



Day 1 Session I: Sixty Years of the Alliance

Moderator: Hahm Chaibong, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Burwell B. Bell, Former Commander, U.S. Forces Korea
William Cohen, Former Senator and Secretary of Defense
Han Sung-Joo, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, ROK
Park Jin, Former Member, National Assembly, ROK

Rapporteur: Nadia Bulkin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

As moderator, Hahm Chaibong of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies described Session I, “Sixty Years of the Alliance,” as an opportunity to bring together the most experienced members of both governments involved in the Korea-US alliance. All four speakers gave the alliance a positive appraisal as having contributed greatly to the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world as a whole, as well as helping to promote South Korean economic prosperity.

William Cohen noted that it was not a miracle but industry and dedication that gave South Korea the thirteenth largest economy in the world following the devastation of sixty years ago. General Burwell Bell argued that for the past sixty years, the alliance has been more resolute and absolute than any other security treaty in the history of the world. He noted that it has stood firm whether in the peninsula or worldwide. While Park Jin acknowledged some troubled times and frictions stemming from different views and misunderstandings, he too called the alliance one of the most successful in world history. He credited the ability of the United States and South Korea to manage conflict in a productive, open, transparent way.

Han Sung-Joo noted that most of the original rationale for the alliance (checks and balances of major powers, supporting the US-Japan alliance, and deterring North Korea) has not changed. South Korea is now a showcase of democracy and development, having built up its own defensive capability and put US economic assistance to good use. Park added that according to *The Economist’s* yearly democracy index, South Korea is the leading democracy in Asia (even ahead of Japan), and is responsible for the advance of democracy in Asia as a whole—a development for which he credited the alliance. While the global financial crisis was a source of concern to South Korea, he acknowledged that the alliance has protected South Korea from the brunt of the crisis’ impact.

Han noted that the alliance has grown from a security alliance to a partnership underpinned by the common values of liberal democracy. He called the United States and South Korea partners for prosperity, stability, and democracy. He noted that South Korea is now America’s seventh largest trading partner and its largest FTA partner. Park stressed that the fundamental bedrock of the alliance is respect for human life, human dignity, and human rights: values that will distinguish the Korea-US alliance from Korea-China relations. While

democracy and the market economy are important aspects of the alliance, Park argued that the fundamental value that maintains the alliance is its humanitarianism. He argued that this humanitarianism is a “renewable energy” that can be carried over for the next six decades.

While Cohen acknowledged that the alliance had matured to include trade and democracy promotion, he considered the security relationship to be the most fundamental to the peninsula and the region. In this light, the decision to send B-2 bombers and F-22 aircraft to South Korea was an important signal to both North and South Korea (as well as Japan and China)—as if to say, “this is what we are prepared to send if Kim Jung-un doesn’t climb down this rhetoric.” Park also noted that South Korea still views peace and stability on the peninsula as its highest priority, and as such, dialogue should be used to attain denuclearization of North Korea.

Cohen predicted the alliance would endure as long as the United States remains committed to it. He argued that the US security commitment could be jeopardized by the US federal sequester and lessening internationalism among younger US policymakers. While US capacity was not yet weakened, if the current trend of the far-right and far-left linking hands with former internationalists continued, it would be a cause for concern. He hoped the United States would understand the consequences of cutting the budget in a mindless way that was not consistent with a strategic objective. He acknowledged that the United States needed to invest in infrastructure and education domestically, but called the idea that the United States can walk away from the world a folly, because the world would never walk away from the United States. Han noted that this isolationism has existed in the US for centuries, but now may be re-emerging in earnest.

In South Korea, Cohen saw a need to remind the younger generation of South Koreans that the alliance has helped South Korea achieve tremendous progress over the past sixty years. The number of Korean students studying in the United States was already large, but needed to be increased. Han agreed that an element of “nationalism,” particularly in the younger generation, was present in South Korea. Bell supported South Korean nationalism as long as it recognized that the real threat faced by South Korea is an imminent threat in North Korea, and regional threats down the road. Thus he suggested that South Korean leaders look for alliances that can be of assistance, and sell these alliances to South Koreans.

Because of the proliferation threat posed by North Korea, Cohen noted that the peninsular situation could be a global destabilizer. Bell emphasized that the United States could not signal any change in its commitment to the alliance, as such a signal would be misinterpreted by South Korea, North Korea, China, and Japan in a time of regional uncertainty (such as the game-changer of belligerent, nuclear-armed North Korea, which he argued must be assumed to have nuclear capabilities, a rising China that is asserting itself regionally, Russia in the background, and age-old bickering between Japan and South Korea). Bell argued that the United States must tell all countries in the region that as long as the United States is welcomed by South Korea, it would be there to stay, as the peninsula represents vital interests for the United States.

General Bell also noted that the United States should help strengthen ROK-Japan relations to present a more unified front against a belligerent North Korea. He argued that there would be no challenge to peace and security in Northeast Asia if South Korea and Japan cooperate, but noted that North Korea tries to exploit a “split” between the two.

While Han felt that the evolution of US-China and Korea-China relations would not fundamentally affect the alliance, Park suggested that strategic dialogue with China would be crucial to encourage North Korea to return to the negotiating table, especially as China increasingly sees a nuclear North Korea as a threat to its own interest in regional stability.

Bell suggested that “leading from behind” could be dangerous, and therefore the United States must not transfer OPCON (wartime operational control) to South Korea as long as a nuclear North Korea and an unhelpful China remained in the picture. The potential OPCON transfer implies that someday South Korea would have the opportunity to lead forces in the event of war, and Bell confirmed that the United States would support that. However, he explained that for now OPCON transfer was not a military doctrinal issue, but an issue of US strategic commitment. A nuclear umbrella would not appear to be enough if it could be misinterpreted as a US retreat of any kind. Park agreed that the currently successful OPCON mechanism should be respected and maintained as long as the North Korean security threat presented a very serious concern to South Korean national security.

Park also suggested a revision of the “123” nuclear agreement to allow South Korea to peacefully develop nuclear energy, both to support its commercial and industrial economic growth, and to present a clear contrast to North Korea. The revised agreement should be mutually beneficial, advanced, and transparent. He suggested it should be resolved in the next two years through constructive dialogue.

Han predicted that the alliance would continue to be easier to manage when ROK leadership takes a more hardline stance toward North Korea compared to US leadership, rather than vice versa. He noted that the Korea-US alliance is in fact peculiar: its primary object is North Korea, which Han called a part of the Korean nation, so any reconciliation between North and South immediately casts doubt on the usefulness and rationale of the alliance with the US. For now, however, the allies seem to be on the same page. He proposed that the goals of the alliance moving forward should be: 1) deterring war through strategic change in North Korea, laying the path for eventual reunification; 2) complete resolution of the North Korean nuclear situation; and 3) addressing non-traditional (as well as traditional) security threats.

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