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## **Day 2 Session I: The Ambassadors' Dialogue: Challenges for the Alliance**

Moderator: Choi Kang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Han Sung-Joo, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, ROK  
Christopher Hill, University of Denver  
Thomas C. Hubbard, McLarty Associates

Rapporteur: Olivia Enos, The Heritage Foundation

The US-ROK alliance is expanding and offers hope for robust cooperation between the two nations. At the Asan Washington Forum 2013, a group of ambassadors came together to discuss the future expansion of the US-ROK alliance and prospects for continued development. As the alliance has unfolded, it has primarily consisted of military relations. But panelists, Han Sung-Joo, Christopher Hill, and Thomas C. Hubbard agreed that the future of the alliance is in economic cooperation.

Moderating the discussion was Choi Kang of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. He framed the discussion from the perspective of President Park Geun-hye's newly inducted plan for a comprehensive strategic alliance between the United States and South Korea. President Park's strategy is intended to expand the present relationship to include economic and military ties between the two nations.

Former ambassador Han Sung-Joo agreed. He argued that there were five key challenges to the alliance: 1) domestic politics and domestic sentiments, 2) issues that exist between the US and ROK in relation to the alliance, 3) budget, 4) alliance structure, and 5) vision for the alliance.

Han Sung-Joo discussed the origins of the alliance. He suggested that from the Korean perspective, the US-ROK alliance was a strange one because it evolved out of a desire to oppose North Korea. Post-Korean war, Han argued that anti-American sentiment was more popular in Korea because they felt that in some way their destiny had been shaped by US involvement in the region. According to Han, this opinion has largely dissipated, but North Korean provocations continue to serve as a distraction from traditionally Korean nationalistic sentiments.

The ebb-and-flow of relations on the peninsula either leads to a decrease or an increase in nationalistic opinion that indirectly impacts perceptions of the US-ROK alliance. Han noted that, "1/3 of the Korean population is already against the alliance, the other 1/3 can be swayed one way or the other based on the state affairs, and the last 1/3 is firmly and consistently in favor of the alliance." The wariness of the Korean population, when combined with a more recent political trend in the United States toward isolationism, Han argued, could contribute to domestic political challenges in Korea.

According to Han, issues that relate to the alliance include dealing with North Korea, trilateral relations between Japan and Korea, and Korea's relationship to China. Han argued that issues with North Korea contributed to a growth in the alliance, particularly since the United States and South Korea have largely been on the same page in dealing with North Korea. Han believed that trilateral relations with Japan were a tenuous subject for the United States—especially since treaty obligations to both nations require a certain level of discretion with both Japan and Korea. Finally, military cooperation in the Yellow Sea, naval activities, and Korean priorities in their relationship with China contribute to ambiguity in the US-ROK relationship.

Budget challenges, according to Han, were relatively self-explanatory. Balancing budget obligations with alliance cooperation has always been a challenge. How much a country allocates toward its alliance is often indicative of its priorities. Determining how much each country could spend respectively toward alliance cooperation remains an issue.

The structure of the alliance is another potential challenge to US-ROK cooperation. Han noted that whether the planned transfer of wartime operations and control should take place as scheduled at the end of 2015 remains undetermined. If it is to be accomplished, Han wondered what the practical implications would be for the joint forces. Would it diminish the effectiveness of joint forces?

Finally, Han believed that a more robust vision should be created for the future of the alliance. He believed that this should include economic cooperation. He hearkened to NATO and the robust development that has taken place to continue to strengthen NATO despite the fact that the Soviet threat is no longer imminent. He felt that the same model should be employed in Korea, keeping in mind the threat that North Korea poses to the peninsula.

As a former ambassador, Christopher Hill reflected on the nature of the alliance. At the time that he served as ambassador, many were commenting on the frayed relationship between the two nations. But he asserted that he believed that the health of the alliance was far better than it was portrayed. He believed that the same was true today.

According to Hill, the emergence of the Korean democracy in the 80's and 90's led to a unique and more developed form of diplomacy in the region. Korean goods have penetrated the global market and have begun to have influence in thought and public diplomacy. He argued that the late development of the Korean democracy meant the easy integration of social media into diplomacy. As Korea has become a global player, US diplomacy expanded to court both the government and the people of Korea.

Hill asserted that the visa-waiver program was a great step forward in the US-Korea relationship. He said that the diplomatic acknowledgement of the necessity of a visa-waiver program for Korea was integral to the growth in the relationship. According to Hill, the visa-waiver program was a visible expression to the Korean people of US respect for their country and another out-cropping of American diplomacy's engagement with the people of Korea.

On the flip-side, the KORUS free trade agreement meant a lot to the United States and reaffirmed Korea's desire to deepen relations with the United States. Congressional response to the trade agreement offered promise to the people of Korea of future engagement with the United States.

Hill saw the greatest challenges to the US-ROK relationship as North Korea and trilateral relations with Japan. Hill said, “I think the US got itself into a tough position when we appeared to be a force trying to keep the Korean people apart.” Thus, he was implicitly arguing for re-unification on the peninsula. Hill felt that the challenges faced by rocky Korea-Japan relations were one of the greatest diplomatic struggles for the alliance.

Hill believed that the solution to problems on the Korean Peninsula were multi-partnership and multilateral discussions such as the Six-Party Talks. He also believed that it was imperative that the United States, Korea, and China be able to talk together face-to-face.

Thomas C. Hubbard echoed Hill and Han's concerns regarding relations with Japan and North Korea. He contended that the United States recognized and understood the depth of Korea's concerns with Japan. In fact, the United States arguably shares some of Korea's concerns, particularly as they relate to the comfort women problem. However, Hubbard said that, “To expect the US to go beyond neutrality [on issues with Japan] is probably setting up a litmus test that [the US] won't pass.” Since the United States has treaty obligations to both Japan and Korea, they are walking a fine line that requires much discretion in dealing with the two nations.

Hubbard made an insightful point when he noted that he was surprised to hear that so many Koreans viewed China's rise to power as the greatest threat to the US-ROK alliance. Quite on the contrary, Hubbard expected that North Korea was viewed as the single greatest threat, particularly since both Korea and the United States have a mutual interest in seeing China rise to power peacefully and constructively and North Korea's actions have been nothing if not belligerent in recent months. Hubbard continues to view North Korea as the most significant threat to the alliance.

Finally, Hubbard had several constructive suggestions for future cooperation. First, he believed that it was in the mutual interest of Korea and the United States to renew the bilateral nuclear accord. He felt that in renewing the accord, the US would both send the message that it respects Korea, while maintaining US security interests in keeping the peninsula nuclear free. He also felt that greater emphasis should be placed on the positive strides made in the signing of the KORUS free trade agreement. He believed that more US businesses needed to take advantage of the multiplicity of benefits they could experience from the free trade agreement. Finally, Hubbard felt that Korea should increasingly engage in negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership and saw this as a productive way of growing the US-ROK alliance. Hubbard felt that it would be a shame for Korea if they did not join in the negotiations early on.

The future for the US-ROK alliance is positive. Expansion beyond military and security cooperation offers great promise for increasing the partnership. North Korea provocations do not have to serve as a divisive issue for US engagement with South Korea, and future resolution to trilateral tensions between Japan, the United States, and Korea would offer a more positive environment for negotiations. Finally, all panelists seemed to agree that a comprehensive and solid partnership would include both military and economic engagement. Then, and only then, could the burgeoning alliance between South Korea and the US be truly realized.

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