

Alternative Future of ROK Relations with the Great Powers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite varying perspectives on the international relations in East Asia, few mention the importance of the ROK-US alliance in the general context. The ROK-US alliance is often forgotten or neglected or it is taken for granted that the alliance is an extension of the US-Japan alliance. Therefore, few discuss the possibility of changing security terrains in Northeast Asia with the US-ROK alliance in mind.

However, it should be noted that the ROK-US Alliance plays a key function in shaping the regional order. How the US-ROK alliance evolves will seriously affect the fate of concerned partners in the region, including China, Japan, south and North Korea. Simply put, the Korean peninsula still is a linchpin for potential conflicts in East Asia, result of which will affect the shape of the strategic interaction among regional powers.

Disintegration of the bilateral alliance between the US and Korea would create a power vacuum on the Korean peninsula, which will intensify the competition among regional powers for extending their influence to the peninsula. South Korea will make a strategic choice to avoid rivalries among the regional powers, but regional powers are highly prone to jump on the rampant strategic game on the Korean peninsula in the absence of the US forces in South Korea.

1. United States and East Asia in Perspective

The role of the United States has been, is, and will be pivotal in the dynamics of international relations among East Asian countries. US presence in East Asia made big difference in strategic milieus and interactions among countries in the region.

As to the future of East Asian dynamics, both pessimism and optimism coexist. Aaron Friedberg put a fire on the debate on the security dynamics in the post-cold war period in East Asia. Unlike the European continent where regional integration gained momentum, Friedberg finds possibility for rivalry and conflicts in East Asia. He suggests that East Asia is ripe for rivalry.¹ The reason is that East Asia lacks the pacifying effects of liberal elements. Much more likely is multi-polar balance of power. Here implicitly supposed is the possibility of the US playing as just one of the players rather than a dominant shaper of the regional order. Against this, Thomas Christensen finds the possibility of a bipolar competition in the East Asian region.² What concerns most is the security dilemma between China and the US-Japan alliance.³ The US and Japan cooperate to cope with the rising China, which produces unintended consequences of security dilemma in the region. Like Friedberg, what Christensen predicts is insecure and unstable East Asia. Thomas Burger argues that pacific East Asia is full of potential conflicts among nations, but the reason has less to do with the US. Upstream nationalism in East Asian countries is the source of conflict and instability.⁴

As against those who argue that East Asia is ripe for rivalry and competition, John Ikenberry argues that East Asia is likely to maintain order as long as the US plays a dominant role without

¹ Aaron Friedberg, "Ripe for Rivalry: Prospects for Peace for Multipolar Asia," *International Security* 18:3 (Winter 1993/1994).

² Thomas Christensen, "China, the US-Japan Alliance and the Security Dilemma," *International Security* 23:4 (Spring 1999)

³ As Jennifer Lind points out, Japan has long been passing the buck to the US under the name of cherishing pacifism. While Japan is striving to be more assertive in assuming its security burden, it is almost for sure that Japan goes with the United States. See, Jennifer Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck," *International Security* 29:1 (Summer 2004)

⁴ Thomas Berger, "Power and Purpose in Pacific East Asia," in John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds. *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 387-420.

pulling back its forces.⁵ Many authors warn the potential that China would challenge the US position in East Asia,⁶ but David Shambaugh and others suggest that China engages, rather than challenges, Asia.⁷ Richard Ross finds the possibility for peace out of geography. China is a limited power, according to Ross, to fight against the US.⁸ Hence, US-China rivalry makes little sense to him. Acharya predicts more stable order in East Asia, pointing out the gradual Europeanization of the Asia-Pacific. Unlike Friedberg who argues the lack of institutional mechanism for fostering cooperation, Acharya argues that interdependence is on the rise and suggests that norms and institutional linkages are developing in East Asia.⁹ David Kang even argues that hierarchical order would be in place with the rise of China.¹⁰ He predicts more of a China-centered regional order in the future, but others argue that Asia's future will not be Asia's past.

2. Often-told but Neglected Alliance between the US and Korea

Despite varying perspectives on the international relations in East Asia, most authors analyze the issue with a focus on the US, China, or US-Japan Alliance. Few mention the importance of the ROK-US alliance in the general context.¹¹

The ROK-US alliance security alliance is often forgotten or neglected. Or it is taken for granted that the alliance is an extension of the US-Japan alliance. Therefore, few discuss the possibility of changing security terrains in Northeast Asia with the US-ROK alliance in mind.

