Section: Overview

A rising middle power facing a strategic dilemma

South Korea and East Asian security

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This article presents a brief overview of South Korea’s security environment and policy. South Korea is currently faced with a strategic dilemma involving balancing, on the one hand, the ROK-US alliance that represents its security interests against, on the other hand, the strategic cooperative partnership with China representing Seoul’s economic interests. Seoul is forced to take into account Beijing’s actions and intentions regarding North Korea, which can form an obstacle to South Korea’s aim for Korean unification. Despite strained political relations in Northeast Asia, South Korea remains committed to strengthening regional cooperation through trust-building mechanisms.

Following the Korean War, the Republic of Korea (South Korea or ROK) experienced remarkably rapid development. Still, it took South Korea until the mid-1970s before it could surpass North Korea in terms of economic development measured by GDP per capita. In the meantime, its highly advanced economy and full-fledged democracy have now helped the ROK to transform into a middle power with significant clout in shaping Northeast Asia’s regional order.

A balancing act

South Korea’s main foreign policy challenge is finding a balance between its security interests and its economic interests. While the security interests are firmly grounded in the alliance with the United States, the strategic cooperative partnership with China is playing an increasingly important role in South Korea’s economic well-being, which cannot be underestimated. The ROK-US alliance and the ROK-China strategic alliance form the two main pillars influencing South Korea’s security policy, as can be seen, for instance, in South Korea’s policy towards North Korea. Put differently, ROK’s security policy revolves around the question of how the two vital relationships with the US and China can be managed in harmony, without promoting either one of the two relationships at the cost of the other. This balancing act between the two world powers has created a strategic dilemma for South Korea. Currently, with her commitment to the China-ROK strategic partnership, conservative President Park Geun-hye has decided to follow a middle way.

South Korea is situated in a volatile region where power politics dominate. North Korea continues to be a source of instability while relations with China and Japan are marked by interdependence and rivalry, and at the same time Seoul realizes too that the country depends on energy imports and exports passing through dangerous sea-lanes. Therefore, Seoul’s national interests are best served by regional peace and stability. President Park Geun-hye strikingly describes the current regional situation as “Asia’s paradox”, in which there is a “disconnect between growing economic interdependence on the one hand and backward political-security cooperation on the other.” To resolve the strained security
cooperation, Seoul remains committed to cranking up peaceful regional coordination and co-prosperity through a varying set of multilateral cooperation mechanisms, which are largely based on trust.

Most recently, Park has proposed a “Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative” (NAPCI) that would include, among other things, Japan adopting a “correct understanding of history” and the United States and China forging a “forward-looking relationship.” In this way, NAPCI serves as complementary instrument to the Trust Building Process on the Korean peninsula, and as an initiative it will be pursued along with existing mechanisms such as the trilateral cooperation among Korea, China, and Japan known as the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS).

The ROK-US Alliance

The ROK-US alliance provides the basis for South Korea’s security and defense policy. The alliance has been in existence since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty after the end of the Korean War in 1953. Since that time, South Korea’s national security has been guaranteed under the American “nuclear umbrella,” also known as “extended deterrence”. Despite the significant threat posed by North Korea, the alliance has enabled South Korea to preserve peace, which in turn served as a stable prerequisite for the economic and political development that followed after 1953.

In comparison to that of his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), President Lee Myung-bak’s term in office from 2008-2013 led to substantial intensification in cooperation between the US and ROK. During his administration, the ROK-US alliance was strengthened into a more comprehensive and multidimensional “strategic alliance”. Under current President Park Geun-hye, who took into office in February 2013, the ROK-US alliance — which focuses on policy coordination between Washington and Seoul regarding North Korea — continues to be tight. Currently the US has stationed about 28,500 troops on the Korean peninsula to supplement the 650,000-strong ROK armed forces. US commanders in South Korea have expressed a vision of the USFK (United States Forces Korea) playing a security role mainly through the US Air Force and US Navy while the majority of South Korea’s armed forces are part of the land army (almost 550,000 ground forces) with the Korean Air Force and Navy consisting of only around 65,000 military personnel each. Interestingly too, earlier this year the Ministry of Defense confirmed that it will purchase forty F-35A (Joint Strike Fighters) to replace South Korea’s obsolete F-4 and F-5 fleet by 2018.

