



A Question of Confidence:
The First U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue

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U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue

July 26-28, 2009, Maui

Key Findings

The Pacific Forum CSIS, on behalf of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), brought a small, select group of South Korean and American security specialists and government officials together to discuss Korean threat perceptions and concerns about the changing strategic environment in East Asia and the nature of extended deterrence. The following are the preliminary key findings from this off-the-record dialogue:

- The return to power of South Korea's conservative Grand National Party brings with it an increased willingness both to partner with the United States and to participate more fully in shaping the regional (and global) security environment. Nonetheless, many South Koreans still see their nation as "a shrimp among whales" in Northeast Asia, subject to forces beyond their control and an object, not a subject, of regional foreign policy. This mindset continues to influence Korean thinking on strategic issues.

- President Lee Myung-Bak's public insistence that extended deterrence assurances be expressly included in the Lee/Obama June 16, 2009 Joint Vision Statement reflects growing concerns about the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella on the part of the Korean public. While Americans tend to interpret Lee's request as a "lack of trust" in the alliance, Koreans argue its real intent was to provide reassurance to South Koreans while also sending a clear warning to North Korea underscoring the U.S. commitment to defense of the ROK.

- The reference to extended deterrence in the Vision Statement is only a starting point. Koreans want follow up to discuss strategy, structure, operational doctrine, and even nuclear targeting. Unfortunately, the ROK bench is not deep on these topics. There is also concern about the political sensitivity of these discussions and it is not clear if ROK society is prepared to address these issues at a meaningful level.

- Like their Japanese colleagues (as expressed at a similar U.S.-Japan Dialogue in February), Koreans are concerned that Washington will be too "flexible" or accommodating toward Pyongyang and will focus on managing the proliferation issue while "tolerating" the North's nuclear weapons program.

- South Koreans argue that it is "essential" that Washington clearly signal that it "will not tolerate" a nuclear North Korea and that it remains committed to denuclearization, but they are hard-pressed to identify ways in which this can be effectively expressed, absent the use of military force (which they would not endorse). The upcoming 2009 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review is one vehicle both for expressing U.S. intolerance and for underscoring extended deterrence, although the Pentagon must be careful not to elevate North Korea's nuclear status or imply acceptance of the DPRK as a "nuclear weapons state."

- While the ROK government may pay lip service to support for any type of dialogue, including bilateral U.S.-North Korean talks, scholars and officials alike privately express grave concern about a bilateral dialogue, cautioning that “close coordination,” while essential (and perceived as lacking during the final years of the Bush administration), is no substitute for being at the table. The domestic political cost to President Lee if the ROK was excluded from any denuclearization dialogue would be significant.

- Japanese talk about North Korea but really worry about China. South Koreans worry about North Korea and constantly rate their status in terms of Washington’s treatment of Japan. They share Japan’s concern about the implications of China’s rise on regional security dynamics in the long run but do not think of China in extended deterrent terms – they are more concerned that unchecked North Korean nuclear ambitions may compel Tokyo to follow suit. The “Chinese threat” is more territorial and psychological than nuclear. There is also some concern that a U.S.-PRC condominium might result in actions which adversely affect ROK national interests.

- Unlike the Japanese (who worry China might increase its inventory in the face of significant U.S. reductions), Koreans do not worry that the U.S. commitment to deep strategic cuts and disarmament risks compromising U.S. extended deterrent, given the size and capabilities of the U.S. nuclear arsenal vis-à-vis North Korea – it’s the “will to use” not numbers that matters. There was also a general lack of concern among ROK participants about the prospect of a U.S. “no first use” pledge or about a “desperate North Korea” scenario (since there seemed to be little prospect of Pyongyang being pushed into a “use or lose” corner).

- While accepting the practical necessity of working with Japan, there are considerable psychological obstacles in the ROK to such cooperation. The most obvious are wounds from history. The shifting balance of power encourages ROK planners to embrace more fully trilateral cooperation and coordination with the U.S. and Japan to deal with a range of concerns and contingencies, including China’s rise (but not in a manner that would be perceived by Beijing as a “containment” effort).

- Tokyo also serves as a benchmark for Seoul. Seoul seeks equality with Japan on every level; this focus shapes cooperation bilaterally and trilaterally. This is especially important as the U.S. tries to close gaps in the global nonproliferation regime and restrict access to reprocessing and enrichment technology. Japan’s possession of this technology drives Seoul to demand “equivalent treatment.” Negotiations on the U.S.-ROK nuclear licensing agreement – which expires in 2012 – will focus on this issue.

- There is gradual acceptance of the need to follow through on the transfer of wartime operational control, although many – if not most South Koreans – would not be troubled if OPCON transfer were delayed beyond 2012 (or even postponed indefinitely). Many in the ROK believe this process is driven by factors other than military ones.

- The U.S. and Korea need to jointly prepare for a North Korean contingency (crisis or collapse), preferably in consultation with China and Japan. Five-Party Talks could prove effective for addressing and containing the North Korean nuclear threat. The U.S. needs to better define what “institutionalization” of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)

means and collaborate with the ROK to persuade Beijing to join this counter-proliferation effort.

ROK participants appreciated and underscored the importance of the reference in the June 16 Joint Vision Statement to “peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy,” and along with U.S. participants stressed the importance of the passage of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement to the broadening and deepening of the alliance.

U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue

July 26-28, 2009, Maui

Conference Report

Supporters of the U.S.-ROK alliance celebrated the June 16, 2009 summit between Presidents Barack Obama and Lee Myung Bak as a pointed affirmation of the two countries' strengthened ties and a continuing commitment to their bilateral security alliance. The meeting yielded a Joint Vision that will guide the security alliance "to ensure a peaceful, secure, and prosperous future for the Korean Peninsula, the Asia-Pacific region, and the world." While most commentary has focused on this forward-leaning statement, considerable attention has also been devoted to the statement's mention of "the continuing commitment of extended deterrence, including the U.S. nuclear umbrella." In coverage of the summit, South Korean media highlighted this clause, underscoring doubts that appear to be creeping into Korean thinking about the U.S. commitment to the ROK's defense.

