

JOINT U.S.-KOREA ACADEMIC STUDIES

2013 | VOLUME 24

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BILATERAL COMPETITION AND COOPERATION UNDER NEW LEADERSHIP

South Korea and the U.S.

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The U.S.-South Korea alliance has flourished under Presidents Obama and Lee Myungbak. It is difficult to find words of criticism for the alliance in either Washington or Seoul as Obama starts his second term and Park Geun-hye begins her administration. Both presidents reaffirmed their respective commitments to policy coordination toward North Korea and issued a joint statement on the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the alliance during Park's first meeting with Obama at the White House. The statement underscored a commitment to broaden alliance functions beyond the peninsula, reaffirming commitments to a comprehensive alliance first announced by Obama and Lee in May 2009. Park and Obama also recognized the first anniversary of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA), which institutionalized another pillar of cooperation. These two agreements represent an expansion beyond extraordinarily close policy and security coordination toward North Korea, which has traditionally provided the main rationale for security cooperation. Basking in the glow of relations that may never have looked better, officials on both sides might be tempted to feel complacent, but concerns have been growing that difficult tests lie just over the horizon.

Although North Korea's provocative behavior and nuclear and ballistic missile tests have intensified with the leadership transition from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un and changes in the regional security environment are providing new challenges, the U.S.-ROK alliance has proven to be an unexpected source of stability for U.S. policymakers. In comparison with rising concern over Chinese assertiveness and the impact of Japan's domestic politics on its foreign relations, U.S.-ROK coordination in response to North Korean provocations has mainly been a good news story for Obama, but it remains to be seen how and whether South Korea will capitalize on its increased capacity to contribute to global security and standing in Washington to carve out a stronger regional role or whether renewed North Korean challenges might inhibit an expanded regional role for the alliance.² In the background is the challenge of maneuvering between the regional strategies of China and the United States, each of which has its own North Korea policy.

Park came into office with a mindset that is largely consistent with that of her predecessor on alliance issues. She inherited a stable relationship with promise for further development, but there are also some notable challenges that, if managed poorly, could test recent advances in the U.S.-ROK relationship. Following a review of new developments in the relationship at the peninsular, global, and regional levels, this chapter examines three challenges that will test the durability and direction of the security relationship: 1) the renegotiation of a nuclear cooperation agreement; 2) the U.S. rebalancing policy, North Korea's provocations, and their effect on U.S.-ROK relations; and 3) U.S. policy toward Korean reunification and its ramifications. Each of these issues involves areas of potential conflict between what ROK partners desire in U.S. policy and what U.S. policymakers consider to be their various functional/geographical objectives.

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE UNDER THE LEE AND OBAMA ADMINISTRATIONS

The Lee and Obama administrations cemented close relations based on an unprecedented convergence of national interests and expansion of South Korean capabilities and willingness to work with the United States on economic and off-peninsula non-traditional security issues. While these forms of cooperation were initiated under Roh Moo-hyun and George W. Bush despite their clear gap in world views, a shared vision for cooperation came to maturation under Obama and Lee. As a result of South Korea's economic growth and democratization, it emerged as a willing and able partner of the United States on many issues that extended beyond the main task of the alliance to secure South Korea from potential North Korean aggression. The June 2009 Joint Vision statement set the stage for a relationship bound by "trust," "values," and "peace." It set the tone for an ambitious agenda of expanded cooperation beyond North Korea on many issues, including global and regional security cooperation and the deepening of trade and investment relations through the KORUS FTA.

NORTH KOREA: CONSENSUS IN FAVOR OF DENUCLEARIZATION. But With Little Means to Pursue It

The Lee and Obama administrations both prioritized North Korea's denuclearization as the main challenge on the peninsula and moved in lockstep in response to early provocations, including an April 2009 failed multi-stage rocket launch, a May 2009 nuclear test, and difficult issues involving individual Americans and South Koreans who had been detained in North Korea. The insistence of both on the necessity of North Korea accepting denuclearization as a main agenda item proved to be a major obstacle to the resumption of Six-Party Talks despite sporadic efforts of each to pursue dialogue with the North. 4 North Korea's sinking of the Cheonan in March 2010 resulted in scores of military casualties and the Yeonpyeong Island shelling the following November took South Korean civilian lives for the first time since the end of the Korean War.

