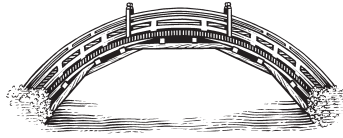


ROUNDTABLE

What If?
A World without the U.S.-ROK Alliance



Nicholas Eberstadt, Aaron L. Friedberg & Geun Lee

S. Enders Wimbush

David C. Kang

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Introduction

Nicholas Eberstadt, Aaron L. Friedberg & Geun Lee

By many measures, the U.S.-ROK alliance—formalized and underpinned through the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty signed between Seoul and Washington—qualifies as a signal historical success. After all, the proximate objective of this military alliance was to deter a second North Korean attack on South Korea (with the first such attack, in June 1950, having launched the devastating 1950–53 Korean War) and, for the five decades that the treaty has been in force, the peninsular ceasefire has steadily held, albeit at times uneasily. Moreover, this U.S. military guarantee helped to assure stability and security in the Northeast Asian region during the Cold War era, thereby facilitating South Korea’s own remarkable economic and political development. By the mid-1990s, the Republic of Korea (ROK) qualified for membership into the OECD, formally joining the world’s roster of affluent and highly industrialized constitutional democracies—an achievement that is, considering South Korea’s starting point in 1953, hard to imagine absent the strong and continuing military and political bond with the United States.

Notwithstanding those past successes, the U.S.-ROK alliance is under growing strain today—and the increasingly troubled nature of the current security relationship is no secret on either side of the Pacific. Given South Korea’s tremendous relative rise in recent decades, some degree of friction and readjustment would arguably have been inevitable in this alliance. Today’s growing tensions are, however, more than a reflection of mere “structural” developments. Over the past decade, fundamental differences have emerged between Washington and Seoul over the perceived objectives of the alliance. Most critically, U.S. and South Korean policymakers now do not entirely agree on the nature and urgency of or the appropriate responses to the “North Korean threat.”

Since the Mutual Defense Treaty is cast as a pact for resisting potential North Korean aggression, this fissure has potentially profound ramifications.

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A Parable: The U.S.-ROK Security Relationship Breaks Down

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay outlines the different forces and influences that might prevail in Asia if the U.S.-ROK security relationship were to end.

MAIN FINDINGS

The absence of the U.S.-ROK security alliance would likely have the following effects on the Asian security environment:

- U.S. behavior following military withdrawal from South Korea will greatly determine how other Asian states strategize.
- U.S. military drawdown will change the threat calculus of many Asian states, causing countries to ensure their own security through a variety of measures and military capabilities that can be harnessed to strategies previously checkmated or muted by the U.S. presence.
- Having seen the departure coming, by the time U.S. troops exit the Korean Peninsula most Asian states will have already designed strategies that anticipate the consequences of U.S. withdrawal, each with different timelines and expectations.
- Incentives for many Asian states to “go nuclear” will be extremely powerful, with Japan likely being the trigger. Taiwan and South Korea might also find the strategic logic of becoming a nuclear weapons state difficult to resist.
- Rapid shifts in alliances and relationships will create short-term non-traditional alliances, based on tactical advantage and specific issues. Seoul’s objectives will effectively be adjusted to reflect the formulation of these new partnerships.
- A number of other actors will rapidly acquire incentives to stimulate the ROK’s sense of threat from North Korea.
- Japan may eventually take on a new persona—becoming more nationalistic, assertive, well armed, and nuclear capable.
- Russia will possess a unique strategic flexibility, with many options, plenty of room to maneuver, and the ability to play all sides with equal facility.
- New Delhi will not only have difficulty hedging on all fronts, especially between Japan and China, but India’s decisions will have a powerful effect on other parts of what has become a much larger chessboard.
- Possibility of misjudgments and miscalculations in the region will rise dramatically, causing Asia to become a more dangerous place to the detriment of nearly everyone.

