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## **Securing South Korea** *A Strategic Alliance for the 21st Century*

By Abraham M. Denmark and Zachary M. Hosford



Center for a  
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Security

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### Cover Image

U.S. Navy F/A-18s are seen on the flight deck of the Nimitz-class USS George Washington during the joint military exercises between the U.S. and South Korea in South Korea's East Sea on July 26, 2010.

(LEE JIN-MAN/Reuters)

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# SECURING SOUTH KOREA A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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## KEY OBSERVATIONS

- U.S. policymakers should reassure South Korea of the U.S. commitment to its defense while candidly discussing constraints on American power and the need for the Republic of Korea (ROK) to contribute more to its own defense.
- For the foreseeable future, the ROK military must focus on the many challenges presented by North Korea.
- In part to gain the experience, skills and capabilities necessary to respond to a North Korean collapse, South Korea's military should expand its participation in international peacekeeping, stabilization and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations.
- The United States and South Korea should make the management of China's rise a fundamental element of the alliance. While the U.S.-ROK alliance should be a vehicle to engage China, it should also sustain a strategic hedge against potential Chinese coercion or aggression.
- South Korea should pursue an adaptive force structure – within its ground, air, naval and C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) forces – that can effectively respond to a variety of contingencies, ranging from an attack by North Korea to its collapse.
- The U.S.-ROK alliance should expand engagement with Japan to address the challenges posed by North Korea and China.

## SECURING SOUTH KOREA A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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### Introduction

Sitting on the frontline of Asia's rapidly shifting security and economic environment, South Korea, officially known as the Republic of Korea (ROK), faces some of the world's most difficult security challenges. The U.S.-ROK Mutual Defense Treaty, signed 57 years ago, is the cornerstone of the alliance between the United States and South Korea and has ensured security for South Korea by deterring a major North Korean attack.

But growing economic constraints on the projection of American power, coupled with a desire by U.S. policymakers to pursue a more active posture in response to rising threats throughout the region, requires America's regional allies to contribute more to preserving the region's stability and prosperity. South Korea must invest more in building an adaptive military force structure that can respond effectively to a wide range of threats posed by North Korea while the United States continues to play a significant supporting role. Simultaneously, the U.S.-ROK alliance must be part of a broader effort to manage the peaceful rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) by encouraging the constructive use of Chinese power, while also remaining poised to deter and defend against potential Chinese coercion and aggression.

For the past several years, the U.S. military's scheduled transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) to South Korean forces has occupied much of Washington and Seoul's attention. The transfer would place South Korean military leaders in command of South Korean troops during wartime, with the U.S. and South Korean militaries linked by liaison officers and coordination centers. The decision to delay the transition from April 2012 to December 2015, which Seoul requested in reaction to North Korea's continued belligerence and concern about its own readiness to assume command, presents an opportunity for the alliance to prepare itself to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Indeed, the United States and South Korea are



already undertaking several initiatives to prepare for the transfer at the tactical and operations levels under the rubric “Strategic Alliance 2015.”

Nonetheless, a strategic discussion of the U.S.-ROK alliance remains necessary. This report will discuss America’s support for a strong South Korea, identifying both American interests in the region and the ROK’s strategic challenges. It will then present an overview of the threats facing the U.S.-ROK alliance and conclude with specific recommendations regarding the military capabilities necessary to confront those threats.

## Future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance

Relations between the United States and South Korea are both deep and positive. South Korea is America’s seventh-largest trading partner (just ahead of France), and the personal relationship between Presidents Lee and Obama is reportedly one of the strongest in the region.<sup>1</sup> The United States and South Korea cooperate closely with one another on the international stage, and Seoul’s recent hosting of the G-20 conference indicates that South Korea is playing a more prominent role in international politics.





U.S. Army Col. Kurt Taylor, left, briefs Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, center, and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, right, at the truce village of Panmunjom, in a demilitarized zone (DMZ) north of Seoul on July 21, 2010, as a North Korean soldier watches through the window. The DMZ has separated North and South Korea since the Korean War.

(CHERIE CULLEN/Department of Defense)

The heart of U.S.-ROK relations since the Korean War has been a robust military alliance that has long played an important role in America's strategic approach to East Asia. Like all alliances, this alliance should be viewed in the context of both interests and constraints. America's interests in East Asia and South Korea are significant, but so are the challenges the United States will face in the coming years. Ultimately, the United States will turn to its allies and partners, especially South Korea, to play a larger role providing regional security.