To better understand these seemingly contradictory tendencies, the Pacific Forum CSIS, with support from the Advanced Strategic Concepts Office (ASCO) of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), convened the inaugural U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue, July 27-29, 2009 in Hawaii. Officials from both governments (attending in their private capacities) joined policy analysts and academics to discuss, off the record, the two countries' perspectives on the regional security environment, the state of their alliance, and the role of strategic systems in safeguarding peace and prosperity in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, 10 Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders attended the meeting to provide a next-generation perspective on the agenda. The report that follows reflects the views of the chair; while other participants have reviewed it for accuracy and completeness, it is not a consensus document.

Perceptions of the Asian Security Environment

The resilience of an alliance depends on a convergence of the partners' perceptions of and priorities regarding the security environment. In our leadoff presentation, a U.S. participant noted that new governments in Washington and Seoul had yielded "a more in-depth and cooperative relationship than any other time."

For Americans, the principle threat to U.S. interests in Northeast Asia is North Korea. That threat is both conventional – which is obvious, longstanding, and manageable – and nuclear. Pyongyang's seeming readiness to spread its nuclear knowhow and technology is especially troubling. While the DPRK committed in the Six-Party Talks (6PT) to denuclearization and to begin that process, North Korea has shifted its position, walking away from the multilateral negotiations, declaring them dead, and demanding dissolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance and withdrawal of the U.S. nuclear umbrella as a condition for its nuclear disarmament. This new situation, explained our presenter, requires the U.S. and South Korea to intensify their bilateral coordination (and with all dialogue partners in the 6PT) as Pyongyang pushes for bilateral engagement with

the United States. Most important, Seoul has to keep domestic divisions in South Korea over North Korea policy from derailing the alliance.

The second U.S. regional concern is Japan – more specifically, the domestic political muddle in that country and its impact on Tokyo’s foreign policy. The prospect of the first election win by the opposition in over half a century has concentrated Japanese attention inward, weakening the country’s regional and global leadership, and undermining its effectiveness as a U.S. partner. While the impact of an opposition victory on the alliance is unclear, the obsession with domestic affairs is a concern for U.S. policy makers.

A third overarching concern is China. The general trajectory of the country is positive: there is rising transparency, a dependence on the global economy, an openness to markets, and slow reform of the ruling communist party. But troubling elements are on the rise: a defense budget that is growing at a pace that is divorced from any threat and a military whose intentions are opaque; a poor record on human rights; the ruling party’s determination to stay in power; uncertainty about Beijing’s regional ambitions, and ongoing territorial disputes with neighbors. Our speaker opined that the need for stability and the scale of domestic challenges will reduce any tendency for foreign adventurism. Fortunately, the bilateral (U.S.-China) relationship is solid. But, our speaker warned, relations with China can’t come at the expense of U.S. relations with its allies. His warning suggests that there is a perception that this may in fact be the case. Clearly, there is some concern that a U.S.-PRC condominium might result in actions that adversely affect ROK national interests.

Other regional threats include terrorism and Islamic extremism, territorial disputes (especially those that threaten to involve the U.S.), and a fear of U.S. disengagement from the region, which the current U.S. administration is fighting. The affirmation of democracy in Indonesia is a positive development, as is the diminution of tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

In facing all these challenges, U.S. leadership is key but, our speaker cautioned, Washington must recognize the interests and concerns of its allies and partners. Thus far, the outlook is good.

Our South Korean presenter identified anxiety about the changing regional security framework as the chief concern in his country. While the regional security environment is largely stable, there are worries about a relative shift in power between the U.S. and China, which could lead to abandonment of the ROK if the U.S. concludes that cooperation with Beijing is more important than cooperation with its ally: “Korea passing” was his phrase. The speaker suggested that Chinese gains in recent years are the result of U.S. neglect of the region – a point of convergence with our U.S. speaker – and a problem that can be easily fixed. He also agreed with the U.S. speaker that Japan is marginalizing itself and this is bad for the region and for South Korea.

South Korea’s list of specific threats is long. It includes traditional Cold War flashpoints such as the division of the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait, historical and territorial issues, nuclear dominoes, regional military rearmament, as well as newer concerns such as transnational threats and global issues.

When attention turns to the Korean Peninsula, Seoul's focus is the alliance with the U.S. While attempts to forge a "21st century partnership" are making progress, there is still a current of uncertainty about the U.S. commitment to the alliance. Our speaker asked whether the two countries see North Korea through the same lens, in particular whether Washington is prepared to accept Pyongyang as a defacto nuclear power. The scheduled transfer of operational control of wartime command (OPCON) over ROK military forces from the U.S. to the ROK and U.S. pressure for the ROK to assume a global presence raise fears that Washington is pushing Seoul to take on roles that fit U.S. priorities, not those of South Korea.

Korea's relations with China are "broadly positive" – the two countries are "partners" – but problems are emerging. South Koreans worry about Chinese sincerity as they watch growing Chinese investment in North Korea and fret over signals Beijing is sending Pyongyang about following through on denuclearization pledges. South Koreans are sensitive to Chinese concerns about the revitalization of the U.S.-ROK security alliance, but a more realistic assessment of ROK-PRC relations affords that Chinese unease less weight than in the past.

Our ROK speaker characterized his government's policy as "a more realistic survival strategy." This thinking rests on three pillars: normalization and strengthening of U.S.-ROK relations, a more realistic view of ROK-PRC relations, and a "return" to the more traditional ROK role within the bilateral alliance. Looking ahead, his key concerns are how the Korean Peninsula fits into overall U.S. strategy (in particular, whether U.S. and ROK threat perceptions are aligned), the terms of U.S. and ROK strategic cooperation, and whether Washington is sensitive to currents in ROK public sentiment.