What if the U.S.-ROK security relationship were to break down? This essay explores the alternative futures of such a scenario. Analyzing scenarios is one technique for trying to understand the increasing complexity of strategic environments. A scenario is an account of an imagined sequence of events. The intent of a scenario is to suggest how alternative futures might arise and where they might lead, where conflicts might occur, how the interests of different actors might be challenged, and the kinds of strategies actors might pursue to achieve their objectives. Important to keep in mind is that scenarios are nothing more than invented, in-depth stories—stories about what different futures could look like and what might happen along plausible pathways to those futures. The trends and forces that go into building a scenario may be carefully researched, yet a scenario is not a research paper. Rather, it is a work of the imagination. As such, scenarios are, first, tools that can help bring order to the way analysts think about what might happen in future security environments; second, scenarios are a provocative way of revealing possible dynamics of future security environments that might not be apparent simply by projecting known trends into the future.

Scenarios are particularly useful in suggesting where the interests and actions of different actors might converge or collide with other forces, trends, attitudes, and influences. By using scenarios, to explore the question “what if this or that happened?” in a variety of different ways, with the objective of uncovering as many potential answers as possible, analysts can build hedging strategies for dealing with many different kinds of potential problems. Though they may choose to discount some of these futures and related scenarios, analysts will not be ignorant of the possibilities, with luck avoiding having to say: “I never thought about that.”

As with any scenario, the intent of this scenario—the breakdown and dissolution of the U.S.-ROK security relationship—is not to predict the future. Rather, the intent is to tell a plausible story in a way that might alert readers to how different forces and influences might produce dynamics they have not considered. Some parts of this scenario might strike readers as more plausible than others. All parts of this scenario are possible, most are plausible accounts of what might happen, and some aspects described are indeed probable.

This essay is divided into three main sections:

- ≈ pp. 10–12 set the stage for a scenario where the U.S.-ROK alliance ceases to exist
- ≈ pp. 12–22 outline various possible effects on and implications for Japan, China, Russia, Taiwan, India, and the United States in the aftermath of a breakdown in the U.S.-ROK security alliance

≈ pp. 22–24 reflect on the scenario and highlight the major triggers that cause “domino effects,” altering alliances and changing the behavior of regional actors

PREAMBLE: THE ROAD TO BREAKDOWN

By 2015 the long-time U.S.-ROK security alliance had come to an end. Historians were quick to note that to imagine Northeast Asia with such a *de minimus* U.S. security connection one would have to go back quite a long time, even before the 1856 opening of Japan by Commodore Perry. For as long as anyone could remember, Korea’s security was a function of relations among China, Russia, and Japan—relations that were never particularly harmonious, with South Korea often the *casus belli*. The U.S. security presence in South Korea served for the most part as an outside stabilizer, balancing the inherent tensions among the other three states.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops over the previous two years had ultimately led to a collapse of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954—and with it U.S. guarantees for South Korea’s security, including what most people had assumed was space for South Korea under the U.S. nuclear umbrella. The explicit intent of the U.S.-ROK alliance, which had endured for more than 50 years, had been to dissuade North Korea from attempting unification with South Korea on its own terms. The nearly 40,000 U.S. troops that the alliance placed directly in the way of North Korea served as a trip-wire to a larger conflict that would bring the United States into the conflict immediately and in force. While allowing South Korea the necessary security to develop and prosper, this arrangement also offered the United States some direct security benefits (e.g., the use of South Korean space as a platform for launching military operations into the USSR and China, if necessary) and a vital location from which to monitor North Asia’s sea lanes.