#### AMERICAN INTERESTS IN EAST ASIA

The United States, with its extensive trade and political relationships throughout East Asia, has an enduring interest in the region's stability. Built in the aftermath of World War II, America's network of alliances in East Asia has been the bulwark supporting peace and prosperity in the region. These alliances, and their supporting basing structure, have enabled the U.S. military's unrivaled access and capability in the region – a presence that assures allies, deters conflict and sustains the

openness of the global commons. Regional stability and the protection of common sea lanes have enabled the development of the world's second, third and twelfth-largest economies – China, Japan and South Korea, respectively – all of which produce, import and export a wide range of goods.

Yet threats to the region's stability and prosperity remain. North Korea, officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), continues to spurn the region's peaceful economic development and rapid modernization. It imperils the region with a large conventional military, an apparently limited but nonetheless threatening inventory of nuclear devices, and the potential for catastrophic political collapse. Separated from the North since the Korean War, South Korea is directly threatened by the DPRK's belligerence.

The region's most powerful country, China, also presents potential strategic challenges to regional stability. After decades of robust modernization, China's military is a force of overwhelming size and quickly expanding capability. This military modernization, combined with persistent ambiguity about China's long-term intentions as well as statements and actions that many fear could challenge long-respected territorial boundaries and international norms such as freedom of sea navigation, has raised concerns throughout East Asia about the impact of a stronger and more assertive China.<sup>2</sup>

Given South Korea's geographic location, economic strength and cultural and historical ties to North Korea, many U.S. policymakers are looking to the U.S.-ROK alliance as a linchpin of the region's future stability and prosperity. This focus on the ROK is especially significant given recent political turmoil in Japan and an extended dispute over a U.S. military base there. A stronger South Korea capable of playing a greater role in its own defense will be necessary, especially in light of emerging constraints on the exercise of American military power.

### AMERICA'S CONSTRAINTS

For the foreseeable future, the United States will face several constraints on the exercise of American military power that will directly affect the U.S.-ROK alliance.<sup>3</sup> Strategists in Washington and Seoul should recognize these constraints, and adjust the alliance to reflect this new reality.

Persistent economic hardships stemming from the 2008 financial crisis, and a debt-to-Gross Domestic Product (GDP) ratio that is projected to exceed the post-World War II record of 109 percent as early as 2020, may constrain America's ability to project and sustain military power.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, the Obama administration's 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy linked America's economic strength to its geopolitical power; it is also why the United States Joint Forces Command's 2010 Joint Operating Environment report identified the nation's growing debt problem as the major threat to U.S. national security.<sup>5</sup>

American public sentiment regarding overseas commitments – in part driven by domestic economic constraints – will also influence how the United States deploys its military resources. After nine years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American people are growing tired of foreign entanglements. According to public opinion polls, support for the ongoing wars is declining and Americans increasingly believe that other issues are significantly more important than foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> According to a 2010 survey of American opinion by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 91 percent of Americans think it is more important for the United States to fix problems at home rather than address challenges abroad, and 71 percent think the United States should do its share to solve international problems together with other countries.<sup>7</sup> This generally comports with Korea-specific elements of the survey, in which 56 percent of Americans said they opposed the use of U.S. troops if North Korea invaded the South, but 61 percent favored

### Security and South Korea's Domestic Politics

The internal dynamics of host nations always affect alliances, and the U.S.-ROK alliance is no exception. In particular, changes inside South Korea over the past several years have shaped the U.S.-ROK alliance by influencing policy towards North Korea.

From 1998 to 2008, the progressive governments of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008) pursued a policy of reconciliation with North Korea. This approach was based on a populist strain of South Korean politics which identified the United States as one of the causes of North Korea's belligerence. These governments therefore sought to distance South Korea slightly from the United States, including reducing the number of American troops stationed on the peninsula and transferring wartime OPCON to the South Korean military. The progressive political movement during this time also contributed to occasional outbreaks of anti-American sentiment, which often manifested themselves in the form of protests over issues ranging from crimes committed by American military personnel stationed in South Korea to the importing of American beef. When such anti-American sentiment erupts, security policies of the alliance can easily be derailed.