The trend during the recent years of South Korea’s growing economic, diplomatic, and military power has given Seoul a much more direct and prominent role in Washington’s planning and thinking about how to deal with Pyongyang. One indicator of South Korea’s increased influence vis-à-vis the US regarding diplomacy over North Korea is the fact that, at the insistence of Seoul, no successful round of the Six-Party Talks has taken place at moments when inter-Korean relations have been poor.

South Korea’s policy towards North Korea: “trustpolitik”

How to deal with North Korea remains one of primary strategic components within the ROK-US alliance. A series of provocations by the North in 2013 — illustrated by Pyongyang’s
nuclear test in February 2013 and its bellicose rhetoric around this event — induced Seoul and Washington to boost their joint deterrence posture to fend off threats from Pyongyang and to respond with flexible retaliation in case of any new military strike from the North. Future attacks cannot be ruled out. For instance, the Northern Limit Line (NLL) — the disputed Yellow Sea (West Sea) military demarcation line between the two Koreas — could continue to serve as a source of friction between them. In response, last year the Americans and South Koreans carved out a “Counter-Provocation Plan” and sharpened the agreement by developing a “Tailored Deterrence Strategy against North Korean Nuclear and Other WMD Threats”, designed to give South Korea a first-strike counterforce strategy against Pyongyang.

The current ROK grand strategy towards North Korea and the region is what President Park Geun-hye calls “trustpolitik”. Park has called for creating a new era of peace on the Korean Peninsula and has proposed some modest confidence-building measures with Pyongyang designed to build trust between the two sides. The objective of this trust-building process is to gradually bring about change in North Korea. Park’s trustpolitik consists of three elements. Firstly, deterrence by reinforcing ROK’s defense capabilities against a continuing nuclear threat from North Korea continues to be important. Secondly, through trust diplomacy Seoul endeavors to create a cooperative worldwide network based on trust in order to cultivate verifiable trust among the involved states. Thirdly, President Park hopes to realize sustainable peace on the Korean peninsula by managing inter-Korean relations based on mutual trust-building. 

Although overall the ROK-US alliance stands firm, the alliance is facing some significant challenges in the years ahead, such as cost-sharing. But one of the most gripping subjects under discussion concerns the 2007 agreement about the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) from American to South Korean forces by December 2015. Reportedly, the South Korean defense establishment wants to delay the OPCON transfer to a later year when the ROK military will be better prepared to handle the command responsibilities in the event of war with North Korea.

Although the United States and South Korea share a common interest in repelling contingent North Korean attacks, views on the overall security landscape in Northeast Asia do differ. Most notably, Seoul is more hesitant to adopt stances that threaten or offend China because it may hamper South Korea’s plans for unification on the Korean peninsula. Thus, Seoul tries to minimize Beijing’s worries that the ROK-US alliance represents a regional security threat to China.

**The impact of China’s rise**

China’s emergence as global power has substantial impact on virtually all aspects of Korean foreign and security policy. China’s continuing rise, market growth, and sheer size have undeniably led to a situation in which South Korea has grown increasingly dependent on China’s economy through its trade links. In addition, Beijing’s clout over North Korea makes China pivotal for the security situation on the Korean peninsula. This has driven President Park Geun-hye to place a priority on improving relations with China.
August 24, 1992 marked the beginning of the normalization of diplomatic ties between South Korea and China. On that day China formally recognized the Republic of Korea, whereas South Korea in turn recognized the People’s Republic of China as the only legitimate authority on Taiwan by breaking ties with the Chinese Nationalist authorities on the island. The normalization of diplomatic ties set into motion an unprecedented growth in bilateral trade. As a result, China is now South Korea’s largest trading partner (25% of Korea’s export went to China in 2011), followed at a considerable distance by Japan in second place and the US in third. When maritime disagreements with Beijing popped up in November 2013, the two governments were able to prevent these incidents from escalating. After China proclaimed its Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in November 2013, South Korea’s proclamation of its own ADIZ followed, outlining a zone that overlapped China’s. Yet this situation didn’t lead to heated tensions between both countries as China resisted “the obvious temptation to consider Korea’s expanded ADIZ as a threat to [its] territorial sovereignty.”

