



Alternative Futures for the US-ROK Alliance: Will Things Fall Apart?

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Executive Summary

Over the last several months, 38 North held discussions with a broad range of former high-level US and ROK political, diplomatic and military officials as well as various analysts and academics. The following key points emerged from our discussions:

- The US-ROK alliance faces several challenges to its continued cohesion, raising serious questions about its capacity to adapt to structural and strategic shifts buffeting the relationship.
- Major changes in the alliance's command structure, the possibility of US force withdrawals, the erosion of the US extended deterrence commitment and divergent perspectives about how to approach the DPRK and the ROK's role in the US-China strategic competition will all stress alliance solidarity.
- To maintain extended deterrence, Washington and Seoul need to deepen their consultations. Some ROK officials argued for going beyond the type of nuclear consultations held in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), while others advocated more regular and transparent discussion between the Trump and Moon administrations.
- There was a palpable concern about the alliance's future direction. The general consensus was that both governments need to reassess the value and direction of the alliance as well as the costs and consequences should it fall apart.
- Many US policymakers do not fully appreciate divergent US and ROK perspectives on fundamental bilateral and regional issues. A rupture in the alliance is unlikely, but institutional inertia alone will not sustain it in the face of the centrifugal forces pulling it apart. Transforming the relationship might be a bridge too far, but intelligent and diligent alliance management can keep the relationship from going off the rails.

Introduction

Over the last several months, 38 North held discussions with a broad range of former US and ROK officials (hereafter referred to simply as “officials”), analysts and academics. The discussions revolved around different scenarios for the future of the Korean Peninsula that would be central in shaping the alliance’s structure, roles and missions. In-depth discussions around each scenario yielded various options for the US-ROK alliance, covering specific defense, logistics and military command arrangements as well as the broader political setting. All discussants grappled with overlapping and often cross-cutting realities and the extent to which bilateral alliance issues quickly involve regional and strategic implications.

In general, there was a palpable concern regarding the future direction of the alliance, reflected in a broad consensus that allies—and the policymaking community as a whole—must reassess the value and direction of the alliance as well as the costs and consequences should it fall apart. Looking beyond the short-term disagreements between the Trump and Moon administrations, there were additional worries about longer-term issues resulting from major changes in the alliance’s command structure, the possibility of US force withdrawals, the erosion of the extended deterrence commitment, and divergent perspectives regarding the ROK’s role in the great power competition between the US and China on the peninsula and in the broader Indo-Pacific region. What follows is a distillation of the key issues our discussions explored and the trends and trade-offs identified throughout the process.

Troubling Trends and Potential Alliance Fracture

One ROK official highlighted the current tension in the US-ROK alliance by comparing it to the erosion of US-Philippine relations in the early 1990s and the forced removal of US naval and air forces from Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base, respectively. He noted that three key factors drove the fracture in the relationship between Manila and Washington: a reduced threat perception; impulsive or assertive nationalism on the part of the smaller ally; and a belief in Washington that the ally in question was ungrateful and uncooperative. The result: a slim majority of Filipino senators voted to force the expulsion of US forces, despite the fact that the majority of ordinary citizens in the Philippines were not opposed to a continued US presence. He noted similar dynamics in the US-ROK relationship today.

The Moon administration has maintained a dialogue-based approach toward Pyongyang, stressing peace more than denuclearization; in contrast, US President Donald Trump has downplayed DPRK missile tests, said the North no longer poses a threat and repeatedly supported reduction of military exercises. The apparent lowering of tensions (or at least the perception of such a reduction) undercuts the rationale for maintaining US forces in Korea, even more so in light of Trump’s own skepticism about their utility. There is a progressive ROK leadership that approaches the alliance more assertively, stresses issues of sovereignty, bristles at

constraints it believes Washington imposes on inter-Korean relations and objects to the heavy-handed and transactional approach the administration takes in Special Measures Agreement (SMA) talks. In turn, Trump administration officials and President Trump himself repeatedly note that the ROK essentially does not keep up its end of the bargain, is overly dependent on US protection and free-rides on American support. On the plus side, other officials pointed to polling data that shows a high approval rating among the Korean public for the US-ROK alliance and US military presence. Furthermore, others noted that the immediate threat environment on and around the Korean Peninsula makes sudden changes to the alliance, like those in the US-Philippine relationship in the early 1990s, more difficult. Still, the importance of elite opinion was cited in the US-Philippines case, and depending on electoral outcomes in the ROK and US, elite perception and decision-making could lead to greater tensions between Seoul and Washington.

Extended Deterrence: Eroding, Evolving, Strengthening?