The bulk of our discussion focused on Japan and its relations with the U.S. and Korea. There was unanimity that Japan is a key regional player – at least potentially – and that relations between Seoul and Tokyo need to be stronger. Several Korean participants argued that relations between the two are not as bad as is commonly thought; one ROK participant asked the U.S. to stop harping on that theme. Nonetheless, there was a sense that bilateral coordination and dialogue should be institutionalized; one ROK speaker said that his country and Japan needed a strategic dialogue like this one. He worried that the relationship was dominated by bilateral specialists, not strategists.

There was also agreement that a strong U.S.-Japan relationship is good for South Korea. As one South Korean speaker noted, rising Japanese capabilities actually add to the ROK deterrent; Japan's strength supplements Korea's defense. Another added that Japan's strategic value grows as China gets stronger. Plainly, the current government accepts the practical necessity of working with Japan.

Recognition of Japan's importance underscores the value of trilateral – U.S.-ROK-Japan – discussions. Fortunately, there are signs that the three governments "get it." There are a growing number of trilateral discussions that involve the three. An American noted that trilateral cooperation pays dividends beyond the obvious: ROK actions provide "political cover" for similar actions by Japan and helps "lock in Japan" on regional security discussions. This will be increasingly important if, as expected, Japan has a change of government and the opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) comes to

power in the Aug. 30 general election. Most of our participants dismissed the notion that a DPJ win would produce significant shifts in Japanese policy.

While the shifting balance of power encourages ROK planners to embrace more fully trilateral cooperation and coordination with the U.S. and Japan to deal with a range of concerns, including China's rise, there was some sensitivity among Koreans about Chinese reaction to stronger links between Seoul and Tokyo, as well as growing trilateral cooperation. While Koreans have an increasingly realistic assessment of their relationship with China, they do not wish to antagonize Beijing. This doesn't mean that South Koreans will defer to China; it does require, quite sensibly, that Seoul, Washington, and Tokyo engage Beijing to ascertain its views on regional security issues and try to minimize misperceptions. One agenda item of importance is ensuring that the three governments' views – the U.S., the ROK, and China – are aligned when it comes to dealing with North Korea.

While China is viewed with some suspicion, there is a real difference in threat perception when compared to the Japanese. Japanese consider the Chinese military threat to be high; the Koreans do not. The “Chinese threat” is more territorial and psychological than nuclear. This has profound implications at the strategic level: Koreans don't worry about cuts in U.S. strategic arsenals rebalancing relations with China. They don't worry about U.S.-Russian strategic arms reductions undermining the U.S. deterrent; Japanese do.

Trilateral discussions are always a touchy subject in Northeast Asia. All governments are for them in principle, but each wants to be at every meeting – which would turn them into quadrilaterals. Our South Korean participants endorsed the various trilateral formulations – even those their country did not attend. At the same time, however, there was an undercurrent of concern about issues vital to ROK national interests being decided in its absence. As one ROK participant explained – in a view echoed by others – “Koreans are still captivated by a sense of vulnerability and fear that decisions will be made without them.” It is essential, then, that the U.S. maintain ROK trust and confidence: with that foundation, there will be little concern when the U.S. meets other dialogue partners.

Several Korean participants warned that maintaining stability in U.S.-ROK relations is made more difficult by the prominent role that public opinion plays in foreign policy making. One insisted that the link between foreign policy and domestic politics is closest in South Korea when comparing all Northeast Asian nations. Another noted that a “dominant and aggressive” civil society makes it hard for the government to control foreign policy; swings in public mood often occur, triggered by specific incidents that involve its partners or neighbors. Yet another argued that trilateral cooperation that excludes Seoul has the potential to undermine the Lee Myung-bak government by making it look weak and irrelevant. Washington has to be careful. This participant also suggested that if the U.S. wants to do something to truly strengthen the U.S.-ROK relationship, it should pass the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS). Many in the room (Koreans and Americans alike) shared this view.

Perceptions of the global nonproliferation regime

The second session honed in on a specific component of the security landscape, the global nonproliferation regime (GNR). Our Korean presenter focused on nuclear policy regarding the Korean Peninsula. He began by noting that denuclearization was important, but that North Korean tactics make it harder to maintain the united front among the five parties – China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the U.S. – that is required to force Pyongyang to honor its denuclearization pledge. Difficult thought that task may be, he fears that signs of North Korean willingness to return to negotiations would make it harder still for the five to maintain a unity of purpose. Offers to talk could provoke tensions in South Korea, and reopen “South-South conflict.” Moreover, he urged the U.S. to demand North Korean reciprocity in any deal that it contemplated, especially if it included a “comprehensive package.”

Looking at U.S. policy, our speaker suggested that many South Koreans were comfortable, at least in theory, with the embrace of a preemptive strategy, as long as it strengthened deterrence. Actual application of that policy, and the prospect of war, was worrisome, however. Given ROK concerns about asymmetric North Korean capabilities, the threat to use tactical nuclear weapons makes sense as a deterrent, but in reality, such a policy could have a negative impact on alliance dynamics. He noted that ROK planning is out of sync with that of the U.S., especially the timelines to produce key planning statements. Still, those deadlines force the ROK to work to reduce gaps between the two militaries regarding capabilities and readiness. This effort is critical as the two countries work together on out of area operations, such as Iraq.

Our speaker said that this experience has shown the ROK that it needs to develop its own strategy documents, that it needs to consult more actively with Washington as the U.S. develops its strategies, and that both government and nongovernmental experts should be working on ways to operationalize the joint vision spelled out by the two presidents in June 2009. He would like to see specific measures that can insulate the alliance from domestic politics. He also wants the U.S. to reaffirm that it will respond with force if nuclear weapons are used against South Korea, and that the U.S. will not accept a nuclear North Korea. (When asked what more the U.S. could do to make that last point clear – U.S. officials and track two participants insist at every opportunity that Washington is *not* acquiescing to a nuclear North Korea – there was no answer.)