North Korea's multi-stage rocket test in April 2009 led Obama to declare that violations of international law must be punished, as he pushed for a tough UN Security Council resolution that authorized states to interdict suspected shipments related to nuclear and missile programs.⁵ Rather than rushing to dialogue with North Korea, Obama emphasized a regionally-coordinated response that sought to win China's cooperation, but China's decision in the summer of 2009 to strengthen relations with North Korea ran in the face of this sanctions-focused policy. North Korea's provocations and the need to closely coordinate a joint response fueled dozens of highlevel meetings involving diplomats from Washington and Seoul, as well as an expanded set of joint military exercises designed to reinforce a message of deterrence against aggression. Plans for U.S.-ROK military exercises drew critical responses in the summer of 2010 not only from North Korea but also from China, while Japan also become involved in exercises with South Korea and the United States, first as an observer and in June 2012 as a direct participant.⁶

While the need to mount an effective coordinated response to North Korea's 2010 provocations provided a basis for deepened U.S.-ROK political coordination, it also produced some subtle tensions that required careful management. The South Korean public criticized the Lee administration for not responding more strongly to the artillery shelling, and a civilian report advocated a policy of "proactive deterrence," including the right by South Korea to undertake preemptive strikes in self-defense in the event of an imminent North Korean threat. U.S. officials expressed private concerns that a stronger response to a new North Korean provocation could inadvertently lead to military escalation. The U.S. Forces Korea initiated an intensive dialogue with military counterparts to forge a joint

counter-provocation plan that outlined in greater detail immediate and proportional steps that the South Korean military might undertake in response to a North Korean attack while strengthening military and political coordination to manage any escalation. The counterprovocation plan was initialed at security consultative meetings held in Washington in October 2012 and was formally adopted in March 2013.

Careful coordination was also required in diplomatic approaches to North Korea. While the two governments maintained a unified front in response to provocations, coordination challenges arose regarding how far to go in pursuing diplomatic negotiations with North Korea. South Korean diplomatic efforts to pursue inter-Korean contacts foundered in the spring of 2011, with the North Korean side eventually leaking the existence of secret contacts and blaming the Lee administration for their failure. 8 Despite this, the United States returned to several rounds of diplomatic dialogue from the summer of 2011 that resulted in the parallel release of U.S. and North Korean diplomatic statements on February 29, 2012.9 This was originally expected to take place in Beijing during the third week of December, but it was postponed by Kim Jong-il's death on December 17, 2011. The parallel statements envisioned IAEA monitoring of the North's uranium enrichment program in exchange for 240,000 tons of food assistance, but that agreement went nowhere following North Korea's March 16 announcement that it would launch another multi-stage rocket in defiance of Security Council resolutions.¹⁰ Following this, Washington pursued two secret rounds of direct dialogue with Pyongyang in April and August, the contents of which were briefed only between Lee and Obama to the exclusion of senior diplomats.¹¹

U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE: EXPANDED SCOPE FOR NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION

The Joint Vision Statement provided the basis for extending cooperation beyond the Korean Peninsula to meet regional and global challenges. It envisions a wider role for the alliance in contributing to international security in a range of areas, including postconflict stabilization, development, non-proliferation, and counter-terrorism. These new forms of cooperation are made possible by an increase in South Korean capabilities and its willingness to step forward and make such capabilities available as a public good for the international community. The statement anticipates contributions to international security commensurate with the benefits South Korea derives from a stable global system, but it is also so ambitious that it raises questions about prioritization and capabilities if the alliance were to be stretched too thin.¹²

South Korea has determined that it will contribute to international security as a national defense priority based on an assessment of its own interests and global responsibilities in addition to its efforts to ensure security on the Korean Peninsula. Its 2010 Defense White Paper identifies "contributing to regional stability and world peace" as one of three national defense objectives, along with "defending the nation from external military threats and invasion" and "upholding the principle of peaceful unification." To support these activities, it has established a three-thousand-person standing unit dedicated to overseas deployments, passed legislation authorizing the deployment of up to one thousand ROK personnel to UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) prior to requiring an authorization request from the National Assembly, and established a PKO center dedicated to the training of military personnel to be dispatched for

assignments.¹³ This significant development shows South Korea's willingness to contribute to international security for the long haul.

