



Stressing the Linchpin: The US-ROK Alliance and ‘Rebalancing’ to Asia

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In recent years, the US-ROK alliance has scaled new heights. Credit is due to a convergence of multiple factors: the personal relationship shared by Presidents Barack Obama and Lee Myung-bak, a coordination and consultation process ensuring that Washington and Seoul work together on key concerns, and a congruence in outlook on key security concerns shared by the two administrations. As a result, the two governments declared their alliance to be “the linchpin of regional security, stability and prosperity” (a bold statement that left some Japanese officials wondering if there can be more than one linchpin; they usually see that as their role).¹

The key question today, as the United States and South Korea enter presidential election campaigns, is whether that relationship can be sustained. Domestic political dynamics, especially in South Korea, have the potential to politicize alliance discussions and trigger reactions in the other country. Friends and supporters of the alliance in both countries must work to insulate the relationship from the vagaries of election year politics; there are ample opportunities for tension and trouble even without the overlay of a campaign.

The need for a strong and forward-looking US-ROK alliance has never been more evident. In addition to the perennial threat posed by North Korea, new regional security challenges have emerged at the very time that a straitened economic and fiscal environment has imposed new and powerful constraints on policy. An accurate understanding of both countries’ perspectives of the security environment, the domestic decision making context, and security priorities is critically important.² Of particular concern is how South Korean security officials assess the role and

¹ Victor Cha, “The Accidental Linchpin,” *The Choson ilbo* (English edition), chosonilbo.com, July 13, 2010, at http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/07/13/2010071301101.html

² To that end, the Pacific Forum CSIS, with support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), has held for four years a strategic dialogue that focuses on these very issues. The comments that follow reflect the results of those discussions, in particular the last meeting in February 2012. Reports from each of the strategic dialogues

credibility of the US alliance and its extended deterrence commitments, at a time of great change marked by a US determination to reduce the role of nuclear weapons -- long asserted to be the core of the US extended deterrent -- in its security policy.

‘Rebalancing’ to Asia

Considerable attention has been devoted to the US “rebalancing” to the Asia Pacific, and deservedly so.³ This concept -- initially articulated as a “pivot” but since modified as a result of some strident criticism⁴-- is an attempt to provide an intellectual framework for US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Iraq withdrawal and the Afghanistan drawdown. It is intended to reassure US allies and partners of an ongoing commitment to the region at a time of geopolitical transformation. While the policy is genuine, it is not a radical break with the past as some suggest. Initial indications of a “new” focus on Asia were evident in the George H.W. Bush administration, and core components of the policy -- in particular alliance modernization efforts - - have been underway for nearly two decades.⁵ On one level, then, the program is something of a “branding” exercise -- the Obama administration’s attempt to put its “stamp” on foreign policy.⁶

The argument that the US is “returning” to Asia as some originally insisted is absurd. The US never left. The US has had a formidable military and economic presence in Asia for over a century; historians note that the US had a Pacific policy before it had a Pacific coast.⁷ The region has been central to US foreign policy for over half a century. Since the end of World War II, the US has established five military alliances in Asia and has fought two bloody ground wars in the region. As President Obama noted in his 2011 speech to the Australian Parliament, the US “is and always has been a Pacific nation.”⁸

“Rebalancing” begins by recognizing the shift in the world’s economic and strategic center of gravity towards the Pacific. The Asia-Pacific region now generates some 50 percent of world trade and its growth outpaces all other regions.⁹ This “rise of Asia” as a third pole of the global economy demands a structured and comprehensive response. In the plainest of terms,

(along with similar discussions with other allies) are available at the Pacific Forum CSIS website, www.pacforum.org.

³ See for example, “Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama administration’s ‘rebalancing’ to Asia,” by Mark Manyin et al, Congressional Research Service, March 28, 2012, and National Bureau of Asian Research, “Roundtable: Turning to the Pacific: US Strategic Rebalancing toward Asia,” *Asia Policy*, No 14, July 2012, pp. 21-49.