Flush with economic success and political self-confidence, by the early years of the 21st century South Koreans entertained a strong belief that time was running out for North Korea and that the Korean Peninsula could be reunified on terms South Korea would dictate. Seoul spent lavishly on state-of-the-art weaponry and on research and development to expand South Korea’s military advantage over North Korea, which lagged in every technological and industrial category. In the early 1990s both China and the USSR had opened full relations with South Korea, each state making abundantly clear that engaging in risky behavior to support North Korea was out of the question. Beijing’s support for North Korea waned dramatically as the need

Inter-Korean Relations in the Absence of a U.S.-ROK Alliance

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In exploring how inter-Korean relations would evolve in the absence of a U.S.-ROK alliance, this essay focuses on three areas: preferences of the South Korean public and elite regarding how best to deal with North Korea, whether North Korea might pull back on its hesitant moves toward economic reform and a more open diplomacy, and how Chinese foreign policy toward the Korean Peninsula might evolve.

MAIN FINDINGS

- In the absence of a U.S.-ROK alliance, South Korea would likely continue to emphasize interdependence. South Korean elite and public opinion on North Korea and U.S. policies is complex. South Korean support for engagement continued even after North Korea's nuclear test—and even as relations between the two Koreas deteriorated over the past five years—in large part because South Koreans found U.S. policy to be destabilizing on the peninsula.
- Because North Korea's military and economic position has deteriorated since the Cold War and the country is far more isolated, North Korea is unlikely to return to an active destabilization campaign against South Korea.
- Because instability would have a direct impact on China's own domestic and international situation, allowing, or even supporting, North Korean retrenchment and destabilization of the peninsula would not be beneficial for China.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Relations between the U.S. and South Korea continue to improve, based mainly on the convergence of policy over how to deal with North Korea. This essay presents a “worst case” scenario and emphasizes that sound policy by both South Korea and the U.S. can avoid this outcome.
- Even with the arrival of a new president in 2008, South Korea would be unlikely to support a containment strategy against North Korea. Both of the major progressive and conservative presidential candidates broadly support engagement strategies, even if they differ over the details.
- South Korean popular support for the U.S.-ROK alliance and U.S. military deployments remains firm, but the alliance performs a less central role in security on the peninsula than during the Cold War.

The international position of South Korea (ROK) involves a complex mix of pressures. Seoul must manage South Korea's alliance with the United States, devise a *modus vivendi* with a massive and dynamic China, and resolve the relationship with Japan. Yet overwhelming the importance of even these issues is South Korea's remaining focus on the last vestige of the Cold War: the unresolved division of the peninsula into North Korea and South Korea. To that end, a fairly clear South Korean grand strategy has emerged over the past decade—one that emphasizes economic interdependence over military strength, accommodation rather than confrontation with China, and a slowly evolving alliance with the United States.¹ The centerpiece of this grand strategy has been the economic engagement of North Korea as a means of solving both the nuclear issue and the broader “North Korea problem.”

Even as this grand strategy has been emerging, however, U.S. and South Korean policies about how best to deal with North Korea have diverged, sometimes quite sharply. The apparent interest displayed by the Bush administration early in its tenure toward fostering Pyongyang's collapse or using military force was unacceptable from Seoul's perspective given that either approach would have threatened the progress made by South Korea over the past decade. South Korea's refusal to take a harder line toward North Korea—a foreign policy referred to by some analysts as “appeasement”—has led to increased friction between Seoul and Washington.² This disagreement over approaches to North Korea was based not on emotions but on national interests: Seoul has focused on avoiding collapse in North Korea while Washington has focused on nuclear nonproliferation.³

Relations between Seoul and Washington have improved in the past year as progress with North Korea has followed the path envisioned by the February 13, 2007 agreement reached at the six-party talks. Furthermore, if relations among the United States, South Korea, and North Korea continue to improve, the U.S.-ROK alliance could dissolve following a significant decrease in tension on the peninsula and resolution of the nuclear crisis. A much more likely end to the alliance than this Panglossian “best of all possible worlds” scenario, however, would be for the United States to at some point return

¹ Jae Ho Chung, *Between Ally and Partner: Korea-China Relations and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

² Nicholas Eberstadt, “Tear Down This Tyranny,” *Weekly Standard*, November 29, 2004 ~ <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/004/951szxxd.asp>.

