A Parable: The U.S.–South Korea Security Relationship Breaks Down

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Preamble: The Road to Breakdown

By 2015, the long-time U.S.-South Korea security alliance had come to an end. Historians were quick to note that one has to go back quite a long time, even before the opening of Japan by Commodore Perry in 1856, to imagine northeast Asia with such a *de minimus* U.S. security connection. For as long as anyone could remember, Korea's security was a function of relations among China, Russia and Japan. It was a history of considerable movement among the key players. The U.S. had established itself in the Philippines and Britain signed on with Japan in the Anglo-Japanese Alliance early in the 20th century. China and Japan struggled over Korea; then Russia and Japan fought over it; the old USSR got the northern half at the end of WWII; and finally New China saved North Korea and established itself as the primary guarantor of North Korea's security. Relations among China, Russia and Japan were never particularly harmonious, and South Korea was often the *casus belli*. America's security presence there, for the most part, served as an outside stabilizer, balancing the inherent tensions among the other three.

American troops had been withdrawn in the previous two years. This ultimately led to a collapse of the Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954 and with it American guarantees for South Korea's security, including what most people had assumed was space for South Korea under America's nuclear umbrella. Why this state of affairs had come about was complicated; for many observers, it seems just "to have happened," without the benefit of powerful drivers or precipitating events. More astute analysts pointed to influences on both sides that drove these long-time allies apart.

For South Koreans, their spectacular economic growth of the previous three decades had spawned an unprecedented level of national self-confidence. By the beginning of the second decade of the new century, South Korea's economic might, significantly enabled by America's security contributions, was exceeded by that of only four members of the European Union; a large middle class had emerged that changed the face of South Korean politics; and most of the elements of vibrant democracy were in place. In this success story lay the roots of the strategic rupture with the United States.

The U.S.-South Korea alliance that had endured for more than 50 years was intended explicitly to dissuade North Korea from attempting unification on its terms by placing nearly 40,000 American troops directly in their way as a trip wire to a larger conflict that would bring America into the conflict immediately and in force. This arrangement gave South Korea the security it needed to develop and prosper, while at the same time it offered the United States some direct security benefits, for example 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 came to entertain a strong belief that North Korea's time was running out, and that the peninsula could be reunified on terms the South would dictate. It spent lavishly on state of the art weaponry and research and development to expand its military advantage over the North, which lagged in every technological and industrial category. South Korea in fact opened a qualitative edge over North Korea in virtually every military and defense category. Other changes in the competitive context encouraged South Korea's greater self-assertiveness and independence. China's support for North Korea waned dramatically, as it became clear that South Korea's economic power and position must be accommodated in Chinese strategies. The USSR, another strong supporter and arms supplier to North Korea, disappeared in 1991. In any event, both opened full relations with South Korea in the early 1990s, making it abundantly clear that neither would engage in risky behavior to support North Korea.

Public opinion in South Korea reflected the changing mood, especially among the generations born after the Korean War (about two-thirds of South Korea's population), increasingly taking the position that South Korea was capable of mobilizing its own resources and providing its own defense. American oversight and command of the South Korean armed forces, thus, ended in 1994. Anti-Americanism began to rise in this decade, and it accelerated into the new century, as more and more South Koreans deduced that they could handle defense against North Korea by themselves, without American support; to the contrary, repeated opinion polls testified to the South Koreans fear that American military presence on the peninsula actually reduced their security rather than enhanced it. North Korea's unpredictability and China's inability to rein in

North Korea fed this concern. Clear majorities favoring withdrawal became a prominent feature of the public attitude toward continued American military presence—spread across nearly 100 bases—on South Korean soil.

In 2010, after many failed attempts to stop North Korea's nuclear arms buildup—a failure most South Koreans attributed to American diplomatic ineptitude and an unwillingness to compromise with Pyongyang, negotiations from which the South Koreans had been largely excluded—several petty incidents involving American servicemen provoked mass street demonstrations against continued American presence. These events, which a decade earlier might not have excited so much popular anti-American fervor, became increasingly frequent, as nearly every security issue came to be associated in public opinion to one or another incident of American perfidy. A new generation of South Korean historians and political commentators took aim at a variety of moments in the past when, they argued, America brought suffering and injury to South Korea. The American attitude toward Japan's colonization of Korea, which, they argued, the U.S. traded for Japanese acceptance of America's takeover in the Philippines; American acquiescence, even assistance, to repressive Korean governments with blood on their hands; recurring conflicts between South Korean civilians and American soldiers, in which Americans exercised extraterritorial legal agreements to avoid justice under South Korean law; these and many other complaints flooded South Korean media outlets.

Serious disputes between Seoul and Washington about how to deal with a North Korea predisposed to dangerous risk-taking—in 2011, Pyongyang again tested Taepodong 2 missiles, one of which landed within 20 miles of the Alaska coastline—broke more frequently into public view, with South Korean authorities, backed by strong public opinion, demanding less bellicosity from the Americans and room to allow their "Sunshine" policy to work, while American pundits publicly, and American policy makers privately, told the South Koreans to develop more backbone.[1]

By 2012, American public opinion, deluged with video footage of American flags burning and of American soldiers confined to their South Korean bases for safety, had

[1] The foregoing discussion draws heavily on Rajan Menon's *The End of Alliances* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially Chapter 5.

had enough. Only the year before, American troops had finally been extricated from the war in Iraq. That conflict ended in a barely disguised American retreat after suffering more than 5000 casualties over the better part of a decade without winning a resounding victory or, for that matter, even holding Iraq together. Successive Iraqi governments negated whatever meager political gains had been achieved by their predecessors, blaming the American "occupiers" either for too much interference in their affairs or not enough. Iran tested a small nuclear device in 2011, leading American public opinion to the stark conclusion that the United States had lost its bid to remake the Middle East in its democratic image; moreover, the people there couldn't seem to care less that American blood and treasure had been expended in vast amounts to secure their liberty. America was in no mood for further foreign adventures.