⁴ Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman, “Return to Asia: It’s not (All) About China,” *PacNet* #7, Jan. 30, 2012, at <http://csis.org/files/publication/Pac1207.pdf>, Walter Russell Mead, “What’s in a Name? Asia Policy ‘Pivots’ to Rebalancing,” Via Meadia, *The American Interest*, June 25, 2012, at <http://blogs.the-american-interest.com/wrm/2012/06/25/whats-in-a-name-americas-asia-policy-pivots-to-rebalancing/>

⁵ Ralph Cossa, et al, “The United States and the Asia Pacific Region: A Security Strategy for the Obama Administration” *Pacific Forum Issues & Insights*, February 2009, p. 28-29, at http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/issuesinsights_v09n01

⁶ Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

⁷ Ralph Cossa, et al, op cit note 5, p. 10, at http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/issuesinsights_v09n01.pdf

⁸ Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament, Nov. 17, 2011.

⁹ Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, “Asia Pacific Economic Outlook: Chapter 1,” at <http://www.pecc.org/research/state-of-the-region/412-chapter-1-asia-pacific-economic-outlook>

“rebalancing” is strategy in the purest sense: an attempt to more tightly couple national security and economic prosperity in US policy. This linkage was first laid out in President Obama’s *National Security Strategy*, which was published in 2009 (itself another attempt to establish a conceptual framework for policy in the aftermath of the Global War on Terror).¹⁰ In this world, it is common sense to devote more US resources -- time and money -- to a region that is larger, potentially more unstable, and where the impact of that instability could be global in scope, given its centrality to supply chains.

Significantly, while much of the discussion of this new strategy has focused on its military dimensions, this is not the emphasis of most US policy makers. Instead, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made the case for a new approach, she framed her thinking in terms of the “soft” elements of US power, arguing that “it starts with forward deployed *diplomacy*.”¹¹ Thus, the starting point for US policy is the decision to engage Southeast Asia and ASEAN on new terms, including the creation of a new ambassadorial post to ASEAN, ratification of the organization’s Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and the subsequent decision to join the East Asia Summit.

On the economic front, there is a drive to use the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) to revitalize regional and global trade negotiations and to create a “gold standard” for such talks. The TPP, along with APEC, is intended to consolidate US economic engagement in the region at the same time that East Asian community building continues apace.

And of course there is a military dimension. This process includes modernization of US alliances in Asia, deployments of US marines on a rotating basis through Darwin, Australia, and deployment of US littoral combat ships to Singapore. The military pillar has been the subject of considerable scrutiny as territorial disputes in the region heat up, prompting speculation whether the new US policy is a response to these developments or is in fact triggering them.¹² This debate is perhaps inevitable since the US announcement that it will step up engagement with the region comes after several years of a narrative of US decline and a shift in the regional balance of power toward China; deliberate or not, the two countries’ policies are often seen in zero-sum terms.

Despite accusations, US rebalancing is *not* about China. US policy is driven by a consideration of US interests that encompasses far more than simple balance of power calculations vis-a-vis Beijing. I believe that US policy starts with other building blocks: the need to maintain strong links with a dynamic and vibrant region and the need to work closely with allies and partners to promote shared values and interests, to name the two most compelling. When all these elements are in place, the remaining piece of the puzzle is ‘China.’ Of course, if China chooses to challenge the status quo and threaten regional order, then the US and its allies and partners will

¹⁰ National Security Strategy, Office of the White House, May 2010.

¹¹ Clinton, *op cit*.

¹² In conferences and discussions in Asia throughout the summer, I have been repeatedly warned that the US must ensure that “the tail does not wag the dog”; there is fear that US policy is not reassuring allies and partners but instead emboldens them to indulge in behavior that risks conflict between Washington and Beijing.

be ready to respond. But this policy does not start with a consideration of bilateral relations between the world's two largest economies.¹³

A solid alliance under stress

In this environment, the US-ROK alliance *should* be a core component of US policy. Korea is one of the region's most vibrant economies, and the two countries' shared history, values, and interests, along with the chemistry of their top leaders, practically dictate that it is the "linchpin." But linchpins are frequently stressed, and the US-ROK alliance is no exception. There are the usual ideological issues that surface in an election year in Korea that have the potential to involve the United States, as well as several other bilateral issues that could become politicized. These include the call to renegotiate the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, the transfer of operational control of military forces in wartime, the dissolution of the Combined Forces Command, negotiations over the permissible ranges of ROK missiles, and the US-ROK civilian nuclear power agreement.

