

The Future of the U.S.-Korea Alliance: Emerging into the Post-Modern International Politics

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Unfortunately, war is normal in international relations. Since 1500 there have been more years with wars than without wars in international relations.¹ A war joined the United States of America and South Korea in 1950. The two countries fought against a common enemy during the Korean War, establishing a shared experience of protecting freedom at the cost of some hundred thousand lives. This shared experience has been one of the cornerstones of the U.S.-Korea alliance. The alliance has lasted for more than 50 years. It is, however, faced with challenges today.

Surprisingly, the challenges have originated internally rather than externally: the rise of anti-American sentiment in South Korea. Robert Hathaway, director of the Wilson Center's Asia program, accurately puts, "The growth of anti-American sentiment in Japan and South Korea must be seen not simply as a response to American policies and actions, but as reflective of deeper domestic trends and developments within these Asian countries."² A collective venting of grievances and distrust that have lain hidden for decades is reflected in the sentiment. As exemplified in the candlelight vigils on the U.S. beef in Korea and the protests that have arisen over specific incidents, the anti-Americanism has given a substantial impact to the U.S.-Korea alliance. What went wrong?

The disparity in values and perceptions between the U.S. and South Korea

The first thing to note is a disparity between the two countries on the ways in which each perceives the other and the values each manifests in its foreign policies. Where does this disparity come from?

According to the result of the World Values Survey conducted by the World Values Survey Association, on the national level, South Korea is engrossed in the values "secular-rational" and "survival." Due to its unique geopolitical location surrounded by four Great Powers—the U.S., Russia, Japan, and China—Korea has been keen to the matter of its survival throughout the history. This is reflected in South Korean foreign policy and its national security principles.

By contrast, the U.S. is more concerned with the values "traditional-rational" and

¹ Joseph S. Nye Jr, Ryan, Henry and C. Edward Reartree eds. *The information revolution and international security* (Washington DC: CSIS, 1998) pp.7-13.

² Robert Hathaway, "The Making of "Anti-American" Sentiment in Korea and Japan," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 6, 2003.

“self-expressive.”³ The U.S. foreign policy and security strategies are based on more global and universal values such as democracy, human rights, global economic integration, and so on.

Given this difference between the two countries, the decisions made by the U.S. can be perceived in a different way by South Korea and provoke objections. The opposition of Koreans with regard to withdrawing the second division of U.S. troops to the rear station reveals the disparity between the two countries’ perceptions. The U.S. made the decision within a broader context of its global military and defense strategy—reduction in the ground force and reinforcement of mobility—whereas South Korea perceived the withdrawal as decreased strategic importance or declined strategic interest in South Korea. The anxiety shown by the Koreans regarding the possibility of U.S.’s single attack on North Korea also reveals the gap in perceptions between the two countries. This gap has originated from the distrust that the Koreans have toward the U.S.

Modern alliance in a post-modern world

The framework of the U.S.-Korea alliance was set out more than 50 years ago, during the Cold War era. Meanwhile, today’s international relations has dramatically transformed into a post-modern system. A post-modern system is institutionally complex and characterized as a movement “beyond” modernity,⁴ or the Cold War system in international relations. The blocks of sovereign borders are becoming somewhat powerless in relation to rapid social and cultural integration such as transnational civil society network. The terms and norms that once were used in analyzing the world are now becoming relatively useless. Sources of power in international relations are changing. In all these transitions, the U.S.-Korea alliance still remains in its features crafted half a century ago.

The future of the alliance: managing the complexity on a common ground

Then, what shall we do? The answer can be found in what have become the cliché describing today’s world: “globalization.” The alliance has to prove itself effective in dealing with new problems arising in a globalized world, such as terrorism, humanitarian assistance, international development, forced migration, human rights, drug, human trafficking, environment, and so on. These emerging problems, at the same time, can be sources for strengthening the alliance when addressed and dealt with properly by the U.S.-Korea alliance.

The North Korean nuclear issue is an example that explains how the alliance should approach a common problem from new and multiple perspectives. It has to be acknowledged that the North Korean nuclear problem is not simply limited to bilateral diplomatic negotiations

³ Ronald Inglehart, “National-level value scores on the two major values dimensions,” World Values Survey Association, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.com/> [Accessed Jan 20, 2009].

⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990) p.163.

between North Korea and the U.S. As seen in the six-party talk, the problem is a regional one involving major states in Northeast Asia. It is a global issue as well in light of the international nuclear non-proliferation movement. The U.S.-Korea alliance should have the capacity to manage the multi-layers of the problem that goes far beyond a simple military or security implication.

The unification of North and South Korea is another example. The matter is not merely bound to the peninsula. It is a regional problem in view of Northeast Asian regional integration, and a global problem considering conflict resolution and the expansion of democracy. The U.S.-Korea alliance should show its leadership in the process, managing the different levels and the complexity of the problem.

In order for the alliance to manage these complexities, South Korea should try to expand its international affairs to universal and global spectrum, going beyond its value-boundary of national “survival.” The U.S., simultaneously, should try to understand the specific values and history on which South Korean foreign policy is based. This will build and provide with a mutual ground for the alliance.

It is also important for both the U.S. and South Korea to recognize that the alliance is now faced with new common problems—such as terrorism, global financial crisis, humanitarian emergency, environment security, etc—that require measures far beyond the traditional security or military actions in solving them. All of these problems came forward in a more globalized, post-modern world. It can be said that now the alliance is faced with new and additional common external enemies. Only by being grounded on a mutual understanding of the other and playing an essential role in confronting the emerging common problems would the U.S.-Korea alliance succeed in keeping peace in Korea, Northeast Asia, and the world.

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