The election of the conservative Lee Myung-bak government in 2007 brought a more conservative approach to foreign and national security policy. Fundamental to this approach has been a concerted effort on the part of South Korean President Lee to build a productive relationship with President Obama and strengthen America's leading role in the alliance – primarily by delaying the transfer of wartime OPCON. Yet President Lee cannot ignore a significant percentage of the voting population that wishes to see a positive relationship with the DPRK and has mixed feelings about the U.S. military presence. Going forward, American strategists should keep in mind the current government's political restrictions as well as the likelihood of another progressive government in Seoul.

the use of U.S. troops if they were part of a U.N.-sponsored effort to reverse North Korean aggression.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the U.S. military's current focus on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in addition to the many other security problems the U.S. military may face in the coming years, may weaken its ability to focus on the Korean peninsula. The U.S. Department of Defense's Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) identified a wide variety of challenges for the future of the U.S. military, including counterterrorism, stabilizing fragile states, preventing human suffering due to natural disaster, defeating aggression by adversaries armed with advanced anti-access capabilities, protecting the global commons and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, population-centric counterinsurgency operations such as those being employed by the United States in Afghanistan require large numbers of troops, and the all-volunteer U.S. military force has been, at times, hard pressed to meet deployment requirements.<sup>10</sup> The scale and scope of these challenges will strain the U.S. military's capacity, leading to American calls for allies and partners to play a greater role in ensuring stability.<sup>11</sup>

America's strategic demands directly affect the U.S.-ROK alliance. For several years, American strategists have examined options to deploy American troops stationed in South Korea to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. South Korean leaders have largely opposed these deployments, fearing reduced U.S. troop levels would diminish America's commitment to the defense of the ROK and lead to its eventual abandonment by the United States.

**U.S. policymakers should reassure South Korea of the U.S. commitment to its defense while candidly discussing existing constraints on American power and the need for the ROK to contribute more to its own defense. Fundamentally,**

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*Fifty six percent of Americans said they opposed the use of U.S. troops if North Korea invaded the South, but 61 percent favored the use of U.S. troops if they were part of a U.N.-sponsored effort to reverse North Korean aggression.*

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America's commitment to South Korea is political, and driven by the shared interests, values and relationships that have bound the United States with South Korea since the Korean War. Military capabilities underwrite political commitments and are a physical demonstration of political resolve. Changes to military capabilities should change with shifting military and strategic realities, even when the political commitments they support are unchanging.

### **Adapting the Alliance to 21st-Century Challenges**

The U.S.-ROK alliance will face several significant challenges in the coming years. North Korea continues to be South Korea's most direct and imminent threat because of its large military, its belligerent history and the fragility of its ruling regime. China looms as a longer-term challenge, due to its rapidly expanding military capabilities and its burgeoning economic and political significance to South Korea. The United States and the ROK share an interest in sustaining regional and international stability beyond the Korean peninsula, including sustaining the openness of the global commons – the high seas, air, space and cyber domains that no state controls yet upon which all states depend.<sup>12</sup>

Given the complex range of potential threats and limited national resources, the United States and South Korea must prioritize objectives and agree upon a division of alliance responsibilities. The defense establishments of both nations are already examining essential operational and tactical changes to shift increased responsibility for the defense of South Korea to the ROK military, under the umbrella label Strategic Alliance 2015. Strategists in Seoul and Washington are busily identifying the “enduring capabilities” the United States is uniquely suited to provide and the “bridging capabilities” the United States will provide until the ROK military is ready to take over specific tasks. Planners and strategists must evaluate which bridging capabilities are essential to OPCON transition and focus short-term acquisition and training plans to ensure these capabilities are in place by 2015. Ultimately, the capabilities these strategists identify as “enduring” and “bridging” should be tied to a shared understanding of each side’s primarily responsibilities in various contingencies.

#### NORTH KOREA

**For the foreseeable future, the ROK military must focus on the many challenges presented by North Korea.** Though far behind South Korea technologically, the sheer size of the Korean People’s Army (KPA) presents a significant threat. Other potential threats loom in the region, but North Korea surpasses all others in terms of having both the will and the capability to attack South Korea.

North Korea has significant conventional military capabilities that can threaten South Korea, including as many as 180,000 special forces troops, naval combatants, cyber warfare, ballistic missiles, chemical and perhaps biological weapons, nuclear devices and a massive array of artillery capable of quickly devastating civilian population centers with little to no warning.<sup>13</sup> Recent revelations about North Korea’s apparent advances in enriching uranium also suggest that its nuclear capabilities could expand in the years ahead.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, North Korea has the ability to threaten the ROK with unconventional attacks such as the destruction of up-river dams to cause severe flooding in the South.<sup>15</sup>