Evidence from South Korea of profound anti-Americanism from a putative ally for whom America had sacrificed even more than it had for Iraq over a much longer period was a was not something Americans were prepared to endure. Images of South Koreans burning American flags resonated with the neo-isolationist candidates, who had come to dominate both parties. A key foreign policy debate defining the 2012 presidential election campaign was whether or not to draw down some of America's far-flung commitments. The Iraq experience had seared a strong antipathy toward going where America was not wanted into the campaign rhetoric of most candidates, to the point where the competition seemed to be who could be more isolationist and shut down the most "unwanted" American facilities abroad. South Korea figured at the top of the list for most candidates. Evidence was trotted out to demonstrate that, in realty, South Korea did not need further American security assistance. After the inauguration of the new president in January 2013, one of her first acts of foreign policy was to serve notice that a drawdown of America's South Korean bases would begin immediately, to be phased over the next two years. And, indeed, by July 2015, all American combat troops had left South Korea.

Japan Transformed

For Tokyo, America's deteriorating relationship with South Korea was like the rerun of a bad old movie. Jimmy Carter had announced in the 1970s that he, too, intended to remove all troops from South Korea. This caused consternation in Japan before Carter reversed himself. Forty years later, the Americans were singing the same song. But this time, the Japanese were determined not to be taken by surprise.

Tokyo had closely monitored the deterioration of the U.S.-South Korea security relationship for nearly a decade. More than any other Asian actor, Japan understood that America's response to South Korea's growing assertiveness and independence would affect its own security planning dramatically. Any American withdrawal from South Korea, in Japanese eyes, would suggest that America's commitment to Asia generally was flagging, which would have paradigm shifting implications for Japan, America's chief Asian partner. In fact, as the crisis in South Korea gained momentum American diplomats had been telling the Japanese quietly not to worry, that the United States might indeed leave South Korea but that its commitment to Japan was steadfast. Japanese leaders listened politely, then discounted this insider information. Even if it were true, Japan's prime minister privately told his inner circle, Japan cannot behave as if America's commitment to Japan's security is a certainty. Japan will have to plan to fend for itself.

As early as 2010, the prime minister ordered a full net assessment of Japan's strategic position in light of the possibility that America might reduce or eliminate its commitment to South Korea specifically and to Asia generally. The scheduled two-year exercise involved Japan's brightest national defense and military strategists. Their job, as the prime minister described it, was to identify key challenges and opportunities facing Japan going forward in several imaginable alternative worlds that featured America withdrawing from South Korea specifically and reducing its commitment to Asia more generally. The team was instructed to analyze the character of the emerging competition, paying particular attention to the values, objectives and possible strategies of key

competitors. They were asked to assess long-term trends and asymmetries that might affect how Japan should compete in these worlds. They were instructed to conduct t a full capabilities assessment for both Japan and the competition, paying particular attention to what capabilities Japan will require to compete in a more complex security environment where American support might not be available. Finally, the net assessment team was instructed to create a series of scenarios, then test them with simulations and games to explore different "what if" situations.

The net assessment team worked diligently. We do not know all of its conclusions, but some general themes eventually surfaced. These included that the removal of American troops from South Korea is a trigger that could potentially set in motion a number of dynamics that will challenge Japan's security and even its survival. These dynamics included:

- China will control the entire mainland of Asia, leaving the problem of North-South integration in Korea to Beijing. South Korea's gradual slide into China's sphere of influence will be unstoppable.

- North Korea will be emboldened beyond all measure, with only the Chinese able to restrain it. Japan will likely have to respond alone to future provocations by the North Koreans, and it will probably be opposed by China and South Korea.

- The "Pacific Lake" will disappear, as you cannot have a lake with only one side; if America does decide to return to Asia, it will find that the Pacific is as much a barrier as a highway.

- Chinese pressure on the Russian Far East will increase.

- Japan will become more politically and militarily isolated, and it will be left largely friendless in its immediate region. It will have to forge useful military and security alliances elsewhere to correct this imbalance.

- The American nuclear umbrella may not be available to Japan, yet Japan will be faced directly by two nuclear weapons states, China and North Korea, and possibly South Korea. Japan must develop its own nuclear deterrent.

The conclusions of the Japanese net assessment transformed the national security and defense debate in Japan utterly. The activist Japan that emerged beginning with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe quickly became an assertive Japan. The three positions that had historically characterized the debate—Japan should disarm and commit itself to peace, Japan should take prudent defense measures but rely on the Americans to tip any balance in Japan's favor, and Japan should build up its arms to become a mighty nation again—gradually reduced to two, as the variant relying on American intervention became less credible. Option one, too, began to fade, as the Japanese came to understand that their nation was at risk that disarming would only deepen. Nationalists gained strength. With the far right of the political spectrum, they urged a rapid and comprehensive military buildup. By 2012, Article IX of Japan's constitution had been rescinded. Military procurements picked up speed, enhancing Japan's capabilities in the air, in space and on the sea. In 2014, the Diet passed a ground-breaking resolution to build a robust missile defense system to augment the earlier platforms developed jointly with the Americans.