³ David C. Kang, “The Cause of Strife in the U.S.-ROK Alliance,” *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 23–31.

to a containment policy against North Korea, with South Korea remaining focused on engaging North Korea.⁴

Given this possibility, how might relations between the two Koreas evolve in the absence of a U.S.-ROK military alliance? Fairly clear is that while South Korean threat perceptions of North Korea would increase North Korean threat perceptions would decrease; this would occur simply because U.S. military support for South Korea would be less readily available in event of a crisis or military confrontation. Indeed, rather than focusing on the direction of change the key question should be about the extent of change: would the increased threat perception be enough to override both ROK engagement of North Korea and Seoul's interdependence strategy in general? That is, would a cold war return to the peninsula or would South Korea continue its engagement of North Korea?

Evidence suggests that even without the U.S.-ROK military alliance instability and change on the Korean peninsula would be less dramatic than some observers have predicted. The absence of an alliance might under certain circumstances, such as continued progress in the six-party talks, have relatively little impact. Under other circumstances, such as increased tension between the United States and China over regional issues, the absence of the alliance might be more consequential.

This essay examines relations between the two Koreas in the absence of the U.S.-ROK alliance and is divided into five sections:

- ≈ pp. 29–30 address two scenarios for the future of North-South relations on the Korean Peninsula: (1) a return to a cold war and (2) continued engagement of North Korea by South Korea
- ≈ pp. 30–35 examine South Korean attitudes, threat perceptions, and national interests vis-à-vis North Korea and the U.S.-ROK alliance
- ≈ pp. 35–39 identify the conditions under which the North Korean leadership might feel emboldened enough to take military or other threatening action against South Korea
- ≈ pp. 39–40 analyze China's role in peninsular dynamics
- ≈ pp. 40–41 conclude the essay with an assessment of how an end to the U.S.-ROK alliance would influence relations both on the peninsula and in the region

⁴ The alliance ending because of South Korean containment and U.S. engagement is unlikely, and the author does not consider that possibility here.

U.S.-ROK Civil Society Ties: Dynamics and Prospects in a Post-Alliance World

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NOTE ≈ This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the Korea Institute for Future Strategies (KiFS) and NBR conference, "A World without the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Thinking about 'Alternative Futures,'" Seoul, South Korea, September 10-11, 2007.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This essay examines the relationship between the U.S.-ROK security alliance and the civil society ties linking the U.S. and South Korea and analyzes the likely impact on such ties in the event of the termination of the security alliance.

MAIN FINDINGS

The essay covers U.S.-ROK ties across five different sectors:

- *Private sector* ∼ Private sector ties between the U.S. and South Korea respond to economic and financial conditions rather than to a rise in regional security tensions. Following the establishment of a dialogue channel with North Korea in April of 2003, the Korean stock market appears to have decoupled from the North Korean nuclear issue.
- *Educational sector* ∼ The predominance of the U.S. as a destination for higher education and vehicle for social advancement within South Korean society has played a major role in solidifying grass-roots ties between the two countries.
- *Religious sector* ∼ Substantial religious networks have developed between the two countries, through which constituents are likely to advocate for the maintenance of close ties with the U.S. as a component of South Korea's long-term security strategy.
- *Civil society/NGO sector* ∼ The relationship of the U.S. military and South Korean civil society remains relatively antagonistic. The end of the alliance would deprive the activists of a focal point for protests against the alliance.
- *Media/public opinion sector* ∼ The South Korean public is currently concerned about a withdrawal of U.S. forces. The end of the alliance would be considered as a significant event that would require considerable adjustments in the world view of South Koreans.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Although the alliance makes both positive and negative contributions to how the people of the U.S. and South Korea view each other, the U.S.-ROK military alliance serves as an “unseen support beam” that has supported the growth of civil society ties. Cultural relations may well be a lagging indicator of the health of the broader relationship. If the alliance ended, the cultural relationship might take years to feel this impact.
- The absence of a bilateral alliance would reduce the number of policymakers, especially in the U.S., who have extensive experience of and a direct personal interest in South Korea.

