
Day 1 Session III: The Future of the Alliance

Moderator: Choi Kang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Kil Jeong Woo, National Assembly, ROK
Lee Chung Min, Yonsei University
Mark Minton, The Korea Society
Douglas Paal, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Paul Wolfowitz, Former US Deputy Secretary of Defense

Rapporteur: Nadia Bulkin, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Choi Kang, moderator of Session III, “The Future of the Alliance,” explained that the United States and South Korea must think beyond North Korea toward future challenges. Speakers offered diverse perspectives on what these future challenges would be and how to meet them.

Kil Jeong Woo listed potential threats to the cohesion of the alliance, so that the Korea-US relationship would not be the victim of complacency. Korean trade, tourism, and student exchange with China is larger than that with the United States, and South Korea could be wooed by the fact that China appears to be taking a firmer stance toward Pyongyang in its efforts to determine its role as a leader in the international community. Furthermore, he noted that according to an Asan Institute poll, most South Koreans think the United States is mishandling Japan’s rightward shift. Other potentially flammable issues include military burden-sharing, revision of the nuclear cooperation agreement, and certain provisions of the Korea-US FTA. Lee Chung Min added the challenge of navigating “down sides” to Asia’s spectacular rise, such as demographic shifts and environmental concerns.

Lee stated that the alliance was at a critical transition between unilateral dependence and a primary emphasis on security to a mutual convergence on multiple issues, even reunification. South Korea now stands out as a US ally, and must now face questions regarding its own power and responsibility for the peace in Northeast Asia. Mark Minton likewise argued that Korea’s growing role in global governance (South Korea is now on the UN Security Council, and the UN Secretary General is Korean), along with growing transnational problems, necessitated increased cooperation through the alliance.

Douglas Paal strongly supported the US pivot to Asia, but regretted an initial overemphasis on security leading to the mistaken impression in Asia that the pivot’s purpose was containing China. He hoped that the pivot would not swivel excessively back toward the Middle East, which would never have been abandoned in the first place. Fortunately, he noted that the alliance continues to enjoy bipartisan support, demonstrating a capacity for durability. He stressed that the United States would very much remain a regional player in Northeast Asia.

Lee called the rise of China a potential speed bump, because nobody can be sure of what role China will play. He explained that South Koreans don’t vocalize their anxieties over the

“China threat” because South Korea has actually been tested the most by China over the centuries. Though he was more positive about China’s role than he had been previously, the “new era” saw more divergence than convergence between the United States and China where security issues were concerned.

Kil noted that there was evidence of growing Chinese compliance with UN sanctions on North Korea (such as a shut-down of Bank of China transfers to North Korea), and a Chinese preference to work with reform-oriented North Korean leaders, such as Kim Jong-un’s uncle-in-law—interpreted by some North Korea observers as a Chinese signal to North Korea’s new leadership. Minton described China as being in an excellent position to pursue its interests in Pyongyang if leadership changes take place. Paul Wolfowitz explained that China, which has the greatest potential to enable such a leadership change, is starting to realize that a nuclear North Korea is not safe for future generations.

Paal stated that China will become more powerful, but not absolutely so—in contrast to the expectation that China would somehow surpass and eclipse the United States, and that countries in the region would have fewer foreign policy choices that were not appointed by Beijing. He stressed that South Korea is in the best position to take the lead on developing a regional security architecture that will engage China in a rules-based order.

As peninsular, regional, and world challenges blend together, Minton stated that any action on North Korea must be conducted jointly, and with Japan’s assistance. He provided the example of the difficulty of encompassing the North Korean threat of nuclear weapons without a larger geopolitical context. Wolfowitz also argued that the United States and South Korea must work with Japan to craft non-military responses to military provocations.

As Korea prepares to take a greater leadership role in the region, Paal argued it should improve its relations with Japan. However, Lee feared that ROK-Japan relations would not be able to improve due to enduring Japanese perceptions of history.

Wolfowitz blamed the North Korean regime’s refusal to relinquish nuclear weapons on the failure of the deterrence policy, not the alliance itself. He also noted that the regime had made force too dangerous of an option. However, Minton explained that Pyongyang is trying to accord itself the most favorable position vis-à-vis its neighbors to accommodate its fundamental weakness, in an attempt to preserve the regime.

Since belligerence has not delivered desired results for either side, Minton argued that Pyongyang may be ready to return to negotiations; in this case, the United States should also consider moving beyond deterrence to more flexible diplomacy in Pyongyang. For example, he suggested that the United States support a measure such as a North-South exchange program. The United States needs to help ensure that Pyongyang makes the right fundamental choice between regime survival and nuclear weapons development. He concluded that soft edges might be more appropriate for dealing with hard problems. This would not mean that the central deterrent role of the alliance would be diminished, or that denuclearization should not remain the alliance’s highest priority. But he suggested other issues (including reunification) might overtake these efforts. Paal also argued in favor of trustpolitik as a well-balanced approach to North Korea. He noted that with every day that passes, North Korea’s leadership becomes more out of step with the rest of the world.

By contrast, Wolfowitz called deterrence absolutely crucial, stating that the United States and South Korea need to determine a strategy for dealing with North Korean missiles, because these missiles would improve. He suggested that while economic reform in North Korea could plausibly lead to a state that is more like China or Vietnam, it would be an enormous systemic change that could be a huge threat to the regime. As the regime's survival is inculcated with the belief that their leader is absolutely right, he felt that North Korea would not be able to reform without a regime change.

Minton argued that in the future, the alliance must be expanded to a full bilateral diplomatic strategy. Upcoming problems for the alliance would include instability and regime collapse. Paal also argued that the alliance needs to be endowed with strength to deal with changing circumstances on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, Wolfowitz reminded the audience that patience with the alliance was necessary. He recalled that on the 10th anniversary of the alliance, South Korea was deemed a permanent economic “basket case” with no natural resources, too much corruption, and a military dictatorship with no plausible claim to a democratic future. Though the South Korean economic miracle and thriving democracy is taken for granted today, he argued that it has only been possible due to the commitment, perseverance, and sacrifice made by Koreans and Americans throughout the alliance as well as the Korean War.

Regarding North Korea, Kil articulated the urge to try a new approach, including the engagement of peace mechanisms and turning arms treaties into peace treaties, given the current perception that existing diplomatic solutions have been exhausted. Minton argued that US and South Korean strategy should start but not end with the well-tested alliance framework—it must move beyond a start-stop reflex that only benefits Pyongyang's interests. Deeper diplomatic immersion with Pyongyang would ensure that China is not the only outside player leveraged in Pyongyang (he argued that even North Koreans might be nervous about the current situation); it would also show that the United States has no vested interest in preventing reunification.

Paal also noted that a reunified Korea was in the best interests of the United States and the region, although he doubted that all perspectives in Korea or China would understand this; he suggested that China may try to dissuade reunification. However, Wolfowitz noted that while the Chinese might not like reunification at first, through dialogue China might eventually understand that reunification is for the good of all of Northeast Asia. Looking ahead, he argued that the alliance had to be maintained post-reunification to promote regional stability— but that this alliance would be very different.

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