Since the early 2000s North Korea has increasingly grown dependent on China. As a result, in shaping its North Korea policy, Seoul cannot afford to overlook China’s actions and intentions. Seoul is concerned that North Korea — especially its northern provinces adjacent to China — will drift into China’s orbit and will eventually come under China’s control. China’s incessant support for Pyongyang — as exemplified by Beijing’s perceived backing of the Stalinist regime after the bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 — has upset many South Koreans and leads them to believe that China’s support for the status quo is underpinning the survival of North Korea’s regime. China is thus perceived as an obstacle to unification. Seoul realizes that it needs Chinese cooperation for any future reunification of Korea. Consequently, South Korean leaders tend to be wary of taking steps that will alarm China.

**Japan-ROK recent tensions**

The Japanese-South Korean relationship poses an increasing challenge for the goal of preserving regional stability and cooperation. Although both countries are highly economically interdependent, and when faced with an immediate threat, the two countries are able to work together on security, since 2012 the Japan-ROK relationship has been spiraling downwards. In particular, diverging views about historical events and territorial disputes have put South Korean leaders in a difficult position in their attempts to institutionalize improvements in its bilateral ties with Japan. After all, public opinion, largely suspicious of Japan, cannot be ignored in South Korea’s policymaking.

Most notably, South Korea and Japan have competing territorial claims over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets (Liancourt Rocks) in the East Sea/Sea of Japan (which is also subject to a dispute of geographical naming). Also, a majority of South Koreans took offense at a series of provocations by nationalist Japanese government leaders. The December 2013 visit by Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the Yasukuni Shrine — a controversial place where, among others, fourteen of Imperial Japan’s war criminals are honored — ignited fierce protests in China and South Korea because they perceived Abe’s visit as downplaying Japan’s history of aggression. More recently in June 2014, the Abe administration decided to order a group of scholars to review how the Kono Statement — the official apology issued in
1993 to women who were forced to work in military brothels during World War II — was drawn up. The conclusion that the apology was a political outcome resulting from negotiations with South Korea appears to cast doubt on whether the apology was actually based on evidence. This action led to public outrage among South Koreans. And as a result, when on July 1st 2014 Japan’s Abe government decided on a reinterpretation of the Article 9 of the Constitution — enabling the Japanese armed forces to be deployed abroad — this decision was observed with suspicion by the ROK.

Unfortunately, historical and political difficulties like these continue to thwart Japanese-ROK efforts to implement even modest security agreements. Illustrative in this respect are the failed efforts in May and June 2012 to achieve an intelligence-sharing agreement in order to ease trilateral cooperation among Japan, the US, and the ROK in the face of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Tokyo and Seoul were on the verge of signing a completed agreement when a domestic firestorm in Korea led President Lee Myung-bak to pull back just a few minutes before signing.

**Conclusion**

All things considered, for the foreseeable future Seoul will continue to be faced with the strategic dilemma of how to balance its firmly embedded ROK-US alliance with the strategic partnership it has with Beijing. The unshakable and flexible deterrence posture against North Korea must preserve stability on the Korean peninsula. And in order to repair the deteriorating security relations in the region, President Park’s trustpolitik aims to give rise to a new era of peace in Northeast Asia. South Korea’s hope is ultimately that the regional political-security cooperation will eventually match the economic interdependence achieved in Europe after World War II.

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