⁵ John Ikenberry, "Conclusion: Images of Order in the Asia-Pacific and the Role of the United States," in John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno, eds. *International Relations Theory and the Asia-Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003): 421-440.

⁶ Bernstein and Munro's view represents this trend. Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997)

⁷ David Shambaugh, "China Engages Asia: Reshaping the Regional Order," *International Security* 29:3 (Winter 2004/2005).

⁸ Richard Ross, "The Geography of Peace," *International Security* 23:4 (Spring 1999)

⁹ A. Acharya, "Will Asia's Past Be Its Future," *International Security* 28:3 (Winter 2003)

¹⁰ David Kang, "Hierarchy, Balancing and Empirical Puzzles in Asian International Relations," *International Security* 28:3 (Winter 2003)

¹¹ Cheol Hee Park dealt the possible linkage between the changing US-Japan alliance and the fate of the ROK-US alliance. See, Cheol Hee Park, "Changing Security Terrains and Alliance Transformation in Northeast Asia," *Daxiyangguo* (September 2006)

However, it should be noted that the ROK-US alliance alliance plays a key function in shaping the regional order. Cold war mentality is not enough to understand the dynamics. First of all, the US-ROK alliance is heavily devoted to the purpose of deterring against the North Korean military threat. Depending on the future shape of the Korean peninsula, the strategic dynamics of the East Asian region will change. Because of the development of South Korea as against the faltering North Korea, South Korean advantage in the strategic interaction is all too often taken for granted. But, how the US-ROK alliance evolves will seriously affect the fate of concerned partners in the region, including China, Japan, south and North Korea. Simply put, the Korean peninsula still is a linchpin for potential conflicts in East Asia, result of which will affect the shape of the strategic interaction among regional powers. Second, the US-ROK alliance is serving the unspoken purpose of coping with the regional contingencies. The purpose of the forward deployment of the US forces is not strictly confined to deterring North Korean threat. US forces in South Korea is a complex combination of army, navy, air forces and marines. This enables the US and Korea flexibly to respond to the potential contingencies in the East Asian region and beyond. If the alliance between the US and ROK disappears, the US should reposition its troops either back home or in other East Asian countries.¹² This will change the strategic milieu of the region. Much more important is the possibility that the disintegration of the bilateral alliance between the US and Korea would create a power vacuum on the Korean peninsula, which will intensify the competition among regional powers for extending their influence to the peninsula. South Korea will make a strategic choice to avoid rivalries among the regional powers, but regional powers are highly prone to jump on the rampant strategic game on the Korean peninsula in the absence of the US forces in South Korea.

3. ROK without the US-ROK Alliance as a Possibility

ROK without the US-ROK alliance is a logical possibility, if not probable in the near future. Four kinds of scenarios, either separately or combined, can lead to the situation of South Korea left without the US-ROK alliance. American initiative to pull American forces out from the peninsula can shape an alternative future. First, American forces can retreat *out of hegemonic fatigue*. American global outstretch can bring about increasing voice within the US that it had better pull their forward deployed forces back home. Decline of American hegemony can switch the course

¹² For example, the US should seriously consider the relocating the US forces in Guam, Okinawa or Hawaii once the alliance with South Korea dismantles.

of American action, as it had been the case.¹³ Second, American forces in South Korea can retreat *out of pique or anger*. Though the US may still have strategic interests in South Korea, increasing antagonism against the US among the South Korean public can generate a voice for pulling American forces back. When the Korean people themselves do not appreciate the security function of the US forces in South Korea, the US may pull out forces from the Korean peninsula out of dissatisfaction.¹⁴ Third, American retreat from the Korean peninsula can be resulted *out of chance*, not by design. Because of the urgent need outside the peninsula, such as anti-terrorist war in unexpected parts of the world, American forces stationed in South Korea can be repositioned to other parts of the world without expectation for return to its original position.¹⁵ In the first phase of this scenario, American troops may be just reduced, but eventually it can end up with the unintended consequences of never coming back to South Korea. Then it would be a virtual dissolution of the bilateral military alliance between the US and ROK. Fourth, American troops may retreat *out of pressure* when the inter-Korean relations reach a fuller scale of integration. A unified Korea may resist against the prolonged presence of American troops in South Korea. Especially left-wing nationalists may raise a voice for the Korean peninsula without foreign troops, which is highly likely.