Japan had been courting India since about 2006, mostly as a hedge against economically robust China. As the U.S.-South Korea relationship soured, this growing security connection took on new meaning. India's burgeoning navy was seen more often in the South China Sea after about 2011, usually for maneuvers with Japan's own powerful naval force. Taiwan also began to figure more prominently in Japan's strategic planning. Discussions between the Japanese Defense Agency and Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense about the emerging shape of the new Asian landscape and its security implications accelerated after 2010; Japanese and Taiwanese military units, especially naval and air forces, engaged in joint training operations; and, it was rumored but never proved, Taiwan began to receive Japanese assistance in developing a nuclear weapons capability. Japan also reached out to Vietnam, and by 2012 the two had developed a full security dialogue. They engaged more frequently in joint naval exercises, which often included the Indian navy, too.

Perhaps Japan's most aggressive move to surround itself with new partners and allies was aimed at Russia. Historians would later point out that this move might have been predicted. Korea had always been the object of a three-party strategic balancing act among China, Japan and Russia. In the absence of some balancing force—lately the United States—this unstable competition was certain to resume, and, like earlier, two of the competitors would seek to gang up on the third. Russia's support, Japanese strategists concluded, was essential. The American withdrawal from South Korea would almost certainly encourage China to increase pressure on the Russia Far East, where Chinese settlers had been making significant inroads for nearly two decades in what some Japanese strategists saw as a move to outflank Japan on the mainland. Russian energy flowed to Asia through this region, leaving Japan vulnerable to possible Chinese efforts to interrupt these vulnerable umbilicals for political reasons. In addition, with the U.S. gone from the peninsula, South Korea would almost certainly turn elsewhere for arms, logically to Russia. A strong Japan-Russia partnership would give the Japanese some leverage over these transactions. It would also improve Japan's chances of managing North Korea's nuclear ambitions and activities more effectively, confronting Seoul and Beijing, if it were inclined to resist, with a diplomatic dyad possessing considerable military power.

To these ends, Japan seized the initiative after 2012 to resolve residual political issues with Russia. By 2013, the largest of these, sovereignty over the northern islands, had been resolved. (See below)

After 2013 and the American declaration that they intended to remove troops from South Korea, the quiet discussion in Japan over whether it should become a nuclear weapons state transformed into a wider and more raucous public debate over when Japan should go nuclear. Japan's huge plutonium stockpiles eliminated one important hurdle. Most outside experts agreed that once it decided to go, Japan could be a nuclear weapons state in only a few months; others argued that the time was even shorter—perhaps a few weeks or days—as it had long been reported, but unconfirmed, that Japanese scientists had been working on the bomb since about 2010.

Thus Japan set about rebalancing a strategic equation that the American withdrawal from South Korea had disrupted. It would build its own military capabilities, engage new allies, and, as a final measure, become a nuclear weapons state.

China Confused

For those few remaining Chinese fluent in Marxism-Leninism, the American departure from South Korea came as a surprise, despite all of the suggestive buildup to departure, visible to everyone. The idea that the imperialist powers might actually walk away from a strategic position that so favored their interests was elusive to China's strategists. And, so, they tended to discount all the theatrics leading to 2015 as a family tiff that would eventually be patched up when the Americans agreed to pay the South Koreans' price, even if this meant backing off criticism of the North's nuclear activities or even embracing South Korea's "Sunshine Policy." "If you wait long enough," a sage old Chinese strategist told his subordinates, "some American leader will cut a deal to remain in South Korea forever."

Yet not everyone was surprised. Chinese strategy had for years focused on the historic inevitability of China directly or indirectly controlling the entire continent, and as America's rift with South Korea deepened, a number of Chinese strategists began to plan for the challenges and opportunities a rupture might create for them.

On the up-side, South Korea would now be fully within their sphere of influence and susceptible to whatever pressures China decided to apply. This was a mixed blessing, to be sure, because many South Koreans remained bellicose, even dismissive of China's might and culture. They would not be easily intimidated. On the other hand, China could now play its North Korea card more effectively. It was no longer necessary to restrain North Korea to avoid conflict with the Americans and Japanese. The Americans were departing, and the Japanese would be unlikely to take on North Korea if American support were in question or if Japan itself were not threatened directly. Played cleverly by China, North Korea would now become the instrument of Korean unification on

China's terms; alternatively, it could be manipulated to delay unification indefinitely. On this issue, the Chinese now felt they held all the cards.

Russia, too, looked like an opportunity for Chinese strategists. In the past two decades, Russia had supplied China's military with the majority of its high-tech weaponry, especially aircraft and UAVs. Russia will not wish to jeopardize its lucrative supply line to China, they reasoned, which will give us the leverage we need to craft some kind of agreement with them that will result in isolating Japan still further. Moreover, China should be able to gain some leverage over the kinds of weaponry Russia sells to South Korea. Under no circumstances must South Korea be allowed to become too strong. To the contrary, South Korea should be kept continuously on edge, Chinese strategists argued. Growls from North Korea would accomplish some of this; Japan possibly no longer restrained by the U.S. from more assertively confronting its many challenges from the South would increase the South Koreans anxiety. And after kicking the Americans out, South Korea could no longer count on the Americans to restrain the Japanese. South Korea's security dependency on China would grow, just as these strategists intended.