Our U.S. presenter looked at the big picture. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the cornerstone of the GNR, has been in trouble since the late 1990s. The Senate’s rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty undermined the U.S. position as a leader of the nonproliferation movement, and the entire GNR. President Barack Obama’s Prague speech, which embraced nuclear disarmament, is part of a broader rethinking of the nuclear option and the prospects for disarmament. The chief challenge today is reconciling the “nuclear renaissance” as states contemplate nuclear energy and movement toward nuclear zero. Additional concerns include the spread of biological capabilities and the rise of nonstate actors, the countering of which necessitates the creation of new doctrines and procedures.

There is hope, however. The Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) enjoys wider acceptance; our presenter anticipates the U.S. will seek to obtain UN approval for it.

Seoul's decision to join the PSI is an important step forward. The passage of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1540 is another key development. It requires all states to strengthen nonproliferation measures and provides means to facilitate national capacity-building to do that. Regional organizations and institutions play a vital role in ensuring that UNSCR 1540 is implemented; multilateral partnerships key to its effectiveness. As our speaker noted, success depends on creating a sense of local ownership of these initiatives, an appreciation of local perspectives, and a long-range perspective.

While there is widespread concern about the durability of the global nonproliferation regime, our discussion suggested that concerns about its erosion in the last few years have had a positive effect: countries are cognizant of the need to do more. (On the other hand, one ROK participant flatly stated that the average Korean doesn't see nuclear proliferation as a direct threat to Korean security; sadly, that view is more widespread than many like to admit.) The ROK decision to join PSI, a move that China is also said to be contemplating, is an encouraging development. More progress can be made if the PSI was better understood. A U.S. participant lamented the misunderstandings that surround the initiative and urged better PR to minimize objections. A focus should be on building capabilities to halt proliferation, rather than high-profile seizures. The U.S. needs to better define what "institutionalization" of the PSI means and collaborate with the ROK to persuade Beijing to join this counter-proliferation effort.

An ROK participant countered that many of South Korea's key concerns go beyond the ambit of the GNR as it currently exists. They include the future of North Korean nuclear scientists after unification and converting and cleaning up the DPRK military-industrial complex.

Attempts to strengthen the GNR could create difficulties in the U.S.-ROK relationship. Korea has a bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement with the U.S. that limits ROK access to enrichment technology. This agreement expires in 2012, and U.S. desires to increase restrictions on such technology is already a sore spot in Seoul. U.S. arguments that the abuse of such technology requires tighter standards were dismissed by our ROK participants; allies should be treated better. They took offense at being lumped in a group with a country like Iran. As one explained, the ROK's "nuclear energy requirements should be decoupled from proliferation concerns." The U.S. objection to the South's acquisition of reprocessing technology "is bad news for the alliance." Washington's readiness to cut a deal with India over such technology is especially galling – as is Japan's possession of reprocessing and enrichment technologies. Arguments that those deals reflect another time won no sympathy.

Our discussion also included the extended deterrent. While participants generally applauded the mention of nuclear deterrence in the two presidents' June joint statement, several Americans argued that this could be interpreted as a lack of faith in the alliance and this was of concern. In reality, references to the deterrent are not new. Today, the chief concern is balancing the desire for progress on disarmament with the need to maintain the deterrent. Allies' views of this process need to be heard and incorporated into the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) process. One ROK participant urged the U.S. administration to avoid "pie in the sky" idealism and to not present its conclusions as a *fait accompli* to allies. One South Korean noted, however, that concerns about extended

deterrence in Seoul are rising, not because of doubts about the U.S. commitment to ROK defense, but because of a rising sense of threat from the North.

Several ROK participants pressed for more details regarding operational use of U.S. nuclear weapons. In what circumstances would a nuclear strike be considered? When is a conventional strike preferred? Several South Korean speakers endorsed a decapitation strategy against North Korea, and urged the two countries to study its feasibility and how it could be carried out.

Asian Nuclear Dynamics

The third session burrowed down into a more detailed examination of nuclear dynamics in Asia. Our U.S. presenter focused on the impact of North Korea's nuclear programs. He called for a more balanced assessment of the country's capabilities and their impact. Despite the furor and the attention, he reminded the group that North Korea should not be called "a nuclear power," nor is it in the same category as the eight states with nuclear forces. He also warned that there is great uncertainty surrounding the size of its stockpile and its nuclear materials and all estimates and extrapolations need to take that into account.

That uncertainty serves North Korean interests since the key to deterrence is shaping an adversary's perceptions. The human cost of a military conflict on the Peninsula (conventional or nuclear) would be huge, and the amount of damage that could be inflicted -- and this shapes perceptions and could possibly *deter* US/ROK military action -- depends on the size of the North's nuclear holdings. A larger stockpile means Pyongyang could use cause more damage and claim more lives. Our speaker also noted that the economic consequences of war are equally compelling and large enough to frustrate Southern aims to reunify the peninsula.

Therefore, our speaker argued that deterrence on the Korean Peninsula should focus not on punishing North Korea, but on denying it the opportunity to achieve its objectives. Pyongyang must believe that it cannot start a war and accomplish its goals. Convincing the North of that outcome is both a political and a military challenge, however. Managing the political consequences of some actions is likely to be difficult: for example, positioning new or additional U.S. weapons systems in the ROK, especially if they are nuclear-capable, would send a strong message to Pyongyang. But it is also likely to ignite a domestic political firestorm and the potential for this backlash limits alliance options.

The ROK presenter looked beyond the Korean Peninsula, noting that the status quo is changing and that nonlinear transitions are possibilities. Past success in deterring conflict doesn't guarantee similar success in the future. One of the most important changes is the emergence of a new balance of power in Northeast Asia. All regional stakeholders are at the height of their national power and they can project power beyond their shores. As he noted, "all the key stakeholders in and around the Korean Peninsula currently have at their disposals the most powerful, destructive, and accurate power projection capabilities since their founding as modern nation states." (One can debate if this is indeed true when it comes to Japan, but it does reflect a common perception about Japanese military capabilities despite the absence of a true power projection capability.)

And the peninsula remains a locus of activity. In his formulation, the country that controls the Korean Peninsula can hinder the ambitions of its rivals. This means that competition is increasing among states as they try to ensure their respective advantages.