Hanging over all these concerns is relations with North Korea. Dealing with the DPRK has been difficult for the two governments due to occasionally divergent perspectives that threaten to drive a wedge in their partnership -- a divergence that Pyongyang has been too happy to exploit. One important reason that relations between Washington and Seoul are good is that the US is following Seoul's lead when dealing with the North, and both governments share a common skepticism towards North Korea. When either condition -- bilateral concerns or North Korea policies -- are not aligned, the alliance gets shaky. Though aligned now, there is a good chance that daylight may again emerge between Washington and Seoul after the presidential ballots this fall.

Rarely in recent history have US and South Korean perceptions of the North aligned as closely as they have during the last four years. A byproduct of this convergence is high confidence in the US commitment to South Korea's defense and security; in Track II discussions, we have heard no doubts in recent years about the US commitment to the ROK. Nevertheless, and in a worrying development, South Koreans raise questions about the trust the US has in them. During our meetings, when we discussed problems that could stress the alliance, several South Koreans attributed differences in the two countries' positions not to divergent stakes but to a fundamental lack of trust in South Koreans. For example, while Americans argued that their position in the civilian nuclear negotiations reflected a concern about nonproliferation norms and setting a bad precedent, South Koreans countered that the US position reflected distrust of Korean intentions -- a point that Americans flatly dismissed. Fortunately, this distrust has been contained but its existence, even among solid alliance supporters, is troubling.

Trust is fundamental to the US extended deterrent. Extended deterrence provides security in two ways: by preventing attacks and as a nonproliferation device. The US nuclear umbrella means

¹³ This is a painful theme -- painful because no matter how many times US policy makers insist that they seek a positive relationship with China, those comments are dismissed out of hand. See for example, Secretary Clinton's most recent remarks in Beijing, "Remarks with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi," Sept. 5, 2012, at www.state.gov/rss/channels/eap.xml

that states need not acquire their own nuclear capabilities. While it is critical that adversaries believe that the US is committed to the defense of its allies, it is equally important that those allies believe in the US commitment to their defense. Doubts erode the foundation of the security partnership and prompt nations to consider the acquisition of their own nuclear weapons. It is not surprising that rising frustration stimulated by North Korean provocations has many South Koreans believing that they need their own nuclear arsenal.¹⁴

The body of public opinion in the ROK that endorses an indigenous nuclear capability reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of how deterrence works. A nuclear capability is neither designed nor intended to prevent all provocations. No government would use a nuclear weapon to counter low-level acts; instead it would rely on conventional capabilities for that purpose. And those conventional capabilities should primarily be maintained and exercised by the ally itself, with US backing. Thus, it is the ROK's responsibility to be on the front line when responding to attacks, like those seen in 2010, with full support from the US. This division of labor will provide the surest deterrent to a potential adversary. Reportedly, it was President Barack Obama's telephone warning to Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao that the ROK could not tolerate future provocations and would be obliged to strike back, with full backing of the US, that got the Chinese president's attention, prompting him to warn the DPRK leadership about future provocations.¹⁵

A division of labor raises issues of its own, however. Most notably, the US is concerned about escalation if the ROK responds to a North Korean provocation. The ROK has developed a doctrine -- "proactive deterrence" -- that is intended to guide the military when dealing with such acts and, in theory, raises the prospect of escalation. Americans worry about the proportionality of a response and whether it would force a similar reaction by the North.¹⁶ I say "in theory" because the policy remains unclear and US planners are still waiting for details. This ambiguity is an indication of the uncertainties that define ROK policies designed to address concerns about US commitment, which, instead of solving the issue of commitment, raise US concerns about entrapment.

It is ironic then that Koreans often demand details from the US on nuclear policy as a measure both of the US commitment to their defense and reassurance that they are treated equally with other allies. Asian allies believe that the US has detailed discussions with European allies over nuclear planning and doctrine; informed observers say most of these discussions concern the public relations dimensions of nuclear policy, not operational details. Informed security analysts understand and appreciate the US reluctance to provide details of its nuclear policy. But that intellectual appreciation of the need for opacity often clashes with the emotional need for reassurance on the level of both security and status. This underscores the significance of high-level joint US-ROK statements about the use of nuclear weapons in the defense of South Korea and subsequent follow-up in the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee.

¹⁴ Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "South Korean Public Opinion on North Korea and the Nations of the Six Party Talks," October 2011.