In addition to general concern about the state of the alliance, others discussed potential problems regarding the US extended deterrence commitment. One ROK official laid out three main pillars of extended deterrence. First, mutual alliance commitment and clarity on what is being deterred; second, a forward-deployed US military presence, not an offshore balancing deployment (discussed below in more detail); and, third, a concrete and shared understanding about the operational mechanisms of extended deterrence (“how it is working when one of them is being threatened by a third party”). Again, across a range of scenarios, questions arose about the implications for extended deterrence.

In an optimistic scenario, with lower tensions and threat reduction, some officials raised the issue that it would become increasingly unclear who was being deterred from doing what. If, over time, the immediate deterrence of North Korea became less salient, not only would it undermine the rationale for US force deployments but would also raise the question of what else might be deterred, with the natural target being China. This, in turn, raised additional questions about the extent to which any government in Seoul, progressive or conservative, would be willing to adopt such a shift. Moreover, in the case of improved US-DPRK relations, other analysts noted that the possibility of a snapback to escalation could still occur, but that several years of reduced or canceled military exercises would complicate the alliance’s ability to respond in a timely and credible manner to a suddenly deteriorating threat environment.

In a negatively trending scenario, several possibilities were discussed and options weighed. If relations between the US and DPRK stayed on their current negative but nonescalatory trajectory, there was little reason to foresee a change in the extended deterrence commitment unless Trump continued to publicly question the US commitment to South Korean security. However, according to one analyst, if relations degraded further and escalation occurred—for example, in response to Pyongyang’s testing a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) or

intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) or conducting another nuclear test—several options would need to be explored:

- A “status-quo plus” approach, namely, the normal reliance on the contiguous US (CONUS)-based forces plus the possible deployment of US SLBM and LYBM (low-yield ballistic missiles) assets to the region, enhanced deployments of B-2/B-52s to Guam and signals of other forward-deployable options.
- The return of US tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) to the Korean Peninsula, specifically the deployment of dual-capable aircraft and storage of B-61 nuclear gravity bombs. The US and ROK would need to work out arrangements on the sensitive issue of command and control (C2) of these weapons.
- A proportionate response strategy which would signal the US intent to match, in a measured, tit-for-tat manner, new North Korean nuclear deployments along every rung of the so-called “ladder of escalation.” In other words, as North Korea built out its own regional and strategic capabilities and expanded its own capabilities on these various rungs, it might feel more emboldened to test US and ROK resolve at lower levels of the ladder unless Combined Forces Command (CFC) deploys matching capabilities to fill the gap.

Overall, though, the general consensus was that, as things currently stand, these various models were too escalatory, in particular the return of TNW to the Korean Peninsula or the use of Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) forces to respond to North Korean advancements, which would antagonize China as well as the DPRK.¹

Consistent with the concern about the general state of the alliance, other officials noted that Trump’s dismissive approach to Pyongyang’s short-range missile tests (which are, in fact, strategic for both Seoul and Tokyo) did signal a potential untethering or decoupling of the US extended deterrence commitment; in other words, Trump may very well not be willing to lose Seattle for Seoul. This gives rise to fears of abandonment, and the possibility of Seoul exploring its own nuclear deterrent absent a credible US commitment to uphold its longstanding nuclear umbrella. Yet, paradoxically, such a US stance also indicates that were Pyongyang to make greater strides in its strategic nuclear capabilities, Trump would pay closer attention and possibly move more aggressively toward North Korea without proper alliance consultations, thus spurring fears of entrapment in a US-DPRK conflict.

The main takeaway regarding extended deterrence was that there needs to be even greater consultation between the allies, either by deepening existing deterrence working groups, such as the Deterrence Strategy Committee (DSC), or developing a new one, such as a nuclear crisis

¹ It should be noted that certain conservative-leaning officials and analysts argued that a future conservative government (and they themselves) would welcome the return of US TNW to the peninsula. However, such posturing is not uncommon and must be taken with a healthy dose of skepticism.

planning group, that would provide an operational-level supplement to the policy-level DSC. On one extreme, some ROK officials and analysts argued for greater US-ROK consultation than the nuclear consultations that occur within NATO; at the other extreme, others called for more regular and transparent discussion than currently exists between the Trump and Moon administrations.

The Indo-Pacific Concept, China and Alliance Transformation

Several ROK officials were particularly outspoken about a key divergence between the ROK and US over their different views of the US Indo-Pacific strategy and a rising China. One senior ROK official stressed the geopolitical uniqueness of the Korean Peninsula and just how vulnerable the ROK is due to geography. Moreover, he was very concerned that this seemingly obvious fact was often forgotten or disregarded in Washington, while US policymakers simultaneously expect Seoul to unconditionally stand by Washington in its growing confrontation with Beijing.

Essentially, the sentiment was that if Washington wants to constantly invoke the US-ROK alliance as the “linchpin” of its Indo-Pacific strategy, then it should not treat the ROK in a transactional manner, as though it exists in a strategic vacuum somehow divorced from its immediate and unique geopolitical surroundings. Indeed, several participants expressed skepticism about the Indo-Pacific concept itself and where it was headed.