The U.S.-ROK alliance benefits from cooperation and interoperability that are being honed through practical experience of the sort that cannot be replicated by scenario-based exercises alone. As both countries face the need to more prudently allocate defense budgets, the experience of working together may also produce opportunities to cooperate in ways that do not unduly limit loss of specific capabilities. Moreover, as the United States moves to emphasize greater interaction and lateral networking of capabilities among its Asian bilateral alliances, South Korea's experience working in a multinational environment will prove valuable, enhancing the role of the alliance as a force for resiliency and stability into the international system. In turn, this will provide residual benefits for the development of South Korean capabilities, particularly if prolonged instability in North Korea would require some of the same skills. South Korea's exposure to fragile or failed-state situations and direct involvement in postconflict stabilization operations may be applied to the management of future instability in North Korea.

South Korea's willingness to contribute to global security is in line with its commitment to triple its development assistance contributions from 2010 levels by 2015. 14 This commitment comes during a period of fiscal austerity in the developed world that is squeezing the development budgets of many countries. South Korea can offer advanced technical and human resource skills on development and governance related issues based on its experience as a recipient of international aid, and is well positioned to cooperate with the United States on joint projects that can enhance development effectiveness. International development provides yet another avenue of cooperation between the two states on the basis of shared values to provide global public goods.¹⁵ However, a notable omission from U.S.-ROK security cooperation thus far is within the Asia-Pacific region. South Korea participates in the U.S.-administered Rim of the Pacific Exercises, but given shared interest in Asian stability, the dearth of collaboration in ways that reinforce Asian regional stability and prosperity is striking. This raises questions about the impact of both South Korea's efforts not to be drawn into the Sino-U.S. regional competition and its hesitation to embrace trilateralism with Japan, the U.S. ally most active in region-wide measures of cooperation.

KORUS FTA PASSAGE: CATALYST FOR THE UNITED STATES to Jump Start its Asian Trade Policy

The third leg of U.S.-ROK collaboration came after an extended delay in the ratification of the KORUS FTA following its 2007 negotiation under the Bush and Roh administrations. Initially, the hesitation lay with Roh, who seemed reluctant to pursue ratification of his own agreement with the National Assembly in the closing days of his term. Then, prospects for the U.S. Congress to consider the agreement diminished, because the main priority became restoration of the U.S. economy and a newly-elected Obama had an extensive agenda of items to address with Congress that were prioritized more highly. 16 To his credit, President Lee was patient, persistent, and flexible, lobbying Obama when he visited Seoul in November 2009, who at that time was working with Congress to pass health care reform and was not ready for KORUS FTA.

After the Obama administration concluded that it wanted to revise parts of the agreement and sought further negotiations to settle outstanding issues that were likely to be a source of congressional objection, talks followed Obama's participation in the Seoul G-20 in November 2010 and finally resulted in a revised agreement that was sent to Congress. Although KORUS was delayed again by negotiations with Congress on the need to raise the U.S. debt ceiling in the summer of 2011, Lee's state visit in October 2011 served as an action-forcing event that finally led to ratificiation, along with FTAs with Colombia and Panama.¹⁷ This occurred so late in the 18th National Assembly that ratification became a heated political issue only six months prior to new elections, 18 but the Grand National Party, with its majority, finally pursued unilateral ratification in October 2011 and the agreement went into effect the following March.

