought the Korean War to a halt, and its provisions—allowing the permanent stationing of foreign troops in an intensely nationalistic country that had endured decades of colonial occupation—underpins the central role the United States had come to play in South Korean security. The southern part of the Korean Peninsula was administered by an American military government from the end of World War II, and it was in the months following the withdrawal of US forces in 1949 that North Korea chose to make its devastating attack on the South. Seventy years later, with almost every other factor in North-East Asia having been transformed, it is South Korea's pervasive sense of insecurity that maintains the strength of the alliance, despite a range of complicating factors.

As a security commitment, the RoK–US alliance is much less equivocal than other US alliances in Asia. The operative clause of the RoK–US Mutual Defence Treaty states that if either party is attacked by a third country, the other will act to meet the common danger. The United States maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea and these, along with the 650,000-strong RoK armed forces, are closely integrated in command and communications, and both Korean and American forces will be under US command in wartime. Despite the alliance's main focus on the Korean

Peninsula, it has long had an extra-regional dimension. South Korea committed over 300,000 troops to the Vietnam War, the second-largest expeditionary contingent after the United States; and, more recently, Seoul sent 3,000 non-combat troops to Iraq and 300 non-combat troops to Afghanistan.

Despite these elements of integration, there is a range of complicating factors in the alliance, and it is the management of these complicating factors that shapes the central alliance dynamics. This chapter will review four key complicating factors in the alliance—North Korea, the rise of China, alliance asymmetries, and changing role conceptions—in order to illustrate some of the key challenges and responses in managing the RoK–US alliance.

Handling North Korea

North Korea's aggression and unpredictability have consistently provided the basis for the alignment of strategic interests that has underpinned the RoK–US alliance but, at the same time, they have created some of the most damaging friction between Washington and Seoul. By one count, between 1953 and 2003, North Korea was responsible for 1,439 major security 'provocations' and for the deaths of 390 RoK and 90 US soldiers.¹ Since the early 1990s, the threat from North Korea has become even greater due to Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons technology, its willingness to engage in direct aggression against the South, and the advent of a third-generation Kim dynasty leader who is younger and seemingly more ruthless than his father and grandfather. North Korea is believed to have around 40 kilograms of plutonium, enough to build around 12 nuclear devices, although there are differing views about how capable it is of miniaturising these for installation on ballistic missiles. Since 2008, Pyongyang has tested nuclear devices in October 2006, May 2009, February 2013, January 2016 and September 2016; tested ballistic missiles in April 2009, April 2012, December 2012, February 2016, October 2016 and February–June 2017; attacked and sunk the RoK naval vessel *Cheonan* in March 2010; shelled the South Korean island Yeonpyeong-do in November 2010; and detonated a landmine on the southern side of the demilitarised zone in August 2015.

---

1 Leon Whyte, 'The Evolution of the US–South Korea Alliance', *The Diplomat*, 13 Jun. 2015.

During the Cold War, Seoul and Washington had a closely coordinated approach to the North Korean issue. The problem of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was seen as an extension of the strategy of containment, with US forces in South Korea playing much the same 'tripwire' role as they were in continental Europe. The end of the Cold War brought real differences between Seoul and Washington over North Korea to the surface. While in Washington there was an expectation that the Cold War's end would bring about a relatively unproblematic unification of the two Koreas, much as had happened between the two Germanys, South Korean hopes were tinged with more than a little apprehension. The first real test of the alliance over North Korea came during the 1993–94 first North Korean nuclear crisis, during which Washington and Seoul coordinated their actions well. Real cracks opened up, however, during the second North Korean nuclear crisis in 2002, which, according to David Kang, 'showed how far the two countries had drifted apart in their foreign policies and perceptions'.²

The 2002 North Korean nuclear crisis showed that a decade of perseverance rather than collapse by the DPRK had opened up divisions between South Korea and the United States about how best to handle North Korea. Seoul had become concerned more about the DPRK's chaotic collapse than about its nuclear or conventional aggression, and had embarked on a policy of transformation of North Korea through engagement. Successive RoK presidents pursued dialogue with the North and supported the development of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which saw the location of South Korean industry in a North Korean industrial zone, as a path towards economic and hopefully political transformation. The United States, however, continued to view North Korea through the lenses of military aggression, authoritarianism and nuclear proliferation, and became wedded to a program of regime transformation. Most concerning to many South Korean policymakers was that many of their counterparts in Washington, particularly in the administration of President George W Bush, seemed unconcerned about whether North Korea underwent a 'hard' or a 'soft' collapse.