Nevertheless, multiple ROK analysts and officials, across the political spectrum, acknowledged a clear awareness of China’s assertiveness and were hardly naïve about the Chinese threat. Several expressed concern over China’s punitive response to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) deployment and ongoing Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) violations, leaving little doubt about China’s aggressive hegemonic intentions in the region. Nevertheless, it remains exceedingly difficult for any ROK government to readily sign on to the Indo-Pacific strategy. Currently, President Moon’s “three nos” (no more THAAD, no ROK involvement in the US regional ballistic missile system and no trilateral US-Japan-ROK alliance) is the most overt manifestation of this, but even conservative officials remarked that it would likely take several years and greater consultation to move Seoul to embrace Washington’s strategy. Such hesitancy, they noted, is not a sign of ingratitude or a lack of alliance commitment. It is a function of Seoul’s remarkably vulnerable position. Again, it was not just the lack of clarity about US strategy but also consternation among ROK officials regarding how it has been executed. For example, the US-ROK dispute over THAAD deployment came with significant economic costs for Seoul, yet they felt Washington left them holding the bag and did little to come to their assistance. This impression has been further exacerbated by Trump’s earlier position that Seoul should pay for the THAAD deployment.

In relation to alliance transformation and moving beyond just deterrence of North Korea on the peninsula to a more “strategic alliance” for the wider region, several analysts discussed the text of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT). One US observer remarked that Article 3 of the treaty, which outlines the defense responsibilities of both allies in case of an external attack on either of their territories (or territory under their respective administrative control), does not actually mention the Korean Peninsula. Rather, it mentions the more expansive “Pacific Area,” which implies US bases or installations in Japan, Guam or elsewhere. In response to this point, an ROK official noted that they do not necessarily take that treaty language seriously; ROK responsibilities are still seen as very much centered on the peninsula. He conceded that in a crisis the treaty certainly calls for ROK actions off the peninsula, yet made the important point that any reconsideration of this dynamic involved a peacetime transformation. In other words, ROK responsibilities would have to be adjusted in a more nuanced manner over time, not based on the compelling pressures and necessity borne of an immediate crisis.

Our various discussions highlighted a strange mix of sentiments and contradictory trends. On the one hand, Washington pushes Seoul to take on a great burden, to adopt a more robust role on the peninsula and regionally as part of the Indo-Pacific concept. Yet, on the other hand, it attempts to restrain Seoul’s drive to take too independent a course. Washington becomes displeased if Seoul goes too far in carving out independent space. Yet it is US policy itself that helps to give the ROK both the incentive and capability to carve out just such a space.

For example, President Trump’s dismissal of Pyongyang’s short-range missile tests alongside his repeated rhetoric devaluing the alliance raises serious questions about strategic decoupling of the US extended deterrence commitment and the possibility of alliance abandonment. If they are going to have to go it alone, then they need to start thinking and planning about how to do this. Paradoxically, though, Seoul simultaneously feels a bit entrapped when Washington’s demand for greater burden sharing not only amounts to paying a premium for the US peninsular presence but also requires active adherence to a regional Indo-Pacific concept to which Seoul does not fully subscribe. Even if observers in Washington see such behavior as ungrateful or dithering, it is indeed the sentiment across the political spectrum in Seoul and has consequences for alliance cohesion. Furthermore, if the Indo-Pacific concept does, in fact, reflect a long-term US strategic commitment to rollback or contain Chinese influence, which appears to be the case, its effective execution will require cooperation from allies and, therefore, understanding their perspective.

Another example of ambivalent US attitudes towards ROK independence touches on talks about operational control (OPCON) & SMA insofar as Seoul’s drive to purchase more US-made weapons, increase defense spending and acquire high-end hardware is driven by SMA demands as well as the requirements of OPCON transition. However, Seoul’s push to acquire OPCON and bolster such capabilities is often criticized as either being overly hasty or producing redundancies in allied capabilities; yet when Seoul resorts to depending on the US to deploy certain airborne,

firepower and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets that it does not itself possess, it is interpreted as free-riding or being overly dependent.

US Force Reductions

United States Forces Korea (USFK) force reductions might occur in the case of either successful or unsuccessful SMA talks. Whether they would yield cost savings would depend on whether the forces are disbanded or retained in the force structure. Of greater importance was that US force reductions, depending on what units were reduced and redeployed and how the process was executed, could signal a waning US commitment to ROK security. As one US observer noted, force reductions did not necessarily mean abrogation of the Mutual Defense Treaty. In fact, the consequences of a force reduction are unclear. The US could, for example, reduce or realign peninsular forces without undermining the political commitment embodied in the treaty. There was a general consensus that much deliberate thought, planning and alliance consultation would have to be put into how a troop reduction would actually be executed. If the MDT is not abrogated, the nature and makeup of the remaining US military presence would be crucial to alliance credibility, not only in terms of retaining the logistical capabilities for supporting US reinforcement of the peninsula in the case of a Korean contingency or deterrence failure but also to handle the evacuation of hundreds of US foreign nationals from the peninsula, which is one of USFK's key responsibilities.

