

“Challenges Ahead for the ROK-U.S. Alliance”

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Abstract

Dr. Patrick Cronin, senior director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security, presented the 14th *Asan Dosirak Series* titled “Challenges Ahead for the ROK-U.S. Alliance”. Dr. Cronin’s presentation discussed the elements of continuity and change in the alliance under the current administrations. He also detailed three challenges that were likely to face future ROK and U.S. policymakers: relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and the upcoming political transitions across the region.

Summary

Dr. Cronin began by briefly outlining the Obama administration’s policy towards Northeast Asia and its moves to deepen and diversify relations with key regional actors. He noted that, from the administration’s perspective, the ROK-U.S. alliance had proven to be a major success through the management of numerous crises over the past 3-4 years and deepened bilateral ties across a range of areas. In light of this positive assessment, Dr. Cronin suggested that there are three issues that will likely pose a challenge to the alliance in the near future.

Dr. Cronin began by noting that there is a tendency among some policymakers to view the DPRK in terms of crisis management and thus only pursue measures designed to limit hostile provocations. He argued that such a fixation on military provocations and weapon testing essentially cedes the advantage and initiative to the Kim Jong-Il regime. More importantly, this view neglects the broader vision and long-term goals that the alliance should have regarding the DPRK.

The second challenge Dr. Cronin discussed pertains to the U.S. relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). The rapidly changing strategic relationship between the two states represents a major challenge to both the alliance and future Korean reunification. Dr. Cronin explained that the continued Chinese policy of ensuring regime stability in the DPRK, coupled with its growing military capabilities aimed at access denial to foreign forces, threaten near-term prospects for reunification.

Finally, Dr. Cronin discussed the upcoming political elections on both sides of the alliance and the ramifications for the region. He suggested that the U.S. is likely to remain cautious about any ambitious commitments or actions until next year's presidential elections. In addition, budgetary constraints and major defense spending cuts will impact heavily upon future U.S. capabilities. For the ROK, a change in the presidency to a more liberal administration would also imply significant changes to the military and political components of the alliance, particularly over issues of sovereignty such as the transfer of operational control (OPCON), the limiting of missile ranges, and nuclear fuel reprocessing rights.

Dr. Cronin concluded by stating that the current preoccupation with minimizing provocations and threats from the DPRK, while important, is likely to miss the important strategic changes that are taking place. For the ROK-U.S. alliance to continue to move forward, a long-term strategic outlook encompassing the multifaceted challenges on the Korean peninsula is essential.