North Korea has already displayed the will to use force against South Korea. In November 2010, North Korea struck the South’s Yeonpyeong Island, killing two civilians and two ROK Marines. Eight months earlier, in March 2010, the South Korean naval ship *Cheonan* was struck by a torpedo while it was operating in the Yellow Sea on the ROK side of the disputed “Northern Limit Line,” the de facto boundary dividing South and North Korean waters. The corvette broke in two and sank in less than five minutes, killing 46 South Korean sailors. A subsequent investigation conducted by South Korean, American, British, Australian and Swedish experts attributed the sinking to a North Korean mini-submarine – an accusation North Korea has repeatedly denied despite overwhelming evidence.<sup>16</sup>

The sinking of the *Cheonan* seized the attention of South Korea’s strategic defense community. For decades, most military analysts focused either on North Korea’s nuclear program or its large but obsolescent military ground forces. By contrast, North Korea’s navy – particularly its submarine forces – was an underappreciated threat.<sup>17</sup>

North Korea threatens the South not just with its military strength but also with its weakness. The prospect of regime collapse in North Korea poses a significant challenge to South Korea and to East Asia as a whole. Though collapse has been wrongly predicted for many years, numerous North Korea-watchers see the regime in Pyongyang as increasingly brittle.<sup>18</sup> With Kim Jong-il reportedly suffering from a wide variety of serious ailments and attempting to establish his son Kim Jong-un (thought to be about 26 years old) as successor, many see the coming months and years as a potential breaking point for North Korea’s ruling regime.<sup>19</sup>





Officers assigned to the U.S. 7th Fleet command ship USS Blue Ridge examine the damage to the Republic of Korea navy corvette ROKS *Cheonan*. A non-contact homing torpedo exploded near the ship on March 26, 2010, sinking it, and resulting in the death of 46 ROK Navy sailors.

(PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS CYNTHIA GRIGGS/U.S. Navy)

A collapse of North Korea would have historic implications for the ROK, East Asia and the global community. Such a scenario would create numerous challenges, the most pressing being securing nuclear facilities and WMD; stabilizing and pacifying a North Korean population that is well armed and has for generations been inundated with violent xenophobic propaganda; and conducting a major humanitarian intervention to help feed, medicate, and rebuild a society of more than 22 million that has faced poverty and near-starvation for decades.<sup>20</sup> Should the regime in North Korea collapse, an international response will almost certainly be necessary to secure, support and help develop a country as dilapidated as the DPRK. Some analysts have placed the cost estimates of reunification as high as 3.25 trillion dollars, not including the cultural and social costs of reintegrating the two societies – a truly multi-generational challenge that would make

Germany's reunification pale in comparison.<sup>21</sup> The United Nations, already on the peninsula under the aegis of the United Nations Command, will be well positioned to bring international legitimacy and coordination to an international response. At the same time, because of historical and cultural factors specific to the Korean peninsula, South Korea will necessarily be in the lead and much of that response will fall to the ROK military.

If North Korea were to collapse politically, South Korea's military would have to move quickly to stabilize the country, deploy forces to stop and prevent violence among factions and disperse humanitarian aid to a needy population. Many of these tasks would bear little resemblance to those required to defend the South from Northern attack. In many important ways, these potential operations would more closely resemble



peacekeeping, stabilization and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) operations than conventional warfare.

**In part to gain the experience, skills and capabilities necessary to respond to a North Korean collapse, South Korea's military should expand its participation in international peacekeeping, stabilization and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations.** The ROK has a long history of contributing to military and security operations far from its borders, and derives a great deal of international political influence because of its participation in these efforts. But the benefits of contributing to international operations extend beyond the political, helping to enhance the ROK military's capabilities for a top-priority contingency. These operations would give South Korean troops invaluable training and experience and expose them to environments and situations that are impossible to duplicate in exercises. By enhancing its participation in several types of multinational efforts, the ROK military can gain essential first-hand knowledge in a non-confrontational manner that will directly translate to operations in the event of a North Korean regime collapse.

Recently, South Korean military personnel participated in U.N. peacekeeping operations deployments, including in Angola, Lebanon, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Sudan, Darfur, Somalia, Western Sahara, Haiti, Timor Leste and Nepal. In the past, South Korea also sent international disaster response teams in the wake of natural disasters, including to Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake. Moreover, since March 2009 a South Korean destroyer has participated in multinational efforts to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden.<sup>22</sup>

However, to date South Korea's experience in these areas has been mostly small and has rarely involved facing the kind of threats that would build the kind of military expertise necessary for a North Korean



A South Korean service member with the Republic of Korea Provincial Reconstruction Team provides security while visiting Qal-Eh-Khoja village in the Parwan province of Afghanistan, August 31, 2010. The team was visiting the village to inspect a new school under construction.