On the down-side, Japan remained a deep worry. Chinese intelligence reported persistently from as early as 2011 that Japan was taking the threat of an American withdrawal from South Korea seriously, and that they were beginning to plan for Japan's security without American troops on the Korean peninsula. They watched as Japan aggressively reinforced and expanded its military capabilities, especially at sea and in the air. The elimination of Article IX from Japan's constitution in 2012 and its decision to build a missile defense shield even beyond the effort started earlier in cooperation with the Americans were signs that Japan was preparing to go it alone, if necessary. Japanese ships were exercising deep in the South China Sea, and even west of the Strait of Malacca, where joint exercises with Indian and Vietnamese navies were a frequent occurrences.

This new Japan—militarily powerful, unhooked from American restraint, with Asia-wide and global security ambitions—was presented effectively to the Chinese public by their propagandists. Anti-Japanese sentiment rose sharply in China. America

receded in the popular angst as villain number one; Japan, never far from the top spot, assumed that position definitively.

Russia: Rich Menu of Strategic Options

Russia had coasted for several decades in Asia. Consumed with their own recovery, indeed survival, Russian leaders had largely ignored taking any paradigm-shifting decisions about its own position in Asia. Indeed, it hadn't had to. Asia was stable so long as the Americans were in South Korea and Japan, balancing the traditional China-Japan-Russia rivalry over the fate of the peninsula. Nothing could have suited Russia more, they reasoned. Without a disruptive eastern flank to defend, Russia had been free to conduct the kind of foreign policy it liked best: developing politico-military dependencies through arms sales. Over the two decades from the end of the Cold War, Russia had sold China a bewildering array of military platforms, including high performance fighter aircraft, AWACs capabilities, new high precision missiles for long range precision strikes, advanced submarine technologies, and a variety of other capabilities that had gone far toward transforming China's military into a serious rival of Japan in Asia.

Similarly, Russia's relations with South Korea had blossomed. The leaders of the two countries had exchanged visits in 2001 and 2004; trade increased dramatically throughout the first decade of the new century; and Russia punctuated its interest in South Korea with a significant arms deal, initially just short of U.S.$1 billion, that included Russian transport aircraft, trainer aircraft, hovercrafts, transport helicopters and refueling aircraft. In addition, Seoul expressed interest in purchasing Russia's S-300 anti-aircraft missile system and a license to produce the missiles in South Korea. Russia participated several competitions for major South Korean defense contracts, with only a modicum of success—the awards generally went to American contractors—but its foot was firmly within South Korea's defense door. Russian experts aided the South Koreans launch their first home-launched satellite in 2008, and a South Korean astronaut joined the International Space Station courtesy of a Soyuz flight during that same year.

The Russians watched the worsening of U.S.-South Korea relationship with mixed feelings. On one hand, a collapse of the relationship would almost certainly open South Korea's defense industry to Russian military products in a big way. Moreover, at least one line of strategic thinking in Moscow argued for helping to build South Korea militarily in the event of an American withdrawal from the peninsula, both to keep the North Koreans down and quiet, but more than this to present the Chinese with an unappetizing view of the meal they might be planning to digest. Under no circumstances, Russians concluded, should China be allowed to assume that South Korea was conveniently within their pocket. Russian military sales to China would continue, of course; it was too lucrative to consider curtailing that revenue stream for any reason. By pumping up South Korea's military, Russia could thus kill two birds with one stone: keep China uncertain about South Korea's real power—which could serve as a stimulus to Chinese military officials to buy more Russian technology—and replace the United States as South Korea's leading defense supplier.

One Russian think tank known for its particularly Machiavellian approach to strategy made two provocative recommendations to the Kremlin. First, it recommended that Moscow should simultaneously re-open its stagnant defense supply relationship with North Korea. A more robust North Korea, however unbalanced its leadership, would be a good prod to both China and South Korea to buy more Russian arms. Second, it recommended that quiet discussions be opened with Seoul about producing its own nuclear weapons. Seoul, the highly classified analysis argued, would eventually concede that it needs nuclear weapons to withstand the ardent embrace of a more aggressive China, and it would need a minimum nuclear deterrent against Japan, which, the analysts concluded, would certainly pursue its own nuclear deterrent if it became clear that the U.S. were leaving South Korea. The analysis pointed out that Moscow had done precisely this in the case of Iran, creating for the Iranian state a nascent nuclear weapons capability under the guise of supporting its nuclear energy requirements.