---

2 David C Kang, 'Rising Powers, Offshore Balancers, and Why the US–Korea Alliance is Undergoing Strain', *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2005, p. 116.

During this period, and particularly in the context of the Six-Party Talks, China emerged as an alternative significant actor in relation to the problem of North Korea.³ As Pyongyang became ever more unpredictable, it became clear that Beijing was the only player able to wield carrots and sticks to try to influence North Korea's behaviour. Furthermore, it became ever more obvious to Seoul that Beijing's interests in relation to North Korea were much closer to its own than Washington's were. Whereas Beijing prioritised stability and behavioural change, Washington prioritised confrontation, isolation and coercion. There was a growing sentiment among South Korean policymakers that China was a stabilising and influential player on the Korean Peninsula, while Washington was destabilising, decreasingly influential and liable to undo years of Seoul's compromise and hard work in engaging and socialising North Korea.⁴

A new round of North Korean unpredictability and aggression unleashed dynamics that moderated these tensions. Perhaps alarmed by the growing closeness of Sino-RoK relations, North Korea's torpedoing of the *Cheonan* and shelling of Yeonpyeong-do opened up a rift between Seoul and Beijing. South Koreans were angered by China's ambivalence over attributing the sinking of the *Cheonan*, at the cost of 40 South Korean lives, to North Korea—despite the unequivocal judgement from an international panel of experts that North Korea was responsible. Later that year, South Koreans' anger towards China deepened when Beijing was also ambivalent about condemning Pyongyang over the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do. Subsequent toughness from Beijing towards North Korea over its nuclear and ballistic missile tests has failed to mollify many in South Korea, particularly among conservatives, who now doubt China's trustworthiness on North Korea. The conservative administration of President Park Geun-hye gradually abandoned the conciliatory aspects of its 'trustpolitik' approach to the North, in favour of increasing pressure on Pyongyang through measures such as closing the Kaesong Industrial Complex after the North's fourth nuclear test in 2016.

The new phase of North Korean aggressiveness coincided with a new president in the White House, who has shown a real willingness for the United States to follow Seoul's lead on dealing with North Korea.

---

3 Leszek Buszynski, *Negotiating with North Korea: The Six Party Talks and the Nuclear Issue*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 78–110.

4 Ted Galen Carpenter & Douglas Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Pyongyang's aggression, and the new US approach has ushered in essentially a joint approach to dealing with North Korea, which has four main aspects: keeping the door open to restarting six-party talks on the condition that Pyongyang takes 'irreversible steps' towards denuclearisation, insisting that any six-party or US–DPRK talks must be preceded by North–South Korea talks and improvements in relations, trying to gradually alter China's strategic assessment of North Korea, and responding strongly to Pyongyang's provocations by tightening sanctions and conducting beefed-up military exercises.⁵ The closeness of the RoK and American positions has also been reflected in a pragmatic revision of the Korean forces' rules of engagement in the advent of another North Korean conventional attack—a revision that was seen to be necessary after RoK forces were constrained by the terms of the alliance from responding more forcefully after the November 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong-do.

The oscillation in RoK–US alliance relations with respect to North Korea reflects some key underlying realities in the alliance. The key independent variables affecting the allies' closeness on this issue appear to have been the political alignment of the South Korean administration and its policy approach to North Korea, the level of provocation undertaken by Pyongyang, and the prevailing global approach in US foreign policy at the time. All of these issues are of course highly changeable, and there is little within the alliance that suggests that, should each of these factors change—and importantly align, a new period of estrangement within the alliance could develop.