The passage of KORUS FTA is significant because it greatly expands openness and reciprocity for Korea and the United States in each other's markets and strengthens economic interdependence.¹⁹ Ratification of KORUS has breathed new life into the TPP negotiations, which are now drawing interest from Canada, Mexico, and Japan. The KORUS FTA has revived U.S. trade policy, opening the door to a vision for a high-standard agreement in Asia-Pacific that might even lead the way toward renewed global trade liberalization.²⁰

MAJOR CHALLENGES FACING THE U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

The development of the three pillars described above has broadened the scope and resiliency of cooperation to the point where Obama referred to the U.S.-ROK alliance as a "lynchpin" of U.S. policy for the Pacific.²¹ It is significant that Park endorsed the Joint Vision established by Lee and Obama by reaffirming almost all of the main themes and directions for the alliance in the sixtieth anniversary alliance joint statement issued following her first White House meetings with Obama. Even more importantly, Park and Obama showed no light between them in their respective approaches to North Korea, affirmed their commitments to continuing international security cooperation off the peninsula, and celebrated the first anniversary of the ratification of the KORUS FTA. Circumstances, however, are becoming less favorable to agreement than they were in the halcyon days of 2009-12.

The alliance will face tests on a number of issues where U.S. policies toward South Korea are bumping up against other U.S. global and regional policies in ways that may limit the potential for cooperation. In each policy area, future cooperation will depend at least in part on whether the United States chooses to treat South Korea as an exception to some other facet of its Asian and global policies or whether U.S.-South Korea policies continue to be pursued within the traditional bounds and constraints of U.S. policies in these other areas. Willingness to make exceptions for South Korea in light of its rise as a "middle power" as it pursues its own regional and global policies will signal the level of priority that the United States places on it, and these decisions will have a direct impact on the closeness of the relationship. By the same token, the level of South Korean willingness to live within the constraints placed on its own pursuit of policy choices as a result of its alliance might also be interpreted as an indication of the priority that South Korea places on continued alliance cooperation with the United States.

THE U.S.-ROK BILATERAL NUCLEAR COOPERATION AGREEMENT

The United States and South Korea are in the middle of negotiations to renew their bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement. These negotiations were extended by two years in advance of Park's visit to Washington to buy time in the face of a seemingly intractable disagreement over whether Washington will allow South Korea the right to enrich and reprocess nuclear fuel. The previous agreement, negotiated in 1974, was set to expire in 2014, but now the Obama administration will request from Congress a two-year extension so that negotiations can be completed. During the period of the agreement, South Korea has made tremendous strides in developing this sector, having gradually mastered almost all of the critical construction technologies and processes required to build a nuclear reactor. Since Westinghouse supplied South Korea's first nuclear power unit Kori 1, which began operations in 1978, South Korea has built seven units in cooperation with non-Korean firms, and four since 1999 almost entirely by Korean companies. With its 2009 agreement to build a Korean-version of the AP-1400 reactor in the UAE, South Korea entered the international nuclear energy supply market.²²

These impressive advancements have enabled South Korea to meet more energy demands indigenously and to reduce its energy dependence. As a new nuclear exporter, it is poised to combine its longstanding international construction experience with experience in developing its own domestic nuclear energy industry to become a major exporter of nuclear power generation capacity, perhaps even to the United States. However, South Korea's development of its own nuclear capacity faces the universally shared constraint of how to dispose of radioactive waste materials. The current space for storage of such materials will all be used by 2016, so there is an urgent need to address this issue.

South Korean scientists have promoted a form of reprocessing known as pyroprocessing that uses electroreduction as the primary means by which to refine and separate the plutonium from the most toxic and radioactive waste products from nuclear energy.²³ They are pushing for South Korea to pursue pyroprocessing as the primary means by which to address the waste problem while preserving the 'clean' plutonium for possible re-use in fast breeder nuclear reactors that might be constructed in the future. However, critics warn that this would produce even more waste while also constituting a significant proliferation risk since additional treatment of the plutonium by-product might result in weapons-grade plutonium.