Fortunately, the current regional hegemon – the U.S. – retains its status and there is no indication of immediate decline. Our speaker also believes that there is little chance of additional nuclear dominoes in the region as long as the North Korean nuclear threat is contained, the U.S. remains engaged, and China refrains from overt aggression. From his perspective, a South Korean decision to go nuclear would be a strategic blunder since it would give Japan an excuse to follow suit; it would make China and Russia its natural enemies; and it would dissolve the alliance with the U.S. (This view was shared by all our ROK participants, even though public opinion polls show a growing majority of ROK citizens support having an independent nuclear weapons capability – but much of this support is soft.)

That said, South Korea needs robust conventional capabilities and strategic intelligence; it should be working with the U.S. to revamp the nuclear umbrella (regardless of the North Korean threat); and it should be developing a global vision and figuring out how to realize that vision.

Discussion focused on deterrence dynamics. Speakers from both countries acknowledged that the U.S. and South Korea have had limited success deterring North Korea from taking various actions: a second Korean war has not been started, but the North has taken numerous provocative steps and repeatedly crossed red lines while incurring only marginal costs. If there is success, it occurs only when Washington and Seoul present a united front. (To the degree that it has been punished, a U.S. participant argued, Pyongyang has been subject to compellence, not deterrence.) In fact, North Korea has in many ways successfully deterred its adversaries from taking harsh actions against it. The key task, one American insisted, is undermining *that* deterrent.

Participants agreed that North Korea genuinely believes it needs nuclear weapons – to deter a U.S. attack, to ensure regime survival, for domestic political purposes, or some other rationale. (The factual basis of those beliefs is irrelevant: the point is North Korea believes it needs a nuclear arsenal.) And, given the depth of that conviction, there is little hope that Pyongyang would give up its weapons. Nonetheless, as a U.S. participant explained, the U.S. has to explore all diplomatic options to get allies on board for tougher measures. Another American added that diplomacy is important to prepare for a North Korean collapse.

In these circumstances, extended deterrence takes on new meaning. U.S. allies need to be assured that the U.S. commitment to their defense is real. Thus, as one ROK participant explained, the reference to the nuclear umbrella in the June joint statement is primarily intended to reassure South Koreans even as it sends North Korea a clear message. But, there is also fear that if the North is backed into a corner, then it could use its weapons as a final desperate protest. So U.S. language has to be calibrated to provide assurance without going too far to threaten the North.

While there was skepticism about the ability of other governments to alter Pyongyang's strategic calculus, there was agreement that the decisionmaking context is

changing. Kim Jong-il is sick and trying to ensure that his son succeeds him. There is the potential for factional strife among elites, compounded by growing dissatisfaction among the masses. And Chinese views of North Korea are changing and that relationship is weakening. All these developments create new options and opportunities for the U.S. and the ROK, alone or as allies.

Korea Peninsula Dynamics

Our perspective then shifted to Korean Peninsula dynamics. Our Korean presenter painted a dark picture. He argued that we need a new model to explain Pyongyang's behavior. The country is a failed state on the edge of bankruptcy. He insisted that the goal of North Korean policy remains unchanged – forceful reunification – and its nuclear arsenal is designed to forestall U.S. intervention. That arsenal is intended to blackmail the South and intervene in domestic politics south of the DMZ.

Given that objective, the ROK needs the U.S. to secure the nation and to face any future challenges. The two nations should strengthen their alliance by creating a joint plan to reunify the Korean Peninsula; jointly explore multilateral and multilayered communications with China, Japan, and Russia to get support for that plan; establish a semi-permanent joint study group to deal with issues of common concern, such as North Korean denuclearization or out of area peacekeeping operations; and develop a consultative process to dispel mutual mistrust.

Our U.S. presenter echoed comments of the previous session, noting that while discussion of a North Korean collapse has fallen out of fashion, there is something fundamentally different about the current situation on the Korean Peninsula. Most significantly, he believes the previous regional consensus about maintaining North Korea is breaking down – “there is a broad regional acquiescence to unification” – and toleration for its antics is dropping. In his view, “the role the U.S. is perceived to play in the process of unification will be the determining factor in the future of the alliance.” At the same time, however, he insisted that the ROK will play the leading role in unification.

Other countries have equally important roles to play in that process, and there needs to be discussion and coordination to ensure that it unfolds with a minimum of difficulty. (Coordination is tough; reflexive reaction to North Korean provocations is easier – it isn't smarter, however.) While South Korean President Lee has called for five-party talks to address that issue (among others), the speaker noted that those talks are already underway as part of the six-party consultative process. In fact, he reminded the group that the core of the six-party process wasn't the plenary but the consultations among the participants. Now the chief task is moving away from mere diplomatic coordination to contingency planning. That requires even closer communications with Russia and China; success will require the U.S., the ROK, and Japan to be in sync.

That trilateral coordination contravenes the conventional six-party narrative, which insists the real heavy lifting in those talks concerns the U.S. and China. Our speaker pointed to the failures of the past five years to show the folly of that idea.

The cornerstone of effective planning will be a solid and unified U.S.-ROK position. Our speaker noted that it is tempting to blame tensions in the alliance on former

President Roh Moo-hyun; the real problem was differing perceptions of the North Korean threat, both among allies and within South Korea itself. Fortunately, the perception gap regarding North Korea in the South is narrowing largely as a result of North Korea's provocative actions; our speaker suggested that President Lee's North Korea policy is more popular than the president himself.

Finally, our speaker urged planners in the U.S. and the ROK (and Japan, for that matter) to view discrete steps forward as part of a larger evolving process, one that is creating the foundation for a broad-based international response.

Discussion focused on the prospect of North Korea's collapse. There was a division of views regarding the likelihood of that event. One Korean participant noted that the Northern economy registered 3.8 percent growth in 2008, trade had recovered to pre-1991 levels, and the country now has nuclear weapons. More significantly, assuming the North's implosion assumes away the most important question for the alliance – what to do if the Pyongyang government stays in power. There was disagreement on whether China had changed its views about having two states on the Peninsula. Several participants from both sides argued that Beijing still has an ideological and historical affinity for North Korea and it still likes the idea of a buffer zone.