But for Russian strategists, all of these moves raised the long-standing Japan question and the perils to Russia of getting it wrong. Russia's need to balance China in Asia was acute, and it had thus far successfully played off Chinese and Japanese interests, in energy production and transport for example, against each other. Russia wanted both

countries to consume Russia's energy riches, and it wanted both to invest in Russia's energy infrastructure. On the other hand, it did not wish to encourage further Chinese immigration to Siberia and the Russian Far East, which had grown steadily over the last two decades. No one knew for certain just how many Chinese now occupied Russian lands along their long border, or how many Chinese were now employed by Russians directly in Russian industries and in agriculture from the Russian Far East to Central Asia. The Russians themselves estimated that, by 2012, the number could not be less than 5-7 million Chinese workers. An American demographer known for his acumen at being able to ferret out hard information from many sources, calculated that the number was closer to 7-10 million. This was the third rail of Russian politics. With its birth rates far below replacement, its mortality rates skyrocketing from alcohol-related health issues and accidents, its burgeoning HIV/AIDS epidemic punctuated by the onrush of other cohabiting illnesses like disease-resistant tuberculosis, Russia was in an accelerating death spiral. No Russian politician, however authoritarian or corrupt, could ignore the unwanted settling of Chinese on historic Russian lands, some of which China continued to insist were not Russian property at all but Chinese. An old Soviet-era joke that captured this seemingly genetic Russia fear was resuscitated and breathed of new life from Nizhnyi Novgorod to Khabarovsk:

> *Kosygin* (rushing into Brezhnev's office): First Secretary! The people are gathering in Red Square!
>
> *Brezhnev*: Please relax, Alexei. You know that it's the people's square. They are welcome to congregate there.
>
> *Kosygin* (10 minutes later): First Secretary! The people are sitting down in Red Square!
>
> *Brezhnev*: Not to worry, Alexei. It's the people's square and the Party wants them to enjoy it, as it is the center of our civilization.
>
> *Kosygin* (15 minutes later): First Secretary! The people have begun to eat their lunches in Red Square!
>
> *Brezhnev*: Alexei, my colleague. As I told you, it's the people's square. They are invited to sit in it and, if they choose, to eat their lunches there.

Kosygin: With chopsticks?

One of the keys to keeping chopstick-wielding Chinese out of Russia's sacred territory, the Russian leadership understood intuitively, was to allow Japanese investment to flow into the de-populated Russian East, which would lure Russians back to the region to seize lucrative jobs; bring a new generation of Japanese technology to bear on Russia's chronic industrial problems; and generally attempt to create a barrier to further Chinese encroachment. Beyond this immediate aim, Russians worried about an economically robust China that might begin to move aggressively to expand its reach and authority not only in the Russian Far East but in Central Asia, where significant Chinese economic (and political) activity had been expanding for more than a decade. At the same time they worried about a fragile China whose economic miracle proved hollow. The latter China in many ways concerned Russians more, because that China would likely be motivated by extreme nationalism and a sense of national grievance. A fragile China would be unpredictable, predisposed to take chances, and susceptible to strategic miscalculations. It would also be plentifully stocked with Russian arms. If America proved reluctant to confront this China, as its withdrawal from South Korea suggested it might be, Japan was the only other game in town.

Russia found Japan a willing partner in putting many of the divisions of the past to rest. After 2011, Russian and Japanese defense planners began holding quiet meetings away from public scrutiny. With unusual candor, both shared their concerns that the impending American withdrawal from South Korea would change Asia's dynamics in ways that could threaten both Russia and Japan. For their part, the Russians quickly dismissed Japanese complaints that by arming both China and South Korea Russia was empowering, and perhaps emboldening, both of Japan's main adversaries. (The Japanese did not know, and the Russians did not tell them, about the recommendation that Russia also arm North Korea; Moscow had yet to take action on this measure.) Russia was not prepared to compromise by scaling back to either customer; indeed, the dynamic they hoped to stimulate would produce exactly the opposite result. But in a daring move that would find its way into the annals of arms deals, the Russians offered—much to the Japanese surprise—to provide Japan with a range of equally sophisticated military

technologies, including, it was rumored, formulae for defeating technologies Russia had already sold to China and Korea. By 2013, a long-term deal had been cut that included the transfer of significant military technologies from Russia to Japan, supply arrangements in the event of a crisis, and training for Japanese military personnel on Russian platforms. On the political side, the long-standing dispute over the four northern islands was settled on the basis of joint sovereignty, thus clearing the way for massive Japanese investment in Russia's East.

Russian leaders believed strongly that they had planned coherently and creatively for the opportunities and challenges that a pullout of American troops from Korea would create. In the end, they concluded that by empowering the key actors they could create dynamic tensions that would keep all the Asians preoccupied with each other, while Russia's coincidentally enriching Russia. In the event that this arrangement broke down, the Russians calculated that they had hedged effectively with Japan to protect their investments, the Russian homeland, and Russia's strategic position in Asia.

Taiwan at the Tipping Point

From Taipei, leaders observed the meltdown of U.S.-South Korea relations with a growing sense of doom. Their second-worst nightmare was about to be realized: an American backtracking from Asia caused by strategic fatigue. This realization brought the first-worst nightmare into focus: China employing its dominance of the entire Asian continent, advertised by its new-found confidence, to bring Taiwan back into China's fold by force. Never creative scenario builders, this future appeared to most to be inevitable; the question was: When?

Like most Asians, no one on Taiwan believed that the Americans were going to cut and run, simply vacating their decades-long security responsibilities. Not even a tired American government and world-weary people would continence such a move, nor would they want one, or at least that is what they were telling themselves. Still, this was uncharted territory for a small island accustomed to hearing American leaders proclaim that the defense of Taiwan as a union card of American politics. You could not be against

it and hope to win elections. Of course, American leaders were still saying this, but momentum for a withdrawal of American troops from South Korea was gathering. And who could believe them, seriously? Their professions of faith were accompanied by lots of fervent rhetoric about bringing American troops home from harm's way, concentrating America's resources on solving the problems of America, and, in the less decorous parts of the American electorate, "lettin' all them violent folks out there just kill each other by the bushel."