To acknowledge the role of civil society as a significant component of the U.S.-ROK relationship is to recognize the transformation in South Korea's domestic governance resulting from the country's transition from authoritarianism to democracy in the late 1980s. South Korea's democratization and economic development are primary factors behind a gradual convergence of social systems and democratic values between the United States and South Korea. Another result of these developments, however, is that leading South Korean civil society organizations have subjected the alliance to greater scrutiny regarding the relative priorities of the two sides and have demanded greater transparency regarding the internal workings of the security alliance, which has traditionally been managed by a small coterie of military specialists and senior diplomats on each side. That the alliance would find itself challenged by South Korean civil sector demands for more transparent management of the relationship is ironic, given that the existence of close security ties under the U.S.-ROK security alliance has been an invisible support beam that has enabled the development of the civil sector and served as a foundation for the development of non-governmental ties between the two countries.

South Korea had already been firmly linked to the United States long before the country's democratic transition through the establishment of the U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty in 1954 and because an open U.S. market was the primary destination for exports that drove South Korea's economic transformation during the 1960s and 1970s from a "basket case" to a leading industrialized economy. Grass-roots ties and interaction with the U.S. system—through individual exchange programs in various fields, exposure to U.S. media through the Armed Forces Network, side-by-side military service with American counterparts, and opportunities for higher education in the United States—played a background role in the development of South Korean civil society, thereby encouraging South Korea's democratic transition. The contribution of the security alliance to the development of, and the role of the U.S. government in promoting, South Korea's democratization remains contested, however. As a result, South Korean civil society actors view the role of the United States and its relationship to South Korea's democratization with great ambivalence.¹

Although the establishment of the alliance pre-dated both South Korea's democratization and the rise of civil society as an influence in the country's

¹ See David Adesnik and Michael McFaul, "Engaging Autocratic Allies to Promote Democracy," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 7–26; and Sun-hyuk Kim and Wonhyuk Lim, "How to Deal with South Korea," *Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 71–82.

domestic politics, South Korean civil society organizations cannot be ignored as an increasingly important factor in alliance management, even if alliance issues are predominantly the responsibility of the two governments. The role of civil society as an influence on the U.S.-ROK relationship has steadily grown more relevant as NGOs have become influential actors with the ability to affect ROK government policies.

The term “civil society” itself is usually defined as the sphere of voluntary NGOs that join together to work for the collective good within a society (the “third sector,” as opposed to government or business). For the purposes of this analysis of the implications for U.S.-ROK relations of a “post-alliance world,” this essay will also include the media and the private sector as important actors, even though the private sector and media organizations are not usually included as a part of civil society.

This essay will review the major non-governmental actors in South Korea and their ties to the United States, the roles and contributions of civil society to U.S.-ROK relations, and the influence of civil society actors on the alliance. The essay will also assess the relationship and relative influence of civil society on alliance management and the implications for major non-governmental sectors if the alliance were to be dissolved.

- ≈ pp. 46–47 examine the U.S.-ROK security alliance’s background and contribution to the formation of relations and exchanges in various sectors between South Korea and the United States
- ≈ pp. 48–58 outline the development of South Korea’s major civil society groups broadly defined, identify the role these groups play in the two countries’ larger bilateral relations, and address the direct or indirect relationship between these groups and the security alliance
- ≈ pp. 58–59 conclude the essay with both an analysis of South Korean civil society in the event that the security alliance ceases to exist and an assessment of the implications for ties between the United States and South Korea

SECURITY ALLIANCE, DEVELOPMENT OF U.S.-ROK RELATIONS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Non-governmental U.S.-ROK ties have traditionally lagged in importance behind the respective roles of the governments in defining the relationship between the two countries. U.S. involvement in the occupation of Korea and the U.S. decision to enter Korean War under UN auspices to defend South Korea against North Korean aggression led to a much closer relationship among the United States and South Korea than would otherwise have been