Our Korean participants questioned whether there was a South Korean consensus on unification. One argued that a truly bipartisan North Korea policy in the South “is not possible.” Another ROK participant wouldn't go that far, but he did complain that while South Koreans should be the most enthusiastic supporters of unification, they aren't. He blamed a wariness born of the German experience and fears that the high costs of unification would undermine the South's economy. While conceding that divisions continue to run deep, a U.S. participant argued that a broad consensus is emerging and that the salience of the North Korean issue in Southern politics is diminishing. ROK participants appreciated and underscored the importance of the reference in the June 16 Joint Vision statement to “peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy.”

It is important to note that while the ROK government may pay lip service to support for any type of dialogue, including bilateral U.S.-North Korea talks, Korean participants alike expressed concern about a bilateral dialogue, cautioning that “close coordination,” while essential (and perceived as lacking during the final years of the Bush administration), is no substitute for being at the table. The domestic political cost to President Lee if the ROK were excluded from any denuclearization dialogue would be significant.

Understanding Deterrence and Other Roles of Strategic Systems

In our second day, discussion returned to the role of strategic systems in the alliance. Our ROK presenter began by returning to a comment of the previous day, that North Korea was forcing an evolution of the alliance. Proponents of this view pointed to the reference to the extended deterrent in the June Presidential Joint Statement. In fact, however, extended deterrence has been a part of the alliance for over three decades. And while our speaker noted that the attempt to reassure South Koreans is appreciated, attention to the deterrent commences a new debate in South Korea, one for which our

participants are not sure the ROK is prepared. There isn't a great deal of knowledge about how deterrence works, or how it should be evaluated and assessed. But, our speaker added, U.S. efforts to address ROK concerns and anxieties are valuable. In fact, he believes that close consultations on extended deterrence are key to the future of the alliance.

Our speaker conceded there is talk in South Korea about acquiring its own nuclear capability, but that comes from the right side of the political spectrum and doesn't command much of a constituency. (That opinion was seconded by other ROK participants.) There is support in South Korea for the acquisition of technologies for the peaceful use of nuclear energy, however. This desire is driven by a growing nuclear industry at home, a desire to seize business opportunities overseas as other countries explore the nuclear energy option, and the need to deal with 10,000 tons of unprocessed spent fuel. Equally important, South Korea wants treatment equal to that afforded Japan, which has its own nuclear reprocessing and enrichment facilities. As noted, the expiration of the U.S.-ROK civilian nuclear agreement in 2012 will be a subject of considerable contention.

The U.S. speaker focused on the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), one of the key U.S. strategy documents. It must be completed this year, which means that it is being completed as the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) is also underway and as the world gears up for the 2010 NPT Review Conference. It also occurs amidst a spirited debate in the U.S. about modernization of U.S. nuclear weapons and an international conversation about reductions in stockpiles by other nuclear weapon states.

According to our speaker, key questions for the new NPR include: how should the U.S. balance the needs for defense and deterrence with the desire for progress toward nuclear disarmament? What is the appropriate role and size of the U.S. nuclear force? What platforms are best suited to those roles and missions? For allies (and adversaries), focus is likely to be the meaning of extended deterrence. How do nuclear and conventional forces fit into that mission? What is the U.S. commitment to missile defense? Under what situation and circumstances would the U.S. use its nuclear weapons? In what situations and circumstances does the ROK expect the U.S. to use those weapons? To ensure that gaps do not emerge here, the speaker endorsed creation of a nuclear planning group type of approach between the U.S. and the ROK.

Finally, our speaker noted the high likelihood of problems being created by the negotiations over access to reprocessing technology. The international environment has changed and fears of proliferation are mounting. While the ROK's good record on this score, its domestic industrial concerns, and its status as a U.S. ally justify special treatment, the danger of sending the wrong message is real. It isn't clear how the U.S. can exit this dilemma.

The Obama administration's desire to move toward greater cuts in its nuclear arsenal has alarmed some allies who fear it will undermine the extended deterrent. This fear is frequently voiced in Japan, where strategists worry it will tempt China to build up to parity with the U.S. and Russia. South Koreans don't appear to share that concern. As one noted, "unlike Japan, we don't seek rivalry with China, so those cuts don't matter to

us.” Another explained that China has said that it will only use its nuclear weapons in retaliation and since the ROK has no nuclear weapons, it cannot be a Chinese target.

A second topic was how deterrence would work. Can conventional weapons do the job or must the U.S. use nuclear capabilities? Since, as one ROK participant noted, deterrence “is in the eyes of the beholder,” a conventional deterrent that looks more flexible and usable is inherently more credible. There were divisions among the South Korea participants about the desirability of a no-first-use (NFU) policy. One ROK participant wondered how the proposed transfer of OPCON would affect extended deterrence. He focused on conventional means of expanding Seoul’s own deterrence options: deployment of PAC -3 batteries, Aegis systems, and next-generation cruise missiles.

Coming to a conclusion on this matter, like all other such discussions, requires an expert group of strategists that is knowledgeable about the issues. It isn’t clear if that expertise exists in South Korea; our Korean participants couldn’t agree. An American countered that the process of debate and discussion can create the needed group of experts. That raises the question of whether the U.S. is prepared to engage in a debate sufficiently detailed to either “educate” its partners or assuage their concerns. That too is an uncertain proposition.

Much of the discussion focused on ROK access to new nuclear technologies. As one U.S. participant insisted, “the energy question is the most important one in the U.S.-ROK dialogue for the next 5-10 years.” The top priority, insisted an ROK participant, is reprocessing the steadily growing stockpile of spent fuel. But it quickly became clear that national needs are not the only driving force in this discussion. Korean participants highlighted the role that status plays in their thinking. As one complained, the nuclear agreement “is hurting the psychology of South Koreans.” Noting that Japan possesses enrichment and reprocessing technologies, not giving Seoul the same access “will hurt our pride and our psychology.”