In reality, Taiwan had few options. Most Taiwanese understood that the American commitment to their security would eventually run its limits, especially as the U.S.-China economic relationship matured. Moreover, lots of Taiwanese were of the mind that joining China was inevitable; hundreds of thousands of businessmen had made their fortunes on the mainland, many returning with Chinese brides and families, which only increased the political pressure to bridge the gap between the island and the mainland. So, at the very least, Taiwan entered a period of unusual reflection about the future.

Not all Taiwanese were inclined to roll over to the Chinese victory in South Korea, or so it was assumed to be by most Taiwanese. The few options they possessed they now began to explore and exercise, if only to build prudent hedging strategies that might be adjusted or negotiated away at a later date.

Within the years 2012-2015, Taiwan's purchases of advanced weaponry from the United States increased markedly. In addition, they sought out other suppliers—
Russia was ready and willing to step in—who could sell them lethal platforms like high precision missiles, quiet submarines and other platforms for shallow water operations, and robust missile defense. The thinking was: If the Chinese are coming, they should know that it won't be an easy passage, despite the short distances.

Their second initiative, to build other alliances, was of necessity limited because most of those they might seek to marry were self-constrained by their fear of China. But two did reach out to Taiwan: Vietnam, quietly; and Japan, more publicly. Japan, in particular, was viewed by many Taiwanese with a strong sense of kinship dating from the colonial period. Japanese was still widely spoken in Taiwan, and Taiwan-Japan trade was well developed and growing. For their part, the Japanese understood that if the

United States renounced, or simply ignored, Taiwan when the chips were down, its commitment to Japan would have to be severely discounted. Therefore, Taiwan's overtures for a closer security relationship, perhaps even a full security alliance, with Japan were treated seriously in Tokyo. Both sides understood that the dynamics created by the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea changed the strategic calculus for both of them. By 2015, such an alliance, including clauses that would seem to require Japan to come to Taiwan's defense in the event of attack, were negotiated and ready to sign.

No one ever knew for certain where Taiwan received assistance in building a nuclear device, but by 2014 intelligence services in many countries reported their suspicions that Taiwan indeed had nuclear potential, if not a deliverable weapon. Attention focused on both Russia and Japan, both of which possessed considerable quantities of weapons grade plutonium. A Taiwanese intelligence agent defecting to the mainland reported to his Chinese handlers that Taiwan had had the technological capability to build a bomb for many years, but the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea was the trigger that propelled theory into practice. He brought with him internal documents that purported to show that Taiwanese leaders as far back as the 1990s had determined that, try as they might to secure Taiwan through alliances and their own military forces, in the final analysis only the threat of nuclear retaliation was likely to deter China, or, better still, convince other powers to defend Taiwan's freedom against an encroaching China.

India: Hedging in All Directions

India was rising. From the early days of the new century, its economic power grew geometrically, its technological prowess expanded, and its leadership put India on course to be an Asian power and global presence. Global investors who had earlier preferred to put their money in China, moved slowly, then more quickly toward 2010 to make India a favored investment destination. With nearly a decade of sustained annual growth of more than 7 percent, India was flush with investment and cash.

Military modernization was near the top of India's list of investment priorities. Its newly-formed partnership with the United States brought it a number of benefits in this regard, including a number of high-end military platforms, systems integration and information technologies of all kinds that speeded transformation. The Indian leadership placed special emphasis on building its already impressive navy. By 2012, India had the second largest carrier fleet in the world (after the United States), and power projection capabilities through a robust naval air arm. Its surface ships dominated the Indian Ocean, were frequent visitors to the South China Sea and North Asia, and had established a strong position in and around the Persian Gulf consonant with India's energy security needs. In 2008, India surprised many analysts by selecting Russia instead of an American contractor to produce its new generation of fighter aircraft. Indian officials explained the decision as building on an existing base—most of India's main platforms were of Russian origin—rather than starting fresh with an entirely different technological base altogether. Outside analysts put a different spin on this development. India, they argued, made a political decision, not a technological one. Most of the India's top military leaders would have preferred American platforms to Russian ones, but the government feared that the American penchant for sanctions might eventually target India for some breach of security etiquette, for example for testing another nuclear device. After all, these analysts pointed out, America was quick to sanction even their ally Pakistan, denying it for many years F-16s that the Pakistan government had already paid for. India was not going to enter this trap.

India's partnership with the United States nonetheless moved forward hesitantly, despite considerable doubt and anxiety on both sides, but particularly among Indians who were not prepared to acknowledge that America would be a reliable long-term partner. As the U.S.-South Korea alliance began to unravel, these Indians were confirmed in the view that, while American assistance is useful and convenient, India needed a broader hedging strategy to ensure its security.

To this end, India as early as 2006 engaged in serious security discussions with the Japanese. By 2012, these discussions had produced a strong security partnership that featured joint military exercises at sea, in the air, and on land (usually under the guise of "international policing operations). Japanese investment in India soared generally,

eventually outpacing investment from any other country. This partnership appeared to have such cohesion and promise that China launched a major charm offensive at India—punctuated by heightened Chinese investment in India. India responded to these overtures cautiously but warmly. Indian leaders repeatedly warned everyone, especially the Americans that India had no intention of being the sharp end of the stick others might choose to poke in China's eyes.