(SPC. KRISTINA L. GUPTON/U.S. Army)

collapse contingency. For example, South Korean forces deployed to Iraq were based in the “relatively secure Kurdish area in northern Iraq and have not engaged in anti-insurgency combat,” according to a U.S. Congressional Research Service report.<sup>23</sup> As a result, those forces likely did not acquire much first-hand experience diffusing tense situations among armed groups and identifying and destroying improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Likewise, the ROK troops deployed to Afghanistan are tasked with guarding a 100-person provincial reconstruction team and are not involved in missions that other troops commonly perform.

The South Korean military will gain more useful experience if a greater number of forces, especially infantry and logistical support units, perform peacekeeping and extra-regional operations that would gradually expose them to the difficult realities of peacekeeping and stability operations.

By using international military contributions to build capabilities necessary to deal with a North Korean collapse, South Korea would also contribute to American efforts to sustain global stability and prosperity and thereby reinforce the importance of the alliance to the United States. Such contributions would directly address long-standing American calls for the alliance to “Go Global” to address international security challenges.<sup>24</sup>

## CHINA

**The United States and South Korea should make the management of China’s rise a fundamental element of the alliance.** China’s future path is uncertain – it may be positive and constructive, or negative and confrontational, but it will fundamentally alter East Asian power dynamics. Navigating the complex dynamics of China’s rise, and encouraging the responsible exercise of Chinese power while hedging against the possibility of Chinese aggression, is a top priority both for Seoul and Washington.

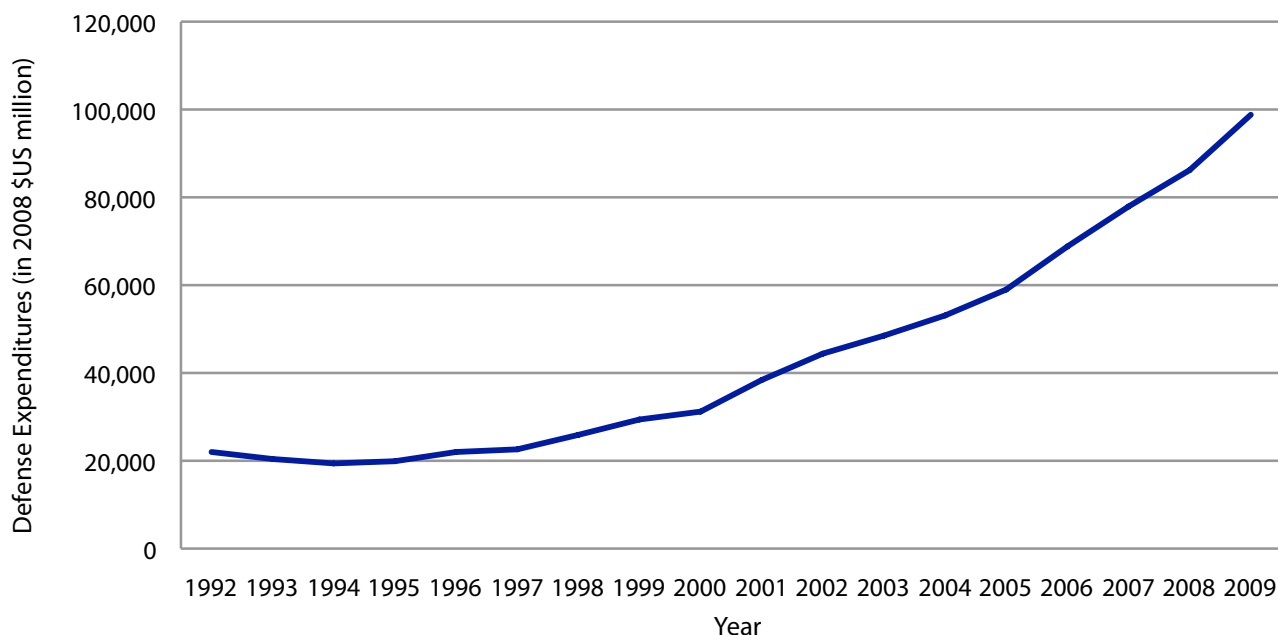
Today and for the foreseeable future, China’s relations with South Korea will likely be dominated by a robust trade relationship (China is South Korea’s leading trade partner) and by Seoul’s concerns about Beijing’s support of Pyongyang. China’s trade relationship with North Korea has expanded greatly in recent years, and the PRC reportedly plans to invest 10 billion dollars into the DPRK economy, which would represent 70 percent of North Korea’s annual GDP.<sup>25</sup> China’s close and long-standing relationship with the DPRK will make it a key player in influencing North Korea’s future path, especially during a time of succession in Pyongyang.