U.S. participants argued that the agreement with Japan reflected a particular set of circumstances – and, most importantly, another period in time – to no avail. A South Korean participant countered that the desire to forge a global strategic partnership with the ROK meant the U.S. should pay “special attention” to Seoul. And the novelty of that arrangement, another Korean insisted, reinforces ROK claims for special treatment.

The Alliance

From a South Korean perspective, alliance management begins with a realistic assessment of North Korean policy. For our speaker, the North’s nuclear tests showed that the current strategy, which employs carrots and sticks, is ineffective. If Pyongyang is to change course, Beijing must squeeze its long-time partner. But warnings about nuclear dominoes won’t motivate China; instead the U.S. has to apply pressure on Beijing to act. These developments demonstrate the limits of the current approach. Our speaker said that a new multilateral channel is needed to complement the Six-Party Talks: “bread and a hammer” are needed.

It has also become clear that the ROK has little leverage over the North. That means Seoul has to strengthen cooperation with both the U.S. and Japan and work more closely with other regional powers and in the UN to fortify its nuclear diplomacy. He endorsed full participation in the PSI not only to prevent North Korean proliferation but to promote Seoul's international status.

Our Korean participants argued that their country is increasingly hostage to North Korean nuclear weapons. That means the alliance's emphasis must shift from defending the South against an attack to deterring one. (It isn't clear how much of a shift that is in reality ...) That is the rationale behind ROK insistence on mention of the extended deterrent in the June vision statement: it was designed to reinforce the nuclear umbrella. At the same time, the two countries need to move their nuclear discussions to a higher level (raising the status of such discussions); expand the scope of the umbrella to include protection against all WMD attacks, and to follow up with the dispatch of a nuclear sub to put some substance behind the rhetoric. His additional suggestions include amending guidelines that restrict ROK missile capability to permit the development of longer-range missiles (up to 750 km), expanding cooperation on missile defense, as well as cooperation on missile technology that would allow South Korea to cultivate an autonomous deterrent capability. Like other speakers, he called for contingency planning in the event of a North Korean collapse: the two sides should standardize terms and concepts, agree on mutual objectives by phase, and delineate the role of other regional actors.

Our U.S. participant gave the alliance a positive assessment. He urged participants to avoid judging the relationship on the basis of the process; like sausage making, it's an ugly sight. More important, the two governments should focus on products and outcomes. He was heartened by their steady push to realize new goals and avoid resting on old accomplishments. He was particularly pleased by the gradual evolution of roles for the ROK in and out of the alliance, all of which strengthen the bilateral relationship.

For him, the big issue is the two countries' ability to coordinate policy on North Korea. Thus far, the record is relatively good. The two countries have deterred an invasion and reassured allies after nuclear tests. (The ROK request for written guarantees of extended deterrence undercuts that last accomplishment somewhat, as do various ROK requests for new capabilities such as Patriot interceptors, Global Hawk vehicles, missile defense, EMP protection, and the desire to delay transfer of OPCON.) They have shown they can use sanctions against the North and impose an effective counterproliferation regime. At the same time, they haven't figured out how to deter nuclear tests and transfers. But, he also cautioned that while denuclearization is important, the real prize is a united, free, and democratic Korean Peninsula.

Our speaker's list of immediate alliance concerns has three items: a high-level bilateral agreement on how to deal with North Korea; OPCON transfer; and the KORUS FTA. The latter is a real problem as there is no way it will be concluded this year, which means it can become an issue in the 2010 U.S. mid-term elections. Our speaker called for reframing this as a strategic issue rather than a trade agreement. While this is certainly the case, there is little reason to be optimistic that a redefinition will change political dynamics.

Not surprisingly, discussion focused on two issues: OPCON and the questions surrounding the mention of extended deterrence in the June vision statement. Americans insisted that the OPCON transfer was good for the alliance. It eliminates the stigma of a “big brother, little brother” relationship, it gives the ROK the leading role in its own defense – as should be the case – and it is seen by other regional governments as strengthening the alliance. If North Korea sees the move as increasing U.S. flexibility, then that is another reason to proceed. Just as important, a delay would send the wrong signal – that the ROK is not prepared – and would derail a process that is already well underway.

While South Korean participants professed some discomfort with the transfer deadlines, resistance is diminishing. Part of that reflects growing confidence in ROK capabilities, but it is also acknowledgement of the fact that there are political consequences in Seoul and in alliance relations to reopening discussions. That said, several ROK participants said they would be happy if the process was slowed. Ominously, one warned that the U.S. should explore whether such a move is good for the long-term health of the alliance.

That warning was ambiguous, but it appeared to reflect Korean fears that the transfer signals a desire to loosen ties between the allies. That concern triggered the need for a reference to the extended deterrent in the June presidential statement. One ROK participant explained that there is concern that the Obama administration is too desirous of dialogue with Pyongyang and could make too many concessions to resume negotiations. If that’s the case, an American participant warned that the alliance has trust problems that go to the very heart of the bilateral relationship.

Another Korean participant argued that the reference to extended deterrence was intended to send a strong message to Pyongyang, one that previous Seoul governments were not willing to make. Our discussions suggest that this political dimension of extended deterrence could be the key to determining the future of the alliance. The problem, one U.S. participant argued, was that North Korea is, as several earlier speakers insisted, driving evolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance. He argued that the bilateral framework must expand beyond that narrow focus. Several Korean participants countered that the focus on North Korea is correct, but that the agenda should be expanded to include all threats, not just those of nuclear weapons. Thus, the discussion returned full circle to differences in threat perception with which the conference began.

After two days of discussion, however, participants were more blunt. After an American charged that “the alliance is mostly characterized by deep anxiety of Koreans about abandonment,” a South Korean countered that “there is a pull between entrapment and abandonment; ending this depends on the maturity of the Seoul government.” Several Korean speakers doubted the prospects for such a development; there was even more skepticism whether the current Seoul government could do so. One ROK participant argued his country lacks three key qualities: the ability to anticipate U.S. needs, the capacity to endure in a policy in the face of political opposition, and a readiness to pursue goals that maximize alliance interests. An American countered that this mentality is a reversion to the traditional Korean mindset that it is “a shrimp among whales.” Today, however, “the ROK is a dolphin.”