South Korean Challenge in the Absence of the US-ROK Alliance

ROK without the US-ROK alliance will face unprecedented challenges to come up with new strategic milieu. Except for the fourth case, unified Korea, South Korea has to, first of all, find ways to cope with the North Korean security challenge. *Inter-Korean relations* may be the first variable that affects the future course of South Korean strategy. As the primary function of the US-ROK alliance is to defend South Korea from the North Korean security threat, South Korea may have to urgently redesign its policy toward North Korea. It highly depends on how resilient the North Korean regime is when the US-ROK alliance is dismantled. If North Korea is resilient enough to challenge South Korean status, South Korea may have to find a way to assertively empower its defense posture. If the North Korean regime is fragile or weakened to such an extent that they cannot survive independently, South Korea may speed up the process of inter-Korean

¹³ American policy toward East Asia at the end of Carter administration or the senior Bush administration may be examples.

¹⁴ Defense secretary Rumsfeld's emotional response is a good example. He is reported to have said: "If they do not want it, pull them back."

¹⁵ This scenario is possible because of the newly unfolding military transformation on the global scale.

reconciliation. Hence, the first variable that would affect the strategic decision of South Korea may be the North Korean situation. The second variable that influences South Korean strategic choice would be the nature of *US-China relations*. If the US and China maintain a cooperative stance, South Korea can make a comfortable choice to go along with both powers without alienating one of the two. However, if the US takes an antagonistic stance against China, South Korea should make a tough choice between aligning with the US and bandwagoning with China. The third variable that will affect South Korean strategic choice may be *Sino-Japanese relations in the region*. The rise of China and its unfolding relations with Japan would be a great concern for South Korea without an alliance with the United States. Facing China independently may not be an easy task for South Korea, considering China's sophisticated military capability and huge market potential. If Sino-Japanese relations are in relatively good terms, South Korea may find a breathing space between the two. Hedging strategy may work. However, if Sino-Japanese relations are in a bad shape, South Korea may face a hard choice. The fourth element that may affect South Korean decision may be *American posture toward South Korea* in the absence of the bilateral alliance. US, even after the dismantlement of the alliance, may regard South Korea as its important diplomatic partner. Though without an alliance, ROK-US alliance relations may reach a level of diplomatic cooperation among ordinary powers.¹⁶ This situation will enlarge a space for diplomatic maneuvering on the part of South Korea. On the other hand, if the US shows apathy, neglect, or even antagonism toward South Korea, South Korea has to find a new way of navigating through the world, for South Korea abdicated by the US can not live without friends.

South Korea' Three Main Strategic Options

Considering the above-mentioned factors, South Korea will design a new future strategy in the absence of US-ROK alliance. This may not be an easy choice for South Korea, but it is unavoidable for South Korea to find a new pathway. Three strategic options may be available for South Korea.¹⁷

The first option would be *increasing independent defense capability*. Without the alliance with the United States, South Korea has to drastically increase its defense budget to the extent that the

¹⁶ Not all Asian countries have alliance with the US. European countries do not necessarily involve in security alliance with the US as well.

¹⁷ Dukmin Yun at IFANS also suggested a few possible choices that South Korea could make. See, Dukmin Yun, "*Dongmaeng, Jaju, gurigo tajaanbo* (Alliance, autonomy and Multilateralism)," IFANS Policy Report (2005).

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full-scale ‘Koreanization of Korean defense’ is possible. Rather than relying on key strategic partners, in the first place, Korea may take an option of adopting the self-help principle. Even under the alliance format, South Korea has been upgrading its capability for Korean defense. However, if the alliance is gone, South Korea has no way but to increase its defense capability to cope with new reality. As a cost-effective way of achieving this goal, South Korea may turn to an option of going nuclear. It will be much of a defensive action, though debates may occur.¹⁸

The second strategic option that South Korea may take would be actively working for *building up multilateral security community* in the region. The initial action would be speeding up inter-Korean reconciliation. Rather than trying to push North Korea to the corner, South Korea may speed up the process of inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation in order to fundamentally get rid of security threat from North Korea. Instead of building up defense capability, South Korea may suggest an arms-reduction and confidence building, in the first place, and then lead to the peace regime on the Korean peninsula ultimately to reach the status of integration. At the same time, South Korea will work hard to build a multilateral security network to assuage security concerns on the Korean peninsula and beyond. This may be a painstaking work, but South Korea without the US-ROK alliance may rely more on multilateral framework in the region rather than unilaterally or bilaterally weaving the net of security ties. Like a concentric circle, South Korea will first strive to build a network of peace on the Korean peninsula and then expand it to Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. Also South Korea will link its efforts with European Union. United Nations may be a ultimate resort in an effort to construct the structure of peace.

