

Security of the Korean Peninsula: U.S. Continuing Commitment

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As the world transitions into the 21st century, changes in the international environment require U.S. strategists to re-examine America's vital national interests in East Asia. In particular, what form of security arrangement for the Korean Peninsula best suits the United States Security Strategy of "enlarging the community of market democracies while deterring and containing a range of threats to our nation, our allies and our interests?"⁽¹⁾ America's political and security interests spring from economic interests. Growing international interdependence with the economies of the Asia-Pacific region will gain momentum and alter the international security environment. The United States and Pacific rim nations will become even more interdependent in the coming decades. Trade between the two sides of the Pacific is vital to the stability of the world economy and a stable Asia-Pacific region is of vital strategic interest to the United States.

In his May 3, 1994 remarks to the Asia Society, U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry stated that, "North Korea threatens the peace and stability of Northeast Asia, which holds the world's fastest-growing economies."⁽²⁾ The current U.S. strategy in East Asia is based on a military presence to ensure broad regional stability and deter aggression in order to provide a foundation for economic growth, mutually benefiting Asians and Americans.⁽³⁾ A stable Asia-Pacific region is a vital interest of the United States, but are the continuing tensions on the Korean Peninsula a real threat to U.S. vital national interests in the next decade? What value does maintaining an American presence in South Korea have for U.S. security? How should the U.S. shape its security alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK) to achieve the stated objectives outlined in the Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region?

The Threat to U.S. Vital National Interest

The Pacific rim region faces a future encumbered with an increased potential for conflict due to economic and political tensions. Competition between major regional powers such as Korea, Japan, China, and the emerging market nations of Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand for political, military, and economic preeminence offers both great peril and promise for the Asia-Pacific region. Stability in this region of the world has significant implications for the U.S. in terms of increased trade and additional jobs. Currently, U.S. trade with the Asia-Pacific region amounts to more than twice that as with Europe and nearly three times as much as with Latin America.⁽⁴⁾ One third of U.S. exports go to the Pacific rim nations and 3 million U.S. jobs are dependent on Pacific trade.⁽⁵⁾ In the coming decade, American jobs connected to the Pacific rim will double from 3 to 6 million.⁽⁶⁾ The growth of the U.S. domestic economy and preservation of the international economy will depend in large part on the continued economic expansion of the

Asian region. The greatest potential for high intensity conflict and destabilization of the delicately balanced Asia-Pacific region remains between North and South Korea.

The Asia-Pacific nations all agree that the final resolution of the long-standing Korean conflict is critical to the stability of the region and continued economic expansion. There is not, however, a consensus on the shape the political system on the Korean Peninsula will take or how the transition will occur; an uncertainty which aggravates the regional security environment. The same tensions that confronted East and West Germany for 45 years continue to confront North and South Korea. The rapidity of the German unification and the resulting economic drain was not lost on a ROK political leadership determined to increase the market share of the region's forthcoming economic prosperity. Additionally, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) has not reversed its long-standing position of unifying the Korean Peninsula under the control of Pyongyang's communist regime, a threat to the stability of the region. The United States and the balance of the Pacific rim nations prefer a relaxation of tensions between South and North Korea with a diplomatic goal of a Korean Peninsula free of conflict. Regardless of the final outcome, the Koreas approach the likelihood of a truculent interregnum between two diametrically opposed nation-states and a single nation-state under one government.

The Value of American Military Presence

There is widespread resistance in nations throughout the world to incurring large costs, military or otherwise, to deal with threats that do not seem immediately serious to vital national interests (an understandable position considering that nations act to ensure their own security). Henry Kissinger asserts that a vital national interest is "a change in the international environment so likely to undermine the national security that it must be resisted no matter what form the threat takes or how ostensibly legitimate it appears."⁽⁷⁾ Relating Kissinger's definition of vital national interest to U.S. East-Asian security strategy, the uncertainty of a change in the political environment in Korea is likely to undermine the security of the Asia-Pacific region which is a direct threat to America's national security. Viewpoints vary, but the general consensus of national security analysts is that the stability of the East-Asian littoral and western Pacific region is linked to a strong U.S. military presence which discourages rivalries from escalating or a single power with regional hegemonic desires from asserting itself.