The Rise of China

As David Kang notes, South Korea appears to be the only US ally or partner in Asia not to have engaged in either external or internal balancing behaviour against the rise of China.⁶ Unlike most other countries in the region, South Korea has not significantly upgraded its security cooperation with the United States or other regional states since the mid-1990s, and its arms spending has been falling even as China's has been growing strongly. Despite China's geographic proximity and increasingly assertive behaviour

5 Mark E Manyin, Emma Chanlett-Avery, Mary Beth D Nikitin, Ian E Rinehart & Brock R Williams, *US–South Korean Relations*, Congressional Research Service Report 7–5700, 26 Apr. 2016, p. 13.

6 Kang, 'Rising Powers, Offshore Balancers', 2005, p. 30.

in the East and South China Seas, there is no evidence that South Koreans consider it to be a rising threat—in clear contrast to a significant number of publics in other regional countries.

Part of the explanation lies in the remarkable growth of economic relations between South Korea and China over the past quarter-century. Currently, over one-fifth of South Korea's total trade is with China, larger than South Korea's trade with both Japan and the United States combined. South Korean industry has eagerly invested in China as well, making China the number one location for Korean FDI, and becoming the largest single source of foreign investment in China. These trade and investment linkages have only accelerated since the signing of the China–RoK Free Trade Agreement in 2015. As in the security realm, there is no clear evidence that South Koreans see China as an economic threat—although Seoul has been signing FTAs with a range of outside countries and has indicated a strong interest in joining the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Another element bringing greater closeness between Seoul and Beijing has been a shared concern about Japan's security 'normalisation'. South Korea and China are the two countries in the region most sensitive about Japan's past war crimes, and Tokyo's perceived unwillingness to adequately acknowledge and atone for its past behaviours. Both countries are most prone to outbreaks of anti-Japanese nationalism when issues of Japan's past come to prominence. Added to this, both countries have outstanding and emotionally charged territorial disputes with Japan. As discussed above, there are many South Koreans who have favoured China's approach to dealing with the North Korean issue over that of the United States.

American strategists have worried for over a decade about the growing warmth of Sino–RoK ties, which has prompted them to ask whether South Korea will be the first ally to leave the US alliance system and gravitate towards bandwagoning with a rising China.⁷ These feelings were particularly stirred during the administration of President Roh Moo-hyun but somewhat quietened during the conservative administration of President Lee Myung-bak. President Park began her term in office developing a strong rapport with the Chinese leadership, holding six summit meetings with Chinese president Xi Jinping during her first three years in office.

---

7 Victor D Cha, 'Korea: A Peninsula in Crisis and Flux', in Ashley J Tellis & Michael Wills (eds), *Strategic Asia 2004–5: Confronting Terrorism in the Pursuit of Power*, Seattle: NBR, 2004.

There have not, however, been uniformly positive developments in South Korean–Chinese relations. In 2004, South Koreans were shocked and angered when Chinese media and government statements claimed the ancient Koguryo kingdom (73 BCE – 688 CE) to have been Chinese. Koguryo is central to the modern Korean sense of identity and, when Beijing refused to back down on the claim, opinion polls found that the number of South Koreans believing China to be the RoK's most important diplomatic partner in Asia plummeted from 63 per cent to 6 per cent.⁸ South Koreans have also been concerned that the dynamism and growth of China's economy are pulling the North Korean economy, particularly in its northern provinces, into China's orbit and away from South Korea's. Many are also angered by China's forcible repatriation of North Korean refugees back to North Korea. In recent years, gaps have begun to open up between China's and South Korea's views of North Korea. As noted above, there was considerable anger over China's refusal to blame or sanction North Korea over the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong-do and, in the face of Pyongyang's increasing nuclear belligerence, there is growing annoyance at Beijing's opposition to South Korean deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems, particularly the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defence system. More broadly, conservative South Koreans have been nonplussed at Beijing's unwillingness to discuss joint approaches to dealing with uncertainties regarding North Korea. Park herself expressed disappointment about the Xi government in China when Beijing did not return the hotline calls from the RoK President's office and the Ministry of National Defence immediately after the fourth nuclear test by Pyongyang. Such non-action by the Xi government indicated that Beijing's position toward the two Koreas had not changed in any fundamental ways and this was especially disappointing, even humiliating, to the Park administration, which made the controversial decision, despite its diplomatic and security ties with the 'West', to attend the celebration in Beijing in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of victory of the Chinese people over the Japanese and fascism.