Third strategic option for South Korea may be *searching for an alternative alliance partner*. South Korea left without the alliance with the US may find an exit by relying on an alternative security partner. If an alliance with the US, offshore balancer, is no more available, South Korea may find its alternative among the immediate neighbors. In case South Korea gives up alliance with the US, Japan will approach more to the United States, while, at the same time, the US put more weight on its relations with Japan. Japan would feel less incentive to show sympathy to Korea. Accordingly, South Korea’s gesture to send a love call to Japan may end up with a one-sided one. On the other hand, China has more incentives to bring South Korea into its hemisphere. South Korea, if not threatened by China, would feel more comfortable in getting tighter cooperation with China.

¹⁸ Conservatives in South Korea would opt for this scenario than other scenarios.

Actual Costs and Benefits of Korea's Alternative Strategic Choices

In case the alliance with the United States disintegrates, South Korea would feel anxious to empower its defense capability in preparation for potential contingencies on the Korean peninsula as well as in the East Asian region. However, upgrading its defense capability in the short period of time is a daunting challenge, considering the limited financial resources that South Korea controls. Because of rapidly developing aging society coupled with declining fertility rate, South Korea should invest more on the welfare functions. Raising the ratio of defense budget drastically would not be simply feasible. If that is the case, South Korea would feel more tempted to develop nuclear weapons, openly or secretly. South Korea would do this with the knowledge that it can violate the NPT codes. However, considering the dire situation surrounded by the great powers in the region, South Korea would maximize its defense potential by relying on the nuclear option. South Korea is also likely to upgrade its missile technology as well as independent surveillance capability. A catch phrase like 'rich nation and strong army' will gain political weight in reality. There might be a voice on the part of the liberal wings for permanent peace based on unarmed neutrality,¹⁹ but this would face a strong rebuttal from the right wing that claims the need for independent capability to defend the country from the outside threat.²⁰ Whether South Korea goes nuclear or rely more on conventional weapons, it is undeniable that South Korea would raise its defense capability on its own. In this sense, the other scenarios can be combined with this scenario.

Though South Korea may feel obliged to work closely with Japan even after the loss of the alliance with the US, Japan would feel less tempted to work with South Korea, for Japan would lose a binding tie with South Korea associated by the alliance with the US. Japan would find in reality that South Korea gets away from the maritime Asia while getting closer to the continental Asia.²¹ Annoyed by the move, Japan would strengthen its security ties with the United States. Also the US without the alliance with South Korea is highly likely to resort to the US-Japan alliance. After its alliance with the US is gone, South Korea would feel uneasy to Japan that has

¹⁹ It has long been the case that the Japanese liberals wanted to realize unarmed neutrality in J the postwar Japan. However, it was possible because Japan was defeated in the war. Also the so-called Peace Constitution gave due legitimacy to the political move in Japan. This is not the case for South Korea.

²⁰ The simple fact that South Korea has maintained a conscription system for along time would strengthen this tendency. 'Who will defend ourselves?' will be a political rhetoric after the dismantlement of the alliance. Ironically the Korean liberals can raise their voice for peace because of the resilient alliance with the US.

²¹ Sawada, a former Mainichi correspondent to Seoul, expressed this concern. Katsumi Sawada, *Tatsunichi suru Kankoku* (Korea Getting Away from Japan) (Tokyo: Ubiquitous Studio, 2006)

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history controversies as well as territorial disputes. As long as Japan maintains indifference and insensitivity regarding those thorny issues, South Korea would not trust Japan fully. This will push South Korea further to China in a reluctant and grudging way.²²

If the US reshuffles its alliance partnership with Japan together with the US-ROK alliance, then South Korea and Japan would be obliged to reproach out of the need for common defense against potential threats in the region. However, much more likely in terms of the US action would be strengthening and upgrading its security partnership with Japan.²³ If the US cherishes its alliance with Japan while abdicating its alliance with South Korea, South Korea would move in the opposite direction out of jealousy as well as out of the sense of loss.

