

US-ROK Strategic Forum

The Search for a Common Strategic Vision: Charting the Future of the US-ROK Security Partnership

THE US-REPUBLIC OF KOREA security partnership is at a crossroads. For half a century the alliance has been an essential component of each country's security and a source of peace and stability in East Asia. But the region is undergoing rapid change. China is rising, American strategic interests are shifting and the Republic of Korea has grown and prospered and seeks greater independence in its foreign and security policies. New security challenges are emerging in the region — and around the world. In the meantime, the United States and the Republic of Korea have just emerged from a period of acrimony over strategy toward North Korea and the wider terms of the security alliance.

This Report offers a comprehensive reassessment of the US-ROK security partnership. In our judgment, the alliance between the US and the Republic of Korea is a vital national security interest of each country, as is the stability and security of Northeast Asia more broadly. Over the decades, this alliance has been more than a security pact; it has been an institutionalized expression of a political and economic friendship — two countries as partners and participants in a larger international order built on shared interests, values, and aspirations. In looking into the future — and at the complex security challenges that await — a revitalized US-ROK alliance will

be more, not less, important to our respective countries and the region.

The US-ROK partnership should be reaffirmed, but it should also be modernized and redefined. The alliance provides a solid foundation for addressing the future, but provides little guidance as to how the alliance’s mission, priorities, scope and even its institutional identity should adjust to the recent changes and trends in Northeast Asia and the evolving security challenges of the 21st century. In this Report, we chart a path of strategic cooperation between the United States and South Korea for this new era.

To reaffirm and place the alliance on a more solid footing, this Report recommends the following specific steps:

- The United States and the Republic of Korea must begin to sketch a new — and shared — strategic vision that goes beyond tactical questions relating to North Korea. The alliance must be seen in wider and longer-term perspective as an institutionalized security partnership with a mandate to address both traditional and “new” security challenges in the region and the global system. In the 21st century, the alliance must become a “multi-tasking” entity.
- The terms of the alliance — and the roles and expectations of each partner — must also be redefined. The old patron-client style of partnership should give way to a more equal and reciprocal relationship. These shifts in status and voice within the alliance come with a renegotiation of roles and responsibilities — roles and responsibilities that are detailed in this Report.
- Even as the American strategic priorities shift on a global level — and basing and deployment commitments evolve — the United States nonetheless reaffirms its commitment to the security of South Korea. In doing this, it should also make a commitment to the basing of at least 25,000 troops in South Korea.

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- The new shared US-ROK strategic vision should include several areas for immediate dialogue and action: these include narrowing disagreements on North Korea, developing a common approach to China, and working together on the development of a new regional security mechanism.
- The search for a new US-ROK strategic vision should also include identifying a common agenda for addressing new transnational and regional challenges — challenges that involve establishing mechanisms to deal with environmental degradation, contagious diseases, energy security and conservation, WMD proliferation, and illicit activities.

At the heart of this Report is a simple message: the half-century old US-ROK alliance remains vital to the security and strategic interests of both countries. The security challenges in the region are changing — but they are not going away. The alliance needs to be redefined and modernized for the 21st century, but its best decades remain ahead of it. To tackle the new challenges — regional and transnational — the alliance must evolve out of the old patron-client framework of the Cold War era. The two countries must work together in new ways, with a new division of labor and a new equality of role and responsibility.

At its core, the alliance embodies a solemn commitment to fight, if necessary, on behalf of the other alliance partner. But the United States and the Republic of Korea are not simply partners in a narrow sense, defined by the threat from North Korea; the alliance is much more than a “business relationship” between two parties. Developed, nurtured and sustained for over five decades, the alliance is a framework that supports and facilitates a genuine political friendship. It is a deeper relationship built on history and shared interests and values. Moreover, the ROK’s political and economic transformation — joining in recent decades the

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ranks of leading capitalist democracies — only expands the interests and values that the two countries share; together, they serve as positive examples to the region of the power of free ideas and free markets.

The institutional mechanisms of the alliance are integral to this relationship. They provide channels of communication that help the larger bilateral partnership to function effectively. A reaffirmed and redefined alliance should be supported by both countries for real and important security reasons. But it should also be embraced for its wider value — as the institutional embodiment and framework for an expanding and deepening political and economic partnership.

To put this alliance on a stronger footing for the 21st century, this Report argues that a new, shared strategic vision is needed. The Report outlines this vision. This vision begins with the idea that the alliance will be a “multi-tasking” entity — it will be a security partnership that will be configured to address a wide array of regional problems. The alliance will seek to develop a common approach to China. The two countries will work together to help build a regional security mechanism — building on the framework of the Six-Party Talks. The two countries will also seek to anchor their relationship in a trade pact that facilitates deepening economic ties. Finally, all alliances need to have “friends” of the alliance working domestically in each country to support the alliance. These friends of the alliance are important as they keep an eye on the issues, spot

emerging conflicts, and look for ways to support and deepen the partnership. As the US-ROK alliance evolves to meet the challenges of the 21st century, supporters of the alliance on both sides will need to become public champions of the alliance and its vital role in the new era.

A full copy of the report, released in February 2008, can be viewed at http://www.keaf.org/htm/news_releases.htm?AC=view&num=3&no=404&page=1.

The report is the product of a multiyear, bipartisan, binational “strategic forum” to candidly discuss the strengths and address the weaknesses in the U.S.-ROK alliance, place them in a regional and global context and look ahead to identify ways to ensure its future success. The forum was organized by The College of William & Mary, the Institute for Korean Unification Studies at Yonsei University, and the East Asia Foundation. It was co-directed by G. John Ikenberry, Chung-in Moon and Mitchell Reiss.