The impact of the rise of China on the RoK–US alliance provides some important insights into the dynamics of the alliance. It shows how tightly focused South Korean security perceptions are on North Korea, as well

---

8 Terence Roehrig, 'History as a Strategic Weapon: The Korean and Chinese Struggle Over Koguryo', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, Feb. 2010, pp. 5–28. doi.org/10.1177/0021909610352675.

as how pragmatically South Korean calculations about their security and economic interest shift in relation to changing power dynamics in their region.⁹ In recent years, as both Seoul and Beijing have begun to engage with Japan on trilateral economic cooperation, South Korea's existential but pragmatic interest in the evolving shape of North-East Asia has become manifest. Despite years of courtship of China and frustration with the United States, the bedrock of the alliance remains undisturbed, showing Seoul to be interested in simultaneously bandwagoning with a rising China, but not at the cost of its balancing alliance with the United States, while the strategic balance in North-East Asia evolves into a new status quo.

Alliance Asymmetries

By definition, every alliance with the world's sole superpower is an asymmetric relationship. And yet, a major source of tension in the RoK–US alliance has been the combination of *stable* and *evolving* asymmetries. In a situation of stable asymmetries, an alliance is able to develop mechanisms for their management or, in the case that they are not resolved or managed—such as the decades-old dispute between the United States and its NATO allies over military spending—they become progressively uncontroversial and effectively quarantined from disturbing the broader alliance. In an alliance with evolving asymmetries—for example, between the United States and the United Kingdom in light of London's changing capabilities in nuclear and conventional weapons—the alliance becomes a shock-absorbing mechanism, facilitating an integrated response to the changing capabilities of each partner. However, the combination of stability and evolution in the RoK–US alliance's asymmetries has been a very difficult combination for the alliance to manage.

The most pronounced stable asymmetry in the RoK–US alliance has been the sovereign status of each of the parties. South Korea's sovereignty has been truncated and compromised by the continued presence of US troops for more than six decades, and there is a strong sense in South Korea that the bedrock of the alliance lies in this continuing abnormality. This is only heightened by growing discussion of Japan's security 'normalisation' in both Tokyo and Washington, giving rise to an acute awareness in

---

9 Hyon Joo Yoo, 'The Korea–US Alliance as a Source of Creeping Tension: A Korean Perspective', *Asian Perspective*, vol. 36, no. 2, Apr.–Jun. 2012, pp. 331–51.

South Korea that Japan's sovereign abnormality is being resolved while the prospects of a similar resolution for South Korea are slight. In the context of this sensitivity to sovereignty in North-East Asia, the stability of the regional order is hostage to the 'tyranny of small issues', where disputes over islands, for example, are able to hijack progressive trust- and order-building. There is a counterpart 'tyranny of small voices' in which US allies are increasing their demands on their alliance partner, thereby hindering Washington's capacity to develop a coherent strategic vision for the region. In the absence of this vision, US policy appears increasingly Manichean—bent on classifying allies according to whether, in America's judgement, they are with the United States or with China (and by implication against the United States). Another stable asymmetry lies in the strategic outlook of the two parties: while South Korea's interests are regional and political-economic, those of the United States are global and political-military.¹⁰