China has long been waiting for the chance to increase its footholds on the Korean peninsula. China, since the Sino-Japanese war in the late 19th century, lost its influence on the Korean affairs for about a century. In the first half of the 20th century, the fate of the Korean peninsula was in the hands of the Japanese. In the latter half of the 20th century, America dominated the scene. The rising China would find the dismantlement of the US-ROK alliance as a prime chance to expand its influence on the Korean peninsula, not only on North Korea but also on South Korea. Without the US-ROK alliance, China would use every sorts of leverages -unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral- to lure South Korea into the Chinese hemisphere. South Korea would feel tempted as well, for South Korea does not have the thorny historical controversies with China and China is regarded as a land of opportunity in terms of market potentials.

However, whether South Korea enters into a security alliance with China is questionable. If South Korea weaves a security tie with China, it definitely means that South Korea stands against the US-Japanese bloc. This will hamper, first of all, the unification process on the Korean peninsula, because the US and Japan would regard that unified Korea will belong to the Chinese bloc. Also, in the realistic terms, China and South Korea combined cannot keep balance against the US and Japan combined. In addition, South Korea does not have ample negotiating leverage against China if and when China feels upset about South Korea, for balancing against China is impossible for South Korea alone. In this sense, South Korea has little incentive to get into the security

²² Cheol Hee Park, "Reconciled Public vs. Polarized Politicians: Korea-Japan Relations after the End of the Cold War," *Asian Voices Seminar Series Transcript* (Washington DC: Sasakawa Peace Foundation USA, 2006)

²³ Armitage-Nye Report reflects this trend very well. Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye, "The US-Japan Alliance: Getting Asia Right through 2020," *CSIS Report* (February 2007)

alliance with China, though it may be the case that South Korea keeps tighter diplomatic cooperation with China.

Then what about the multilateral security framework as an alternative to the US-ROK alliance? If the multilateral security setup is immediately and visibly available, that may become a minor alternative to the security alliance. However, most of all, it is murky for the East Asian countries to have multilateral security set up in the near future. Multilateral security community is highly unlikely to be realized as long as the North Korean nuclear issue is properly handled with the satisfaction of concerned partners. Much more serious deficit of the multilateral framework is that it can only complement the other security setup rather than independently working as a mechanism for peace. It is undeniable that the multilateral security community assuages fears, coordinates conflicting partners, and facilitates cooperation among the participants. However, the multilateral security community itself cannot guarantee the security of individual participating countries. This is also true for the United Nations. As a global organization, the United Nations plays a key function of handling collective concerns of the global community, but the organization is limited in preempting military or non-military conflicts in the world.

Despite its shortcomings, South Korea will endeavor to actively set up multilateral security community in the region with the hope that it will facilitate cooperation among the East Asian countries. However, even South Korea would not solely rely on the multilateral security setup. South Korea will use the multilateral security community, if established, as a facilitator, a coordinator, and a guarantor of security cooperation among the regional powers.

4. Alternative Future Relations with Great Powers -Hard but Realistic Choice-

Considering the costs and benefits of each strategic choice, it is for sure that South Korea would face a hard, not easy, choice if the US-ROK alliance is dissolved. However, South Korea will remain as an independent sovereign nation. Nor its diplomatic option would be that much pessimistic. Korea will try to be a normal country like other Asian or European countries. Not all countries in the world maintain a military alliance with the United States, though many countries have developed friendly relations with the US. The absence of alliance does not mean that South Korea will be an orphan in the jungle of diplomacy.

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Notwithstanding, South Korea's geopolitical location gives it a special status in international relations. First of all, it is a divided nation. Confrontation with North Korea is an ongoing reality. Second, South Korea is surrounded by great powers of the world –US, China, Japan, and Russia. Third, with the rise of China, South Korea is jammed between China and Japan, two East Asian rivals. All these conditions define and confine the strategic choices made by South Korea.