A dolphin can still be swamped by whale-like neighbors. The ROK's growing will and capacity to do more on its own behalf doesn't eliminate the need for reassurance from its ally and partner. The problem for strategists is balancing the need for reassurance with the danger of appearing belligerent (or encouraging free riders). One ROK participant suggested that a section in the NPR that addresses allied concerns would help allay Korean anxieties about tolerating a nuclear North Korea or weakening the nuclear umbrella. Others called for a more active approach. For example, there was support again for a decapitation strategy against North Korea in the event Pyongyang launched a nuclear attack. A U.S. participant warned that this would require changes in U.S. strategy, doctrine, and weapon requirements.

This discussion exposed the dilemma for Korea that lies at the heart of the extended deterrence debate. While Koreans seek reassurance from the U.S. and insist that their inclusion in the planning process would help achieve that objective, there is also fear that South Korean politicians and the public are not prepared for such discussions. Our ROK participants were doubtful that anyone in their government would want to be known to be taking part in discussions about using nuclear weapons against other Koreans. As one ROK participant explained, "the use of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula is not acceptable; threatening their use is." Another added that nuclear retaliation by the U.S. in response to a North Korean nuclear attack against the South would be acceptable, but he wasn't sure that the ROK public would agree to such a response to a nuclear attack against Japan. As one U.S. participant concluded, alliance discussions of this sort would be "a political bombshell," and he wasn't sure that Korean society is prepared for them.

Before the meeting broke up, two Pacific Forum Young Leaders, one from each country, provided a next generation perspective on the meeting. Both expressed disappointment, noting that while the June vision statement called for an expanded role for the alliance, our discussions seemed too narrow. They complained that for all the talk of moving the alliance beyond a threat-based relationship, North Korea continues to provide the glue for the two countries – as least as far as our discussions were concerned. They would expand the agenda in two ways. First, they would talk about the U.S.-ROK relationship, rather than just the alliance. If reassurance is a key concern, then they support broadening contacts across the two societies in ways that more deeply intertwine them and thereby increase U.S. appreciation for the ROK as well as diminish Korean fears of abandonment. Second, the Young Leaders wanted to see more attention paid to China – not as a threat but as a geopolitical reality. The U.S. and the ROK need to come up with more ways to engage China, to diminish tensions and reduce misperceptions. This process is good for regional stability generally, but could also provide a foundation for dealing with enduring issues like North Korea.

Most of our participants agreed that the U.S.-ROK relationship is moving forward; one Korean thought the alliance deserves an "A-" today. But there are no illusions about the obstacles to more effective cooperation or any certainty that the current good mood can be maintained. The alliance requires constant tending; there can be no resting on past accomplishments. The challenge is creating an atmosphere of trust that gives both sides the confidence to deal with the unexpected and a bilateral process that helps them respond when the unexpected occurs. Our inaugural U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue is an important step toward both goals.

U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue
July 26-28, 2009

AGENDA

July 26, 2009, SUNDAY

6:30PM Welcome Reception and Dinner

July 27, 2009, MONDAY

9:00AM Opening Remarks (Introductions, dialogue background, expectations)

9:30AM Session 1: Perceptions of the Asian Security Environment

This session explores each country's view of the regional security environment, to identify issues, and highlight shared and divergent concerns. What are the principle strategic threats to each country and to regional security and stability? How have the threat perceptions and concerns changed in recent years?

11:15AM Session 2: Perspectives on the NPT, the PSI, and other Counter-Proliferation Regimes

The proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, in particular the spread of nuclear weapons, has been identified as one of the top security threats by President Obama and in numerous U.S. national security documents. How effective is the NPT and other unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral countering proliferation regimes? What could be done to make them more effective? How do documents like the American NPR and QDR influence ROK decision-makers?

12:30PM Lunch

1:30PM Session 3: Perspectives on Asian Nuclear Dynamics

This session explores the role of nuclear weapons and strategic systems (such as missile defense and other defense technologies) in the region. How are American nuclear forces best postured in the region? What are the prospects for improved U.S.-ROK-Japan AND U.S.-ROK-China trilateral cooperation? What are ROK concerns about U.S.-Japan-China trilateral cooperation?

3:00PM Coffee Break

3:15PM Session 4: Korean Peninsula Dynamics

This session focuses on security relations on the Korean Peninsula. What influence do North-South relations and unification policies have on the U.S.-ROK alliance? How do U.S.-DPRK relations and Six-Party negotiations impact the alliance? What role should multilateral institutions such as the Six-Party Talks have in defining security relations on the Peninsula? How should the U.S. and ROK deal with a potential collapse in

North Korea? What role should China, Japan and/or the U.N. play in security relations on the peninsula?

5:00PM Session adjourns

6:30PM Reception and Dinner

July 28, 2009, TUESDAY

9:00AM Session 5: Understanding Deterrence and the Roles of Strategic Systems
How does the ROK rate the credibility and effectiveness of American extended deterrence and other strategic systems such as BMD? Is this view changing? Is the ROK contemplating more self-reliant or 'hedging' strategies?

10:30AM Coffee Break

10:45AM Session 6: The Alliance
How do Koreans and Americans rate the health and mutual respect of the alliance? What are the two countries' respective roles and responsibilities within the alliance? What would cause the collapse of the Alliance?

12:30 PM Lunch

2:00 PM Session 7: U.S.-ROK Strategic Nuclear Dialogues – Future Topics and Participants
How can future strategic dialogues help the U.S. and the ROK improve mutual understanding of perceived strategic threats and increase allied capabilities to deter or defeat them? What non-military strategic threats (demographic, economic, resources) most challenge each nation and the alliance, and how have these threats evolved? How can each nation help the other prepare for future strategic challenges?

3:30 PM Session 8: Conclusions and Wrap Up

4:00 PM Conference adjourns

U.S.-ROK Strategic Dialogue
July 26-28, 2009

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