Notwithstanding a more vibrant multilateral and regional security architecture through collective security arrangements, an important role remains for the armed forces of the United States forward deployed in Korea. Today, the DPRK is in the midst of a political, economic, and military decline with little expectation of recovery. North Korea's deteriorating situation threatens the peace and stability of the peninsula with the promise of an uncertain future. The North's unremitting decline provides the conditions for three possible geopolitical scenarios to emerge, each posing a different set of challenges for U.S. strategists: reunification of the Korean peninsula; a more stable relationship between the two nation-states; or resumption of the Korean War.⁽⁸⁾ Forward deployed forces in Korea ensure a rapid and flexible response capability and enhance America's ability to influence events across the spectrum of confrontation.

Reunification. On the surface, a United Korea appears to be the best possible resolution to an armistice that is approaching its fifth decade. It implies neutralization of the Asia-Pacific region's

only major potential armed conflict. Reunification can take the form of either a rapid, chaotic internal collapse in which the North is absorbed by the South, or a longer term, peaceful reunification after North Korea has reformed its political system to an open socialist state and bolstered its declining economy.⁽⁹⁾ Rapid, chaotic reunification is the worst case for the ROK but a more likely possibility under the circumstances. Peaceful reunification depends on a stable DPRK government with enough vision to make concessions that are beneficial to both parties and a ROK government that doesn't feel economically threatened. Economic exchange is necessary if North Korea is to have any hope of recovery and normalization is the only method available to achieve that exchange. Conservative hardliners may feel that the price for economic benefits (reform) is too much to pay and cause the North Korean regime to implode. Like their Eastern European counterparts, Pyongyang's leadership does not want to lose its power base. Internal struggles over economic and political reform may preclude any possibility of a peaceful unification, resulting in the collapse of the nation-state and forcing an immediate consolidation. South Korea is well aware of the economic costs of sudden reunification and prefers the long term approach. In either event, long term transformation or short-term collapse, South Korea's economic growth will bear the brunt of reunification and the ROK leadership is wary of the potential cost, which is a key factor in future South-North negotiations.

Korean unification might lead one to conclude that a United States presence on the peninsula will no longer be necessary. To the contrary, withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula would lead most likely to increased tensions in the region as North and South transition to a new form of government and create a potential destabilizing situation in East Asia. If the German experience is any indicator, a united Korea will be economically focused inward for several years while trying to develop the industrial infrastructure of the northern half of the country. Feeling vulnerable to external threats during this period, a united Korea's dormant hostilities and suspicions of traditional adversaries have the potential of resurfacing. Korea would be suspicious of not only Japan, but particularly of an emerging China with no effective "counterbalance." During this period of increased economic drain, it is not inconceivable for the new Korea to establish a nuclear deterrent to offset a diminished military capability, further aggravating international attempts to restrain nuclear proliferation. The U.S. can mitigate the disruptive consequences of unification as the two current Koreas recreate a national government by remaining military engaged on the peninsula. Having U.S. forces in Korea during reunification, whether a rapid or long term transition, provides a sense of security for both nations from outside distractions and provides an environment conducive to peaceful reconstruction.

Maintaining the Status Quo. Although experts believe Korea will eventually unite into a formidable regional power, the peninsula seems likely to stay politically divided for some time. A more stable relationship between North and South Korea suits the short term interests of the international economy. Peace on the peninsula, no matter what form it takes, relieves some of the tension in the region and allows the economic markets to continue their unprecedented growth. Under the umbrella of U.S. diplomatic agreements and security promises, North and South can participate in a constructive dialogue that is beneficial for both nations. In the broader scheme of international relations, the Korean conflict can only be resolved through inter-Korean cooperation. In order to facilitate a North-South normalization process, North Korea must maintain some semblance of a viable nation-state.