In the case of getting away from the military alliance with the United States, much more likely are the following choices. First, South Korea, like it or not, will immediately empower its defense capability. Korea's strategic choice will stand on the principle of self-help in the first place. South Korea will make a utmost endeavor to equip itself with upgraded defense capability, including nuclear option. Second, at the same time, South Korea will try its best to facilitate the inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. Having ultimate national integration in mind, South Korea will proceed with the long-term process of narrowing the life-style gap between North and South Korea. Also this is the way to reduce the threat from the North, which will eventually reduce the defense burden on the part of South Korea. Third, even though South Korea does not have a security alliance with the US any more, South Korea will continue to develop friendly ties with the United States, which is a dominant player in the world. Based upon the shared values and systems such as democratic polity, market economy and the rule of law, South Korea will continue to work with the United States on many diplomatic fronts. Fourth, as an extension, South Korea will closely work with Japan, which has lots of common qualities among the East Asian countries. South Korea without the security alliance with the US will not go away from the liberal democratic camp. However, there is a possibility that South Korea's conflict with Japan on the territorial and historical fronts gain momentum to the extent that bilateral relations with Japan are in a bad shape at times, though not always. Fifth, South Korea is less likely to establish an alternative security alliance with neighbors. Being absent of offshore balancer, South Korea will find coalition partners on an issue-by-issue basis. Rather than permanently sticking to a one side, South Korea will make a flexible issue-based coalition with proper diplomatic partners. Sixth, however, it would be a general tendency for South Korea to work closer than before with rising China, though the two countries will not get into a security alliance. Bandwagoning China will be a norm rather than balancing China. This does not necessarily mean that South Korea will take sides with China on many issues. When it comes to functional, economic, and global issues, South Korea possibly has more to cooperate with China. As for security concerns, South Korea will remain very reserved in working with China. Seventh, South Korea will make an utmost endeavor to establish multilateral security framework in East Asia in which it can play a key

function. However, utilizing the multilateral security setup may complement other strategies. It may not compose a core part of South Korean strategy.

5. Enduring Values of the US-ROK alliance

If we take into account all the variables mentioned above, it goes without saying that the US-ROK alliance has enduring values for both sides. It has long been said by either side that the alliance between the two gives unequal and non-reciprocal benefits. As a result, voices for restructuring security ties between the two countries went up in recent years.²⁴ However, it is very important to note that the US-ROK alliance stands on the principle of mutual benefits and shared strategic purposes.

For South Korea, aligning with the US in military terms gives a firm security guarantee against the potential contingencies on the Korean peninsula. In particular, provided with the nuclear umbrella, South Korea has little incentive to jump into the thrilled phases of developing nuclear weapon independently. Because of the US-ROK alliance partnership, South Korea has the luxury of developing sophisticated weaponry in a step-by-step fashion in proportion to the economic development of South Korea. In addition to the security guarantee against North Korea, the US plays a pivotal function in East Asia as a neutral arbiter as well as an offshore balancer without territorial ambition. Without the key partnership with the US, South Korea will be soon sandwiched by Japan and China, two key rivals in the region, and pressed for a hard choice on many occasions. In particular, dealing with rising China is easier for South Korea when South Korea maintains an alliance with the US. At the global level, South Korea can get along with many democratizing and economically growing countries in the world, for it has been a role model and a window case for democratization and economic development. This aspect of the soft power of South Korea has its own merit, but Korean soft power will shine more when it goes with the United States.

For the US, South Korea is a very important as well as a convenient security partner in the world. South Korea is ready and willing to accept the military presence of the US with relatively little resistance. Military transformation after 9.11 is reducing the incentives to locate American forces in a concentrated area, but the US still needs overseas bases to accept huge number of army and

²⁴ One good example is, Young Sun Ha, ed. *Hanmi dongmaeng eui bijon kwa kwaje* (Visions and Challenges of the ROK-US alliance Alliance) (Seoul: EAI, 2006)

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marines, let alone Navy and Armed Forces. South Korea provides the US with forward-deploying bases for US troops in East Asia. The US is reported to have no intention to contain or antagonize China. However, in preparation for uncertainty and instability in the East Asian region, the US has incentives to maintain forward-deployed power projection capability. South Korea enables the US to maintain strategically flexible forces in the region. On the global front, South Korea is working hand in hand with American forces overseas for Peace Keeping Operations (PKO). Unlike other allies, South Korea is in a position to dispatch division-level forces to overseas, when approved by the National Assembly, for PKO activities. In this sense, the US-ROK alliance is not confined only to local or regional level but a global level partnership for democratic outreach.

In all, South Korea should be ready to cope with the possibility of the US pulling back from the Korean peninsula. In that case, South Korea should make a strategic decision to live without the security alliance with the US. However, considering the reciprocal benefits it produces, both the US and South Korea have little incentive to scale down the bilateral alliance at this moment.

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