In negotiations with the United States over the new bilateral nuclear cooperation agreement, South Korea has requested advanced consent to alter U.S. provided nuclear material in form or content through pyroprocessing and/or enrichment. Both of these processes are relevant to the competitiveness of South Korea's nuclear energy export efforts since other exporters have retained rights to pursue reprocessing and enrichment of nuclear fuel, but the United States on non-proliferation grounds has resisted South Korean requests. Without these rights, there is a limit on South Korea's ability to address its own waste problems, develop new types of nuclear technology including fast breeder reactors, and supply nuclear fuel to potential customers as part of supply contracts.²⁴ South Korea argues that other allies, such as Japan, and strategic partners, such as India, have already been granted such rights, so a failure to grant it advanced consent is a form of discrimination that directly limits efforts to develop its own industry. But to grant such rights is to add one more country, no matter how responsible, to the list of potential sources of fuel that could be used to build a nuclear weapon.

The United States and South Korea began negotiations on this issue in 2010, but have reached an impasse. Even a two-year extension of the agreement leaves a relatively short period before the agreement will need to be ratified and submitted for congressional consideration, as is the case for all U.S. bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements. An additional potential hurdle may be that Congress has tried to strengthen standards for bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements so as to further restrict reprocessing or enrichment privileges.²⁵ This faces serious challenges as the United States itself is playing a smaller role in nuclear power generation, with challengers such as China and India developing plants outside the influence of U.S. standards. These countries are likely to emerge as less proliferation-conscious sources of supply for nuclear energy producing reactors that will directly compete with South Korean products. Thus, South Korea's commercial interests and lack of long-term high-level waste storage have emerged as major issues in the negotiations. Both sides have too much to lose to allow the agreement governing their cooperation to lapse. Nonetheless, there is currently not an easy way to solve this issue, which, if politicized, could become a source of major conflict between Washington and Seoul. During her visit to Washington, Park reiterated her position during the White House press conference and an address to a Joint Session of Congress that South Korea seeks a "modernized, mutually beneficial successor to our existing civil nuclear agreement." The two sides recognize that a new agreement should seek to address challenges in three areas: the need to ensure adequate fuel supplies for Korean reactors, an adequate solution to South Korea's nuclear fuel waste problem, and cooperation in support of South Korean nuclear plant exports. As negotiations continue, much depends on whether the United States is willing to adjust its nonproliferation policies to accommodate Korean interests, or whether U.S. nonproliferation interests ultimately are given priority.

U.S. Rebalancing Toward Asia. North Korean Provocations, and the Alliance

The U.S. rebalancing toward Asia is a second area where regional strategy may influence the direction of cooperation within the alliance, serving either as an opportunity or a constraint.²⁷ On the one hand, South Koreans have largely welcomed renewed U.S. attention to Asia signified by the rebalancing strategy to the extent that U.S. prioritization of Asia, in general, supports stability and prosperity in the region. On the other hand, new issues, including the reemergence of the North Korean threat posed by improvements in its nuclear and missiledelivery capabilities, could be a source of division as the rebalancing strategy unfolds.

The first area of potential contradiction is related to the U.S. emphasis on a broader geographic distribution of its forces, which might draw U.S. attention and resources in the direction of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean at the expense of South Korea. This trend could create problems for South Korea in at least three aspects. First, the United States and South Korea will be negotiating a new host nation support package in 2013. These negotiations could be even more difficult than usual, given the broadening of the U.S. scope of operations rather than a more geographically limited prioritization of Northeast Asia. If U.S. Forces Korea are drawn more actively into off-peninsula missions as part of the broader strategy, this could also contribute to budgetary frictions to the extent that South Korea may hesitate to sustain financial support for hosting forces that it perceives as not dedicated to its own defense. South Korean defense specialists may already be worried

about U.S. efforts to extract greater support for costs related to the U.S. presence there, given the effects of budget cuts on the availability of U.S. funds and possible increased demands to South Korea to make up any shortfall.