North Korea's future in the short term depends on whether Pyongyang can achieve a degree of international recognition. Mimicking the unification rhetoric, Pyongyang finds itself in a position to obtain economic assistance long enough to stabilize its failing regime, a condition essential to maintaining the current peninsula balance of power. Establishing economic ties with non-communists nations, similar to the Chinese model, offers Pyongyang the benefits of foreign capital investment, technology exchange, and exportation of weapons technology, critical to obtaining needed revenues and rebuilding the DPRK's economy. An important criterion to prepare the way for normalization is the success of Kim Jong Il's political and economic reforms. Without some type of reform, it is doubtful that the regime could survive the concessions the international community would demand in payment for recognition.

The essential ingredient for maintaining the status quo on the Korean Peninsula is the "deterrent value" of combined U.S.-ROK forces. "This deterrent value of United States and South Korean military forces has maintained the peace on the Korean Peninsula for four decades and continues to maintain it today."⁽¹⁰⁾

Without U.S. forces and the promise of an immediate retaliatory response to North Korean aggression, the ROK leadership would be reluctant to rely on DPRK compliance to any North-South agreement. Currently, North Korea is presenting itself to the international community as a cooperative and rational player in the peace process. Political maneuvering like the 1994 U.S.-North Korean Framework Agreement on nuclear programs makes it appear to the world that Pyongyang is moving toward normalization of relations with Japan and South Korea. However, with the recent events of failing communist regimes in Eastern Europe as an indicator, the leadership in Pyongyang has limited choices to secure their position on the peninsula. If Pyongyang rejects a North-South cooperative strategy, the DPRK will be condemned to continued isolation and economic hardship. Further international isolation will increase the pressure on an already crippled nation to the point of collapse, forcing Kim Jong Il's hand. The result would most likely be the worst-case scenario: an immediate and violent response.

Korean War, Part II. American military power is committed directly against a nation that poses a clear and present danger of open aggression. Secretary Perry contends that "there can be no doubt that the combined forces of the Republic of Korea and the United States could decisively defeat any attack from the North."⁽¹¹⁾ Nevertheless, a North Korean attack on South Korea is possible at any time in the future. North Korea has been dedicated to creating a military dominant position, a posture that may not be maintainable under current economic conditions. In light of a dwindling military capability, it is not inconceivable that a desperate nation would take drastic measures to create a more favorable balance of power. Pyongyang recognizes that war is a risky business and is sensitive that a resumption of hostilities could easily lead to the disintegration of North Korea as a nation-state. However, the unpredictable DPRK leadership could make a desperate bid for total, or at least partial, control of the peninsula. History has proven, more than once, that desperate people take desperate measures, often opposite to what international opinion would consider a "rational" course of action.

A North Korean invasion force would have an excellent chance of scoring significant gains before the U.S.-South Korean coalition could halt the attack. Warning times of an impending invasion are uncertain at best and North Korea could launch a major offensive from present

positions with little additional preparation. "Pyongyang hopes to do this with its large conventional force and its chemical weapons and ballistic missiles complement."⁽¹²⁾ The DPRK is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention and "has intensified and expanded its chemical warfare program as part of its military preparedness plan."⁽¹³⁾ Chemical weapon capabilities combined with one of the five largest armed forces in the world suit a North Korean strategy designed to secure Seoul and the adjacent region as a limited objective with the intent of a negotiated settlement in favor of Pyongyang. Seoul is the center of South Korean society and the driving force of economic prosperity. Only 40 kilometers from the DMZ, a successful surprise attack could quickly encircle the ROK capital and secure the Seoul region. Moreover, as an invasion moved into the densely populated city, the coalition would find it difficult to repel the DPRK combat forces for fear of killing civilians; an effective deterrent against an all out counter-offensive.