The immediate concern for Seoul is the possibility for China to play a major role in navigating North Korea’s collapse. Many Korea-watchers believe China could intervene in such a scenario, though the specific size and purpose of such an intervention remains unclear. Some Chinese experts have expressed an interest in securing North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD), while others have discussed establishing a buffer of unknown size between North Korea and China to prevent millions of refugees from crossing the border.<sup>26</sup> Given the historical realities of the Korean War and the renewed possibility of allied and Chinese forces operating in close proximity to one another in a dangerous and unpredictable environment, it is essential that both the United States and South Korea quietly engage China to discuss North Korea collapse contingencies.

**The U.S.-ROK alliance should be a vehicle to engage China, especially the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), and encourage its constructive role in the region and responsible behavior in the international system.** While the dynamics of ROK-China relations dictate that a significant element of this engagement should be economic and political, military engagement with China is also essential. Military engagement through the alliance, especially on non-threatening “soft” security issues, could make cooperation with China more acceptable to those concerned about the potential for Chinese aggression. For example, joint humanitarian assistance/disaster relief exercises can help build relations and establish mutual trust between China, the United States and South Korea.

Along with this positive engagement, however, Seoul and Washington must prepare for the possibility that China’s future path may not be so constructive. China has demonstrated an increasingly aggressive approach to foreign policy, making some in Seoul more willing to consider China as a potential security challenge.<sup>27</sup> Beijing’s willingness

FIGURE 1: CHINA'S DEFENSE EXPENDITURES



Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), <http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

to withhold exports of rare earth metals to achieve political objectives during a recent imbroglio with Japan over disputed islands shocked many in Seoul, and raised concerns that South Korea's close economic relationships with China could leave it vulnerable to coercion in a political dispute. Further, Beijing's decision not to send condolences to the families of the sailors who were killed in the sinking of the *Cheonan* and China's subsequent refusal to acknowledge Pyongyang's culpability in the attack significantly damaged South Korea's relations with China.

Ambiguity about China's long-term objectives, along with its multi-decade investment in its increasingly capable armed forces, suggests the potential for a more confrontational approach by Beijing in the coming years. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China's defense expenditures have increased more than four-fold since 1992 (see Figure 1).<sup>28</sup>

As China's military power rises and the region's security dynamics shift, the ability of the United States to unilaterally provide global public goods such as access to the global commons may be challenged.<sup>29</sup> Many of the military capabilities being developed by the PLA such as anti-ship ballistic missiles and anti-satellite weapons were designed to undermine the U.S. military's ability to safely access the Western Pacific during a time of crisis or conflict.<sup>30</sup> Most relevant for South Korea, China's military is fielding an increasingly capable array of ballistic and cruise missiles, fourth-generation fighters, advanced surface and sub-surface naval vessels and significant cyber warfare capabilities, all of which theoretically could be used to threaten or attack the ROK.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, China's anti-access military capabilities may significantly challenge the U.S. military's ability to come to South Korea's defense should there ever be a China-ROK conflict in the future.

**Over the long-term, the U.S.-ROK alliance should sustain a strategic hedge against the potential for Chinese coercion or aggression.** Due to the PLA's size and growing capability, the United States will necessarily play a leading role in sustaining the capacity to deter or defeat Chinese belligerence. South Korean assistance could be a significant asset to the U.S. military's ability to access the Western Pacific during times of crisis or conflict with China. South Korea's proximity to China makes it a potentially important area for logistical and C4ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) support to regional operations. Contributing to this hedge need not detract from the ROK's focus on North Korea; indeed, many of the assets required for North Korea contingencies could also be applied to China contingencies if needed.

Should a conflict between the United States and China break out, the U.S. military would need to operate throughout the region, and U.S. forces stationed on the Korean peninsula would likely be needed elsewhere. South Korea could greatly assist American military responses to potential Chinese aggression by allowing some United States Forces Korea (USFK) forces to contribute to operations beyond the Korean peninsula – an approach traditionally referred to as strategic flexibility. While Seoul and Washington agreed to strategic flexibility during the first Korea-U.S. Strategic Dialogue in January 2006, the concept itself remains highly controversial in South Korea. Seoul has historically been concerned that strategic flexibility would distract USFK from the North Korea challenge, and that the use of USFK troops in a China contingency could unwillingly pull South Korea into a conflict with China.