Second, a broader U.S. strategy that encourages horizontal cooperation among alliance partners has run into a roadblock over South Korean reluctance to establish an agreement for sharing of intelligence information with Japan, a country that would be called on to support U.S.-ROK military operations in the event of a conflict with North Korea. U.S. interests in strengthening the combined defense posture toward North Korea include promoting high levels of cooperation with South Korea, but also with Japan on many rear-area support issues. U.S. support of stronger ROK-Japan cooperation is seen in efforts to promote greater trilateral coordination, including maritime exercises among the three countries for humanitarian and disaster relief-related activities. The United States has also supported Korean involvement in U.S. and Japanese joint research and implementation of advanced missile-defense technologies.

In addition to pressure on South Korea to strengthen relations with Japan, the United States may also seek to work together to enhance South Korea's role in providing security in the region based on its increasing capabilities. Thus far, U.S.-ROK off-peninsula cooperation has primarily supported global stability and has occurred outside the Asia-Pacific region, but there are possibilities to enhance non-traditional roles, for instance in maritime security cooperation, within East Asia as well. South Korean caution toward undertaking military operations in the region that might risk offending China is a major hurdle that would have to be overcome for meaningful U.S.-ROK military cooperation to be extended within the region.

In both her joint press conference with Obama and her address to the Joint Session of Congress, Park sought to knit together the U.S. and South Korean approaches by seeking "synergy" between the two initiatives as "co-architects to flesh out this vision." This suggests that South Korean efforts to improve the regional security environment in Northeast Asia relies on the foundation provided by the U.S.-ROK alliance, but efforts to tie South Korean proposals for regional cooperation to the U.S. pivot could also complicate South Korea's relations with China despite Park's efforts to establish strong ties with her new counterparts in Beijing.

Third, North Korea's provocative rhetoric and successful satellite launch in December 2012 followed by a third nuclear test in February 2013 have combined to raise U.S. concerns about whether the new leadership—possibly emboldened by the acquisition of an enhanced threat and even a potential nuclear blackmail capability—is embarking on a sustained course of provocations, in contrast to a past pattern perceived as provocation combined with efforts to acquire material benefits in the context of tension relaxation. Heightened uncertainty in the U.S. intelligence community over whether Kim Jong-un is playing by the same playbook or has embarked on a more aggressive path has resulted in U.S. efforts to project stronger resolve to deter aggression, including a show of force in March 2013 U.S.-ROK exercises that notably included participation by nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 bombers and F-22 Raptor aircraft. The heightened uncertainty also raised the question of whether the U.S. deterrence message might be taken inside North Korea as evidence of preparations for an invasion of the North that might inadvertently lead to miscalculation or accidental escalation of a conflict.

At the same time, North Korea's more aggressive posture posed a test for the new Park administration along the lines of past efforts by the North to set the terms of interaction with a new South Korean leadership. Park assumed office in the midst of an escalation of inter-Korean tensions but held open the prospect for improved inter-Korean relations based on an articulated policy of "Trustpolitik," which would have the two Koreas stabilize their relationship after the deterioration that had occurred under Lee Myung-Bak following North Korea's 2010 provocations. 28 The escalation of tensions foreclosed any early offer of renewed dialogue from Park as the South Korean military matched North Korean threats with responses of their own in an attempt to send a message that the administration will not be subject to nuclear blackmail.²⁹ The tense atmosphere placed a premium on a smooth transition, including cabinet-level meetings to put into place effective coordination. Park and Obama emphasized confidence in each other in their joint commitment not to tolerate North Korean provocations and to strengthen deterrence against North Korea's nuclear threat, while Park asserted that "President Obama's vision of a world without nuclear weapons should start on the Korean peninsula" through North Korea's pledge to abandon nuclear weapons as part of the 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement.³⁰

By authorizing a stronger and more public show of force than usual as part of U.S.-ROK spring exercises, the Obama administration was forced to face the prospect that rebalancing has a larger Northeast Asia component than expected, perhaps at the expense of plans for Southeast Asia. The North Korea situation also tested the administration in the face of the sequester with questions raised regarding the extent to which financial pressures would interfere with defense and deterrence commitments. The Pentagon's show of force, the announcement of plans to augment missile defense, and the decision to deploy Theater High Altititude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense systems to Guam took place in spite of the sequester as a response to North Korea's heightened rhetoric. But it remains to be seen whether these expenditures might ironically place even greater fiscal pressure on the Pentagon's ability to undertake long-term acquisitions necessary to maintain the U.S. forward defense posture.