¹⁵ "What's behind Obama's late night phone call to China's President Hu Jintao about Korea," *Los Angeles Times* blog, Dec. 6, 2010 at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2010/12/obama-china-hu-jintao.html>

¹⁶ Brad Glosserman and David Santoro, "The Lynchpin Grapples with Frustration and Distrust: The Fourth US-ROK Strategic Dialogue," Pacific Forum CSIS, *Issues & Insights*, Vol 12, No. 7, February 2012.

More nuclear weapons -- either reintroduced by the US or developed or acquired by the ROK -- will not boost security on the Korean Peninsula. It is US policy to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security planning (a policy that predates the Obama administration).¹⁷ This decision reflects the belief that the only purpose of such weapons is to deter an attack by an adversary with weapons of mass destruction, as well as the belated recognition that the only way that the US can get international buy-in for its nonproliferation agenda is to take seriously the demand that nuclear weapon states reduce their arsenals with an eye to eventual disarmament.¹⁸

For some, this is a problem -- particularly as the US insisted for years that nuclear weapons were essential to an ally's security (this insistence was often a way to overcome popular protests against the deployment of such weapons.)¹⁹ Rather, I think that this is an opportunity to modernize and rejuvenate alliances, create a new division of labor among partners, and strengthen deterrence in the process. By working together to reapportion roles and missions in ways that better match capabilities, resources and newly emerging threats, security can be increased and the alliance strengthened. Shared responsibilities will deepen integration, and a more seamless partnership will promote deterrence as potential adversaries will have no doubts about the degree to which the US and the ROK are committed to each other's defense. Discussions about the nature of this new apportioning of burdens are underway; OpCon transfer is part of this process, but it is just one component of a more encompassing alliance transformation.

There are other steps our two countries can take to prepare the alliance for future challenges. First, we need to continue in-depth discussions among policy makers, strategists and analysts (both official and nongovernmental) to nurture a better understanding of each partner's views on security concerns and a better appreciation of differences (when they exist). The suspicions that too frequently arise reflect suppositions and assumptions rather than fact. Second, we need to better prepare for the unexpected. North Korea has a perennial capacity to surprise and our governments need to think more creatively about contingencies and prepare for them. Third, we need a better understanding of the meaning of partnerships and quid pro quo. The US-ROK alliance is asymmetrical -- as is any alliance with the US. But that does not mean it is unequal or that it is not as important to both parties. The basis for the alliance should be the starting point for discussions of roles and responsibilities. Yet such inequalities often lead to mistaken calculations regarding how to operationalize the security partnership -- in its crudest form, this leads to a "transactional" approach in negotiations. This idea must be resisted: one partner does not do something for another to gain leverage in other circumstances.

¹⁷ 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report, US Department of Defense, April 2010.

¹⁸The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) makes this trade explicit: Nuclear weapon states would reduce and ultimately eliminate their nuclear arsenals in exchange for nonnuclear weapon states foregoing such weapons. In practice, that deal has been more rhetorical than real. The US push to enlist more countries in its nonproliferation efforts given nonnuclear weapon states more leverage to demand that bargain be honored.

¹⁹ Japan's "love affair" with the Tomahawk cruise missile is the best (or worst) example of this. Japanese officials were concerned about US plans to retire the Tomahawk and reportedly conveyed this concern to various US panels discussing US nuclear policy. See for example, Jeffrey Lewis, "Japan loves the TLAM/N," *Armscontrolwonk.com*, May 9, 2009, at <http://lewis.armscontrolwonk.com/archive/2284/japan-tlamn>

All these changes demand a better public understanding in both countries of the role and value of the alliance. There is little doubt among elites of the meaning, significance, and worth of the US-ROK alliance, but political leaders in both countries have been slow to make that case to their publics. This must end. The US-ROK alliance is too important to both countries to allow it to be left to elites to manage and tend. Genuine public support is needed -- not mere acquiescence.

Ultimately, I believe we should increase our expectations of the ROK. This is a controversial proposition. For some it is the offloading of US responsibilities onto a partner. I see it as a reflection of the new capabilities of a modern, growing, and increasingly influential partner. The centerpiece of President Lee Myung Bak's diplomacy was the concept of a Global Korea, one with an extended set of interests and new reach. This was good policy. South Korea is becoming a global player and should be acting accordingly. This goes against the grain of generations of Korean experience when a nation saw itself as more acted upon than as an actor. That time has passed. Korea can and should do more in the world. It can do still more by acting in cooperation with its partner and ally, the United States.

* The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views
of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.



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