India also pushed an aggressive Look East policy. By 2013, it had consummated security cooperation agreements with Indonesia (2007), Singapore (2009), Australia (2010), Vietnam (2011), and Myanmar (2013). India also engaged Taiwan, though it refused to be lured into signing any official agreements with the Taiwanese so as not to appear overly provocative of China. Myanmar was a surprise, as it was assumed by most observers to have been lost to China. Slow steady Indian political pressure and a significant military aid package to Myanmar eventually yielded an agreement. Standing at a distance, many analysts would later remark that India had in effect created the outlines of a new security architecture for Asia that, so long as American presence was sustained, was capable of managing the rise of China.

Only a few years earlier, most analysts would have argued that any deterioration of the U.S.-South Korea alliance would mean little for India, but now times had changed. The general view across Asia was that the American withdrawal from the peninsula could—might—be the harbinger of greater American strategic fatigue. Asians could look to other obvious signals that America might be easing away from Asia, for example at the downsizing of the U.S. Navy. Asians tend to think of their security challenges through maritime prisms. In this sense, the constant U.S. naval presence was comforting and, for some, liberating. By the beginning of the century's second decade, visits by American naval ships had become fewer and joint operations with other Asian nations less frequent. Every ministry of defense could do the numbers. The American fleet, once nearly 500 ships, was now well below 400, and the likelihood that it would descend below even 300 loomed. To offset America's reduced presence on Asia's seas, everyone looked to Japan and India to make up the deficit lest China's growing navy dominate the region.

In the atmosphere created by the U.S.-South Korea imbroglio, everyone courted India. India, for its part, hedged in all directions.

The United States: Branching Out

America, like all other actors in Asia, was not taken by surprise when its long-standing security relationship with South Korea was finally pronounced dead. While no one in official Washington publicly rejoiced in the dismemberment of an alliance that had served both sides well, strategists and security experts in the capital's think tanks quickly pointed to the upside of the dissolution: American forces that had been tied down in South Korea and restricted from engagement because of local sensitivities and alliance "understandings" were now freed to redeploy where they could actually be used.

To many, in fact, having more troops available for possible contingencies in an Asia that was changing rapidly appealed to many as an idea whose time had come. America was stretched thin in Asia, as it was. By 2012, its navy had been whittled down to just a few more than 300 ships, a particularly bad omen in maritime Asia where the potential battle space seemed to be expanding dramatically with the arrival of the beginnings of China's blue water navy as a serious competitor. Beyond the presence of China's new capital ships and a significant number of quieter submarines, its general anti-access capabilities—long range strike weapons, sophisticated mining operations, and other threats—had improved substantially over just half a decade before. By 2013, the prevailing wisdom among U.S. naval experts was that China now possessed the capability to threaten the U.S. fleet at considerable distance from the Asian mainland if it chose to do so.

Downsizing the fleet and the rising military competition from China had driven U.S. defense and military strategy in Asia for some time, which stimulated the Americans to seek new partners with credible and expanding military presence in the Asian theater. As the U.S.-ROK alliance began to come unglued, this search accelerated and intensified. The new Indo-U.S. relationship became a high priority, and it included the transfer or sale to India of significant military assets, especially naval assets like "long-legged" Spruance class destroyers and P3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft. At the same time, the U.S. sought to alleviate Japanese concerns that America's departure from Korea might mean a more relaxed attitude toward the security of Japan. To this end, it assisted in

significantly upgrading Japan's C4ISR infrastructure and in building up Japan's air force, among improvements that were acknowledged publicly.

This pattern of American activity in the years from 2010-2015 also brought old and new partners into the American fold. In 2012, the government of the Philippines invited the U.S. Navy to return to Subic Bay, the result of astute American diplomacy to overturn the several decades of bad feelings generated by America's forced departure from the islands, an exodus that many Filipinos and most Americans never wanted in the first place. In 2014, the U.S. reached a similar agreement with the government of Vietnam for the use of Cam Rahn Bay, which would serve as a convenient fueling and refitting port for American Navy ships on long deployments. Indonesia, too, slowly became part of the extended Southeast Asian naval network, providing port facilities and, it was rumored, covert basing for special operations forces aimed at regional terrorists and pirates. Likewise, the U.S.-Singapore and the U.S.-Australia relationships were upgraded and expanded.

As the ROK-U.S. alliance neared its nadir, most Asian states, fearful of an economically robust and more assertive China, had made it clear to the United States through quiet interventions, new military relationships, and concessions on facilities like ports and harbors that they wanted the United States to remain powerful and, more important, visible throughout the maritime arch from Japan to India. As a wizened strategist from Canberra confided to the visiting U.S. Secretary of Defense, without a strong U.S. presence in this region, all states will be forced to accommodate China in ways they would prefer not to. American presence, he noted, offered them the option of making choices that they otherwise not have in its absence.

By 2015, the unmistakable outlines of a new security architecture for Asia could be seen along China's maritime periphery. Pushed out of South Korea, the center of gravity for American security operations in Asia moved south and west. A powerful Japan anchored at one end; India at the other. South Korea was nowhere to be found in this new architecture. Indeed, the consensus around Asia was that South Korea had wittingly or unwittingly cast its lot with China and, therefore, was part of the challenge to be organized against. How else could one understand their eagerness to send the Americans packing?