U.S. Policy Toward Korean Reunification

A third area where U.S. policies toward the Korean Peninsula might come into conflict with other U.S. policies in the region is related to Korean reunification. A clear vision for Korean reunification on a democratic and market economic basis was set forth in the June 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement and reaffirmed in the joint statement commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the alliance. This was the first time that the United States had officially made such a clear statement in support of reunification, but China's primary interest on the peninsula has been to support stability by shoring up a comprehensive relationship with North Korea, presumably in ways that directly conflict with the U.S.-ROK objective of Korean reunification.

To the extent that China sees the Korean Peninsula in geostrategic terms as an object of rivalry with the United States, its objective of "promoting stability" comes into conflict with the U.S.-South Korean shared objective of achieving reunification. At the same time, broader regional stability in the Asia-Pacific is increasingly dependent on Sino-U.S. cooperation. Although conflict between U.S. policies toward South Korea and China is not inevitable, how the United States prioritizes the objective of Korean reunification in its respective policies toward these states will influence the scope, aspirations, and nature of cooperation within the alliance. While the United States must avoid an approach to reunification that unnecessarily provokes conflict with China, it cannot neglect the fact that both sides have identified unification essentially on South Korean terms as a main objective of the alliance. Policymakers in Seoul realize that reunification is unlikely to be attained without regional cooperation, including with China, but they also realize that South Korea will have little leverage to influence China's stance outside the context of strong policy coordination with the United States.

Rising tensions surrounding North Korea provide an opportunity for U.S. leaders to press China's new leadership for greater cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea, given that North Korean provocations are adversely affecting China's security environment and detracting from regional stability necessary for continued economic growth. But the United States also faces a paradox in its efforts to induce stronger cooperation from the Xi Jinping administration: to the extent that it takes advantage of North Korean provocations to press for increases in missile defense or for China to strengthen cooperation at a perceived cost to North Korean support, such an approach reminds Chinese leaders of their own geostrategic equities on the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis the United States and distracts them from focusing on North Korea as the original instigator and source of Chinese concerns regarding the costs of instability on the Korean Peninsula.

A potential new variable in this equation is the clear effort on the part of the Park administration to improve the tone and substance of China-South Korea relations. The task of improving this relationship will be enormously difficult given the fact that China's views of its relationship with South Korea often seem to be shaped by views of its respective relationships with North Korea and the United States, in addition to its perception of the nature and state of inter-Korean relations. For China-South Korea relations to improve, China will have to perceive direct strategic benefit from this relationship, even as South Korea continues to value its security relationship with the United States. So far, there is little for the United States to be concerned about in Park's efforts to improve relations with China, especially since the strategic stakes for relations with China are likely to be higher than the costs of missteps to the United States.

CONCLUSION

The U.S.-ROK alliance has grown to encompass significant new scope for cooperation, extending both to economic cooperation and to off-peninsula security cooperation. These new pillars of alliance cooperation do not replace North Korea as the primary focus for the alliance, but they do greatly expand the scope of the alliance to many international security issues that had previously not been relevant to the alliance, increasing the importance of South Korea to the United States and of the U.S.-ROK alliance to global concerns.

The continued growth of the U.S.-ROK alliance, however, is also bumping up against other U.S. policy priorities on specific global and regional issues, including nonproliferation policy, the U.S. rebalancing policy toward Asia, and management of a more risk-acceptant North Korea. In their May 2013 meeting, Obama and Park acknowledged the accomplishments of the past sixty years of alliance relations, and tried to lay groundwork for close cooperation on the seemingly intractable security issues likely to beset the peninsula and the Northeast

Asian region in the years to come. For the time being, coordination within the U.S.-ROK alliance remains one of the few indisputable bright spots in a Northeast Asian regional security environment that both tests and testifies to the necessity of the U.S.-ROK alliance.

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