Yet as South Korea's leaders grow more comfortable in acknowledging the challenges posed by China's rise, they should likewise recognize that strategic flexibility improves the ability of both

Washington and Seoul to adjust to military threats beyond the peninsula. The topic should not be taboo within the alliance but rather discussed forthrightly.

## **JAPAN**

**The U.S.-ROK alliance should expand engagement with Japan to address the challenges posed by North Korea and China.** Broader U.S.-ROK-Japan security cooperation on security issues would benefit all three countries, but has been hindered by lingering South Korean sensitivities about atrocities committed by Japanese troops during that country's occupation of the peninsula. Japan occupied the Korean peninsula from 1905 to 1945. Nonetheless, there are signs of progress, which should be supported. For instance, in recent months South Korea allowed Japanese Self Defense Force (JSDF) officials to observe U.S.-ROK naval exercises, which was the first time that JSDF officials have participated in exercises with South Korea in seas near the peninsula.

In particular, the U.S.-ROK alliance should foster cooperation with Japan to prepare for contingencies involving North Korea. The JSDF is highly capable and could play an important supporting role in defending South Korea in the event of a North Korean attack. Moreover, in the event of a North Korean collapse, Japan could offer significant logistical and financial support. Trilateral dialogues and exercises, focused on responding to a variety of North Korea contingencies, could be a productive next step.

A trilateral approach to managing China's rise should mirror the nuanced approach pursued by the U.S.-ROK alliance. Military engagement, including dialogues and multilateral exercises, will be essential to integrating China into the region and encouraging its positive and cooperative behavior. At the same time, sustaining a strategic hedge against possible Chinese aggression will remain important to maintaining regional stability.



Washington, Seoul and Tokyo should examine options for dialogue, military exercises, intelligence sharing and strategic planning that serve both of these objectives.

### **Toward a Greater Role for South Korea**

The challenges facing the U.S.-ROK alliance are driving the need for South Korea to play a greater role in its own defense. While the ROK military must necessarily focus the threat posed by North Korea, building capabilities to be used exclusively against the North runs the risk of leaving the ROK incapable of responding to an unexpected crisis.

**As much as possible, the ROK should pursue an adaptive force structure that can respond effectively to a variety of contingencies, ranging from an attack by North Korea to its collapse.**

While modeling and simulation can help to identify the specific systems necessary to carry out military tasks, adaptive capabilities will be essential to building an adaptable force. As South Korea prepares for the transfer of war-time operational control in 2015, four key areas demand particular attention. Although South Korea must undertake a far more comprehensive set of reforms in the coming years, these areas are essential to the ROK taking a stronger role in its own defense.

**Ground Forces:** While the United States can supplement South Korean troops on the ground, South Korea must provide the vast majority of ground forces in a response to a North Korean attack or collapse. Some of the ROK military's ground forces, such as artillery, may have little utility for securing a collapsed North Korea but are nonetheless essential to countering the DPRK's overwhelming artillery threat to Seoul. Other ground capabilities would be essential to securing North Korea should it collapse. Most important among these would be the capabilities of South Korean soldiers who will have the responsibility of pacifying and securing the North as well as

bringing aid to the North Korean people. Exposing South Korean troops to the rigors of peacekeeping, stabilization and HA/DR will be essential in building those skills. The ROK military should make a concerted effort to expose ground force units to these kinds of operations regularly, and then teach the experiences and skills they gain to the rest of the force.

**Air Dominance:** Air power will be essential to the ROK military in several contingencies. In the event of renewed hostilities on the Korean peninsula, the U.S.-ROK alliance will need the ability to act quickly to neutralize North Korean threats. Though the U.S. Air Force will continue to play a leading role in the air battle in North Korea contingencies, the ROK Air Force (ROKAF) will be expected to play a more complex and multifaceted role than it has in the past, particularly in the ability to command, control, support and sustain a wider range of operations. Advanced aircraft will be essential to defeating North Korean integrated air-defense systems (IADS) and establishing air dominance. Due to the large number of targets presented by the KPA, South Korean air power will play an important support role, especially once American aircraft have successfully established air dominance. South Korea is currently examining its requirements for a next-generation fighter; this division of labor between South Korean and American air power should play a significant role in determining the specific aircraft chosen by the ROK Air Force. In a conflict with North Korea, South Korean aircraft will not necessarily need the latest technology for air-to-air combat; South Korean pilots are not only better trained than their North Korean counterparts, they also fly more advanced aircraft than the North Korean Air Force, the bulk of which consists of the J-5, the Chinese variant of the MiG-17F first flown in 1964.<sup>32</sup> For the ROK Air Force, stealth – while attractive – will probably not be as great a priority as the ability to strike a large number of targets per sortie.