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Reflections

Analyzing scenarios is one technique for trying to understand the increasing complexity of strategic environments. Scenarios are nothing more than invented in-depth stories that are intended to suggest how the 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. I wish to emphasize that scenarios are stories: stories about what the futures could look like and what might happen along plausible pathways to those futures. While the trends and forces that go into building scenarios are carefully researched, a scenario is not a research paper. Rather, it is a work of the imagination. As such, scenarios are, first, tools for helping us bring order to the way we think about what might happen in future security environments; and, second, a provocative way to see the possible dynamics of future security environments that you may not see 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. Scenarios help us to explore the question "what if this or that happened?" question in a variety of different ways, with the objective of uncovering as many potential answers as possible. This is important, which allows planners to build hedging strategies to deal with many different kinds of potential problems. We may choose to discount some of these futures and the scenarios that describe them, but we will not be ignorant of them. We hope never to have to say: "I never thought about that."

This scenario—the breakdown and dissolution of the U.S.-South Korea security relationship—like all scenarios, is not intended to predict the future. Rather, it seeks to tell a plausible story in a way that might alert us to how different forces and influences might produce dynamics that we are not thinking about. Some parts of this scenario might strike readers as more plausible than others. I would argue that all parts of this scenario are possible, most are plausible accounts of what might happen, and some of the things I describe are, indeed, probable.

What does this parable of the deteriorating U.S.-South Korea security alliance suggest for how we should think about the Asian security environment that could emerge?

First, how the United States behaves will determine a great deal of what happens next. If it is successful in convincing other actors that it is leaving only South Korea, but that it will remain a vital military presence throughout Asia regardless, it might dissuade those actors from pursuing strategies that discount the possibility of reduced or continued American presence. It might attempt to do this in a number of ways, for example by creating new security agreements that have specific trip wires, expanding its presence elsewhere in Asia, or perhaps by helping other actors build military capabilities. This will require the United States to have a more comprehensive and coherent strategy for Asia. Possible, yes. But it is a good bet that not everyone will believe it, and that their strategies will reflect instincts to hedge.

Second, the scenario suggests that the deterioration and dissolution of the U.S.-South Korea military relationship is a powerful trigger for many other dynamics. Part of its impact will be the consequence of how other actors believe the United States will or will not behave, and how they must adjust or compensate to ensure their own security. Another part of its impact is in the real way the American drawdown changes each actors' threat calculus; with the Americans out of South Korea most actors' objectives change. The scenario illustrates how this situation is made infinitely more complex because each actor is watching all the others, ascribing objectives and strategies to them. Their calculations may or may not be correct, of course. The American withdrawal changes a situation in which all or most of the strategic variables are known and understood—a kind of strategic stasis—into one that has an unprecedented number moving parts, more actors in the game, and enhanced military capabilities that can now be harnessed to strategies that American presence had checkmated or muted.

Third, the strategic and security landscape begins to change long before American troops actually depart from South Korea because everyone sees it coming. Indeed, by the time troops depart, most actors have designed strategies that anticipate the consequences of American withdrawal. This scenario is not a one-time event; rather, it is a long process with many different timelines and expectations.

Fourth, incentives to "go nuclear" in this scenarios are extremely powerful. Japan is likely to be the trigger; Taiwan will likely move in this direction; even South Korea will find the strategic logic of becoming a nuclear weapons state hard to resist. Thus, the American withdrawal from South Korea shows great promise as a trigger that will set off a wave of proliferation, for if Japan goes nuclear, Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia, perhaps others, are unlikely to be far behind.

Fifth, alliances and relationships are shifting rapidly in this world, creating strange bedfellows, perhaps for only tactical advantage, issue-based, and of short duration. This strategic dance will accelerate and intensify as the breakdown of the ROK-U.S. alliance becomes evident. It is hard to imagine that South Korea will attempt to go it alone in this world; to the contrary, its objectives will have to be adjusted to reflect the realities of the new partnerships occurring around them.

Sixth, in the absence of the alliance—or even the threat of its dissolution—a number of other actors rapidly acquire incentives to stimulate the ROK's sense of threat from North Korea. South Korea's preoccupation with the North produces more political leverage to outsiders than might otherwise be the case.

Seventh, the Japan that eventually emerges from this process—more nationalistic, assertive, well armed and nuclear—may not be the Japan other Asians wish to see. For the last few decades, Japan has tempered its historical persona among Asians who used to fear it first and foremost. Japan, it was often said, had become a "normal nation." Do the dynamics associated with a breakdown of the U.S.-South Korea security alliance encourage the evolution of a Japan that is again "abnormal"?

Eighth, Russia emerges from the scenario as strategically flexible and with many options, lots of room to maneuver, and able to play all sides with equal facility. How it plays its hand will have consequences for nearly all the other actors.

Ninth, the dissolution of the U.S.-South Korea alliance will force India to make some important strategic choices. It will be difficult for India to hedge on all fronts, especially between Japan and China. And its decisions will have a powerful effect on other parts of what has become a much larger chessboard.

Finally, the scenario describes a changing strategic landscape on which the possibility of misjudgments and miscalculations raises dramatically and risk taking has

greater attractions. If the United States and South Korea ever reach this impasse, Asia will become a more dangerous place to the detriment of just about everyone.