From a North Korean point of view, a strategy designed to obtain limited objectives, such as the short term control of the South Korean capital of Seoul with its populace of over 11 million civilians, could reap substantial benefits in a negotiated peace settlement. In fact, "it is believed that North Korea plans either to sweep the entire peninsula before American reinforcements arrive or to partly occupy the Seoul metropolitan area in the early stages of a war."⁽¹⁴⁾ DPRK conventional forces combined with WMD capabilities potentially could control the seized territory long enough to severely damage the economy of South Korea and gain limited demands from a region that prefers peace through appeasement. Seoul has based its defense planning on a reliable American security guarantee for over forty-five years. Without the reinforcing combat power of U.S. forces, the ROK could not eradicate the northern invaders. The prospect of economic collapse and political desperation could lead Pyongyang to conclude that war is preferable to a gradual absorption by a stable South Korea. The outlook for conflict on the Korean Peninsula remains a challenge as long as there are two diametrically opposed nations faced-off across a no-man's-land. A unified Korea remains the overarching long-term objective in the region. However, even after unification, retaining U.S. forces in Korea would be a signal to the Asia-Pacific nations of America's long-term resolve for stability in the region.

The Security Strategy for the Korean Peninsula

Within the broad context of the current U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region, there are two specific security objectives outlined for the Korean Peninsula: "maintain our strong defense commitment to and ties with the Republic of Korea, in order to deter aggression and preserve peace on the Peninsula" and "fully implement the Agreed Framework on North Korea's nuclear program while standing ready to respond if North Korea does not meet its obligations or threatens United States allies."⁽¹⁵⁾ The United States must ensure that its security relations with South Korea withstand the challenges posed by North Korea's WMD and conventional programs and, in the interest of regional security, maintain its strong defense alliance during and after reunification.⁽¹⁶⁾ As North and South Korea move through their period of political transition, the key to securing stability will be for the U.S. to reconstruct the alliance with the Republic of Korea to bolster deterrence in the short run and provide long-term regional support.

While the current security strategy for Korea is a sound foundation for maintaining a regional security structure, the U.S.-ROK security alliance will not achieve the objectives outlined in the

U.S. Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region after unification. The 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty, the security alliance between South Korea and the United States, is the foundation for Washington's security assistance to Seoul and conterminous with the existence of a North Korea. The U.S.-ROK security arrangement is valid so long as the South-North confrontation continues. If the current agreement is allowed to remain as it stands, post-unified Korea could be reluctant to negotiate any new security arrangement with the United States. Regional peer pressure to distance itself from Western influence could lead the new unified Korean leadership to abrogate all standing agreements. It is critical that America be viewed by Koreans as a positive force in the peaceful reunification of the North and South nations to maintain the level of influence the U.S. has enjoyed for the past five decades. If United States policy or military presence is seen as an impediment to reunification, Korean nationalists will sever the relationship during the reunification process or shortly thereafter.

The first component of a new security strategy for Korea is reconstructing the alliance between the United States and South Korea that transcends a unified Korea. Washington's regional mission for peace and stability goes beyond the North-South issue. Despite whether unification occurs next year or in ten years, America has strategic reasons to maintain a military presence on the peninsula.⁽¹⁷⁾ The 1953 Defense Treaty, which started as a patron-client relationship, has evolved into a genuine security alliance but is not robust enough for a post-unified U.S.-ROK relationship.⁽¹⁸⁾ The United States should move toward a supporting role in it's alliance with the Republic of Korea, an evolution of military deterrence to military reassurance. The new alliance should be designed as the foundation of a regional security structure where a united Korea assumes the lead on the peninsula while the U.S. takes the lead in regional crisis. But it must maintain a peninsula focus as a credible deterrent against North Korean aggression in the near-to-mid term with a shifting focus to a regional perspective when unification occurs. Finally, the alliance between Washington and Seoul should be expanded beyond a military relationship to one that includes political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of security.⁽¹⁹⁾ U.S. presence in Korea is central to underwriting stability on the peninsula and providing a credible balance for regional powers. If Washington intends to remain engaged with a unified Korea, the U.S. needs a new security agreement that is well defined in the minds of the host nation.

To set the stage for post unification, the second component of the U.S. strategy must be to continue to ensure full implementation of the October 21, 1994 Agreed Framework regarding North Korea's nuclear programs. Compliance is the first step toward the cooperative engagement objective outlined in the United States National Security Strategy and has long term regional security implications. The accord begins the normalization process between Washington and Pyongyang by reducing trade and investment barriers, establishing liaison offices in the respective capitals, and upgrading bilateral relations at the ambassadorial level. More importantly, the framework promotes implementation of the North-South Korea Joint Declaration for denuclearization and resuming a North-South dialogue. Normalized relations between North Korea and the U.S. would relieve some of the political tension when and if unification does occur. Moreover, reconvening North-South interaction under an atmosphere of mutual cooperation without the impending threat of a nuclear strike is a necessary condition to inter-Korean negotiations.