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*While the ROK military must necessarily focus the threat posed by North Korea, building capabilities to be used exclusively against the North runs the risk of leaving the ROK incapable of responding to an unexpected crisis.*

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**Green Water Navy:** Naval power will play a significant role in defending the ROK from a North Korean attack. The sinking of the naval ship *Cheonan* highlighted the continued danger posed by North Korea's often overlooked fleet of mini-submarines, which American analysts believe "would present significant challenges, particularly in coastal areas."<sup>33</sup> Seoul is already responding; South Korea's cabinet has endorsed spending 35.2 billion won (29 million U.S. dollars) to procure and maintain weapons systems to upgrade warship sonar, deploy sound surveillance systems for islands in the vicinity of the Northern Limit Line and develop an indigenous three-dimensional radar system. The ROK military has also announced plans to buy minesweeper and anti-submarine helicopters.<sup>34</sup>

System-by-system upgrades are, by themselves, insufficient. While the ROK Navy should focus on the security of the peninsula's littoral waters, the U.S. Navy should continue to play a major role in securing sea lanes and supporting ground operations from the sea. To that end, South Korea should pursue a robust green water naval capability – larger and more capable than a brown water naval force strictly confined to the littorals, but short of a full blue water navy capable of long-range power

projection. In addition to the radar, helicopters and minesweepers already in the works, the ROK Navy should continue to acquire advanced surface and sub-surface combatants that are interoperable with the U.S. Navy. These would be effective not only against North Korean naval challenges, but also against incursions by North Korean special forces using mini-sub and small landing craft.

**C4ISR:** When discussing the most immediate need for the ROK military, American and South Korean strategists uniformly point to the need for a robust and integrated C4ISR capability.<sup>35</sup> C4ISR can provide essential self-defense information to South Korea's political leaders and military commanders regarding the North Korean and Chinese military along South Korea's periphery, including the demilitarized zone and the Yellow Sea.

Robust intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities will be most essential to South Korea's defense during times of conflict or crisis, when time becomes a key factor in decision-making and leadership and operational demands for information escalate drastically. Comprehensively expanding the ROK's C4ISR capabilities would fill existing national informational and operational gaps and improve Seoul's ability to assume war-time OPCON in 2015.

Recent breakthroughs in unmanned aerial vehicle intelligence gathering technology present South Korea with new opportunities to improve its C4ISR capabilities. The potential ability to see and hear much farther and much earlier, primarily utilizing satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles, could bolster South Korea's defense and provide advanced warning of developments in North Korea and beyond. In fact, new long-endurance unmanned systems might make possible significant economies of force. A more robust C4ISR capability could therefore tangibly improve the ROK's situational awareness, which South Korea will need regardless of the military challenges it will face.

## Conclusion

South Korea resides in a dangerous neighborhood. North Korea, armed with nuclear devices and the world's fourth-largest military, poses the greatest short-term threat to stability in East Asia. The potential for collapse in the North also threatens the prosperity and stability of the region; if collapse occurs, South Korea will face a multi-generational challenge in reunifying and rebuilding the peninsula. Meanwhile, China's military, after over a decade of double-digit budget increases, is quickly becoming a significant force and already is affecting the region in subtle but significant ways. Though China's intentions about how to use this force are unknown, its size and growing capability make strategic hedging prudent.

To counter these current and potential threats, the South Korean military should contribute more to its own defense and to the stability of the region. While South Korea can rely upon its American ally for its ultimate defense, challenges to America's long-term capacity to project and sustain military power demand a greater role by the ROK. South Korea's military cannot afford to focus on a single scenario, however, given South Korea's rapidly evolving strategic environment. The ROK military must be flexible and experienced enough to address a wide range of threats.

As Washington and Seoul prepare for the transfer of wartime OPCON in 2015, the alliance's strength will be determined by the allies' ability to adjust to contemporary threats and constraints. Adapting the alliance accordingly will be fundamental to the long-term security of South Korea and the preservation of regional stability and prosperity, to the benefit of both allies and the region writ large.

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