The evolving asymmetries relate to the changing balance of material capabilities between the two allies. At the time of the signing of the Mutual Defence Treaty, the South Korean economy was 0.1 per cent the size of the American economy and, in per capita terms, South Koreans were just 10 per cent as wealthy as Americans. By 2015, the South Korean economy was 10 per cent the size of the American economy, and South Koreans were 70 per cent as wealthy as Americans on a per capita basis. No other US alliance has seen such a dramatic shift in the material asymmetry between two allies. The dramatic change in the material asymmetry of the alliance has had several implications. While the United States has been gratified by South Korea's success, and certainly prefers a stable, capable and wealthy ally, South Korea's rise has created expectations in Washington that it should play a more assertive role in regional security, particularly against what Washington believes is the challenge of a revanchist China to the stable order in the region. On the South Korean side, the success of its economy in high-technology innovation and production has created expectations that Seoul should no longer be the passive purchaser of advanced US military technology, but rather should increasingly invest in developing its own defence technologies. This tension has underpinned some of the delays and disagreements concerning the integration of South Korean and American missile defence deployments in the region. Another change on the South

---

10 Kang, 'Rising Powers, Offshore Balancers', 2005, p. 32.

Korean side has been democratisation and the emergence of a dynamic and influential civil society, greatly restricting the freedom of manoeuvre within the alliance that democratic South Korean governments can enjoy in comparison to their authoritarian predecessors.

The change in material asymmetry has led to a questioning within the South Korean security elite of just how closely the RoK's security interests align with those of the United States. An ally that has for decades gratefully accepted a place under the American nuclear extended-deterrence umbrella has begun to consider how it might look to its own resources to defend itself. A 2014 national survey by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies found that 52.8 per cent of respondents say that they believe the United States will intervene for South Korea in case of a war, that 54.4 per cent believe that North Korea will use nuclear weapons in case of another Korean War, and that 52.2 per cent believe that the United States will use its nuclear weapons if North Korea launches nuclear attacks on the South. Tellingly, 61.3 per cent of respondents agreed that South Korea needs to develop its own nuclear weapons.¹¹ Interestingly, the fewest respondents who believed South Korea should develop nuclear weapons thought it should do so to counter North Korea's nuclear threat (32.2 per cent), more advocated nuclear weapons in order to increase South Korea's international influence (33.5 per cent), and to possess nuclear sovereignty as an independent country (33.4 per cent).

This combination of stable and evolving asymmetries has led to a potent mixture in terms of managing the alliance relationship. The growing sense of South Korean capacity and national pride rubs up repeatedly against its sense of compromised sovereignty in ways that affect the alliance's dynamics. To date, the allies have managed these issues, but this is no guarantee for the future. Since 2009, the alliance has been upgraded from a specific undertaking against a North Korean attack to a regional and even a global partnership. Seoul has embarked on a new phase of middle-power activism, engaging enthusiastically in regional forums and global bodies, such as the G20, in ways that have enhanced rather than detracted from the alliance. The two sides are edging closer on ballistic missile defence, deciding on a policy of interoperability rather than integration. A process of relocation of US forces from the area of the Korean demilitarised zone to other parts of South Korea is progressing, and a new

---

11 *South Korean Attitudes Toward North Korea and Reunification*, Asan Institute Report, Feb. 2014.

cost-sharing arrangement for the financial support of US forces in Korea has been pragmatically negotiated. The only sticking point has been in the transition from the operational control of US and South Korean forces in wartime by a US commander; a 2007 agreement to split the United States Forces Korea Combined Forces Command into separate US and RoK commands has been delayed in the face of North Korea's aggression and concerns about the readiness of RoK forces for independent response to an attack. The postponement of the wartime operational control transfer without any set date for its enactment has created anxiety in South Korean society that the RoK military lacks resolve and a sense of responsibility for achieving self-defence.