Pyongyang, on the other hand, could just as easily use the accord as diplomatic leverage to improve its position in the region. Strict adherence to the Agreed Framework is difficult to prove, despite the conditions stipulated by Washington that "North Korea must make its nuclear program completely transparent and must allow the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to perform special inspections..."⁽²⁰⁾ By appearing to conform to the majority of the conditions outlined in the accord, North Korea can gain an advantage in two possible ways: receive economic and technical assistance from its Asia-Pacific neighbors and the U.S.; and stall for time to rebuild its internal infrastructure without major political concessions with the South. In the eyes of the international community, conformity could lead to political parity with South Korea. Indeed, it would be difficult for the U.S. to impose sanctions on a nation that is following an agreement negotiated by Washington, if not by the letter at least in spirit. International pressure to maintain the status quo on the peninsula is too much for a United States that has overextended itself diplomatically and militarily around the globe. Kim Il Sung's Bismarckian tactic of negotiating an agreement with Washington in lieu of Tokyo and Seoul might have provided the international political clout Pyongyang needs to stabilize its failing regime and maintain a divided Korea into the next century.

Conclusion

South Korea can be considered a relatively stable nation, even though it still is participating in the later stages of an emerging market economy. North Korea, on the other hand, is at the extreme "nation in crisis" end of the spectrum. North Korea's ability to survive as a nation intact, given its recent economic failure and continuing questionable government, is the dominant factor in North-South relations and a significant factor in focusing so much U.S. interest on this region of the world. Stability on the Korean peninsula is vital to the security of East Asia, and the security of East Asia is, in turn, vital to the security of the United States. The foundation of relations with a reunified Korea in the next century will be laid in the U.S. actions of this decade. Forward presence is the linchpin of any Pacific strategy and U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula provide the framework for engagement and enlargement outlined in the National Security Strategy.

It should be remembered that the incident which precipitated the Korean War was a speech by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson in January 1950 which diagrammed a U.S. insular defense that excluded Korea, giving the impression to Kim Il Sung that there would be no interference from Washington in a Korean conflict. There is no better insurance against a repeat performance and no better way for the United States to demonstrate a commitment to the security of its Korean ally than forward deployed American forces. An agreement made in good faith now with the ROK has the best chance of surviving the Korean reunification and will create a solid foundation for what is sure to be turbulent political and economic times. Fostering a long-term relationship requires new thinking on the alliance framework between the United States and South Korea to achieve a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula without conflict.⁽²¹⁾

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9. Masao Okonogi, *Assessing the U.S.-North Korea Agreement*, Joint Force Quarterly, Spring 95, 25.
10. Perry, 1.
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13. Ibid, 7.
14. Young-Koo Cha and Kang Choi, *South Korea's Defense Posture*, Joint Force Quarterly, Spring 95, 27.
15. United States Security Strategy for the East Asia-Pacific Region, 4.
16. Ibid, 10.
17. The President of the Asia Pacific Policy Center identified two reasons to remain engaged in Korea: deter China's return to a warlord attitude that can occur unilaterally and deflect an aggressive nature early. He contends that the U.S. is engaged in the region for self preservation. It is his position that Korean unification will result in dissolution of standing U.S.-ROK security agreements and a more robust alliance is in order, one that will last beyond unification of the peninsula. Douglas H. Paal, *Recent Political/Economic Developments in East Asia*, Lecture, U.S. Naval War College, Newport, RI: 23 April 1995.
18. Young-Koo Cha and Kang Choi, 29.
19. Ibid, 30.
20. Proliferation: Threat and Response, 7.
21. In his remarks to the Asia Society, Secretary of Defense William Perry stated that the diplomatic goal of the United States and its coalition allies was "a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula without conflict." Perry, 3.

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