Changing Role Conceptions

Of course, military alliances are not just about pragmatic security interests. A military alliance is a good barometer to measure the strength of mutual trust between countries based upon common values and world views. Forging a military alliance is not only determined by the purpose of deterring the projected military threat from a common adversary. A military alliance is also an institution that nations create to protect political ideology and key principles that they deem indispensable for maintaining civilised orders. For instance, as political scientist Tony Smith concludes in his book *America's Mission*, World War II marked the defeat—one immediate, and the other after four decades—of fascism and communism, the two totalitarian rivals of liberal democracy as viable forms of political organisation, not just a military victory by the allied powers.¹²

Enhancing a bilateral security partnership as a value-based military alliance is an ambitious goal for both sides. Under international anarchy, where there is no central authority above sovereign states to enforce promises between states, it might be regarded as a rarity that states tie their national security to pursuit of shared values. To realists, it is a futile and dangerous practice. Justifying your security alliance with values and principles is only useful as nice diplomatic rhetoric or a code word. And yet, in rhetoric if not always in action, this has been a distinguishing feature of US military alliances across the globe.

---

12 Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

South Korea has a keen interest in this issue from the alliance perspective. Broadly speaking, it assesses the status of the RoK–US military alliance by two standards: functional and comparative. As for functional aspects, the South Korean Government and public assess the value of the alliance in terms of its contribution to national security, especially for maintaining sufficient and reliable deterrence and defence capability against military threats from North Korea. At the same time, South Koreans tend to use the US–Japan alliance as a measuring stick for US ‘fairness’ toward South Korea as its ally. The way the United States and Japan define the core missions and nature of their bilateral security alliance affects the way South Koreans expect the United States to define those of the RoK–US security alliance.

To many South Koreans, the RoK–US security partnership must be as qualified as the US–Japan security alliance is to become a global partnership based upon common values and historical views. Like Japan and the United States, South Korea and the United States have taken steady steps to elevate the status of their alliance to a value-based alliance. The ‘Joint Vision for the Alliance of the United States of America and the Republic of Korea’, which was announced on 16 June 2009, stipulated the commitment of both governments to ‘build a comprehensive strategic alliance of bilateral, regional and global scope, based on common values and mutual trust’. The statement even tied the mission of the alliance to Korea’s unification based upon shared values between the allies. It defines the purpose of the alliance as ‘establishing a durable peace on the Peninsula and leading to peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy’. Such strategic vision is reiterated and articulated in the 2013 ‘Joint Declaration in Commemoration of the 60th Anniversary of the Alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America’, in which the two declared that the alliance:

has evolved into a comprehensive strategic alliance with deep cooperation extending beyond security to also encompass the political, economic, cultural, and people-to-people realms. The freedom, friendship, and shared prosperity we enjoy today rest upon our shared values of liberty, democracy, and a market economy.

The 2013 declaration also affirmed that it is the basis of the joint vision that Korean unification should be achieved peacefully, and ‘based upon the principles of denuclearization, democracy and a free market economy’.

Some may suggest that finding out whether the RoK–US alliance can be a genuine value-based security partnership in fulfilment of the official strategic visions is impossible until North Korea's military threat disappears. Only then will we be able to find out that the alliance was based upon mutual identity and common values, as in the case of NATO remaining robust even after the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

The RoK–US alliance presents some of the most confounding puzzles and practical dilemmas of any of America's alliances. It has confronted a constant and unpredictable threat for its entire existence and, more recently, is at the forefront of a rapidly shifting relative-power configuration in the Asia Pacific. It has embodied both stable and evolving asymmetries and a shift towards aspirations for a more values-based alliance partnership. And yet, through all of these challenges, the alliance has remained solid and relatively adaptable. Perhaps the key to thinking about the future of the alliance lies in the question of values. For a Manichean-minded United States, a values-based alliance will set natural limits on Seoul's willingness to bandwagon with a rising China. For a pragmatically minded South Korea, the evolution of the values question—probably involving Japan and yes, Taiwan also—will be key to the arrival of North-East Asia at a new stable status quo. For these reasons, perhaps we are right to view the RoK–US alliance as a bellwether for the evolution of other US alliances in this era of power transition.

This text is taken from *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century*, edited by Michael Wesley, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.