In terms of firepower and war-fighting capability, US officials and analysts noted that the US could retain significant and highly mobile air force and naval units (as had been imagined during President Jimmy Carter's withdrawal plan in the late 1970s). However, some ROK observers contended that a certain number of ground forces need to remain. They highlighted not only the symbolic value but also the added firepower of the one remaining brigade of second infantry division (2ID), even if it were to be slightly reduced and consolidated further south. ROK officials also noted that once ground forces were ultimately removed, they could not be returned. Domestic political costs and opposition simply would be too high.

OPCON Transfer and Military Exercises

The transfer of the operational control (OPCON) of the ROK military from the US four-star commander to an ROK four-star presents a host of interrelated and highly problematic issues. First, on a pragmatic level, successful OPCON transfer requires certification of ROK command and control capabilities under certain conditions. In 2019, the allies conducted the Initial Operational Capabilities (IOC) test, with a Full Operational Capability (FOC) test scheduled this year and the Full Mission Capability test after that. However, there is skepticism and disagreement among and between US and ROK officials regarding the adequacy of testing conditions. One complicating factor is that military exercises are necessary for the allies to properly test command and control capabilities, yet exercises have either been canceled or

downgraded over the previous 18 months in order to further diplomacy with Pyongyang. (The Trump administration recently announced that the springtime exercises will be similarly downgraded.) The alternative is to increase exercises to their previous 2017 level (or something approximating that) in order to more properly carry out capability and operational tests, yet this would likely worsen inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations. Moreover, OPCON transfer is also predicated on Seoul's procurement of high-end weaponry and ISR assets, which also elicits strong protests/recriminations from Pyongyang (i.e., Seoul's acquisition of drones and F-35s).

Second, the Moon administration is intent on moving forward with the process for political reasons, driven by the imperative to assume control over its own military as an issue of *sovereignty*. Some US officials hold that it is pushing the process forward and accepting even inadequate testing conditions due to this imperative. Nevertheless, it is not as simple as sovereignty, for the future CFC would still include US forces and does not involve abrogation of the Mutual Defense Treaty. It is very difficult to assume US commanders or policymakers would ultimately accept an inadequately tested and prepared bilateral military command arrangement to which they are wedded by an enduring physical presence and defense treaty. Put differently, the allies may soon face a serious and more open disagreement regarding the process and implications of OPCON transfer.

Third, OPCON transfer is also significant in terms of the institutional complications or mismatch that may consequently arise. Were Seoul to retake full wartime OPCON in a new future-oriented CFC, it could exacerbate the contradictions of multiple command structures. During August 2019 military exercises (when the IOC test was conducted), US and ROK officials strongly differed over how OPCON transfer would affect the United Nations Command (UNC) commander's authority. The US side maintained that after OPCON transfer, the UNC (still commanded by the same US four-star general who previously commanded the CFC) should be allowed to give directions to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (ROKJCS) in contingencies in order to fulfill its primary role of maintaining the armistice. ROK officials differed, stating such directions would infringe on South Korea's authority and collide with ROKJCS military operations.

The crux of the issue is differences over respective rules of engagement. The UNC prioritizes enforcement of the armistice agreement and thus stresses a proportionate response to North Korean provocations, whereas the South Korean military allows for stronger countermeasures. The commander in chief of the UNC (CINCUNC) also would receive forces from other UN member states deployed to defend South Korea and it is unclear how OPCON transfer would affect the commander's responsibility for their OPCON and combat operations, as the CFC is its own institution. Such contradictions are not new. The same questions attended internal studies during President Carter's earlier abortive troop withdrawal policy. The difference is that today, these institutional changes are much more likely to occur. From the outside, it is also unclear what implication OPCON transfer would have for extended deterrence and how the future ROK-

led CFC would communicate with US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) in general and regarding the possible deployment of tactical or strategic nuclear forces.

Fourth, OPCON transfer is potentially problematic due to the historic and symbolic nature of the change, specifically in the current political context. For all but one year of South Korea's national existence (June 1949 to June 1950), it has occupied a subordinate position in the alliance's command architecture. Although the 1978 CFC provided a more relatively equal bilateral command structure, full wartime OPCON transfer presents a fundamental reordering of the alliance relationship insofar as an American will be the deputy to a Korean; the only such inverted bilateral military command arrangement to which the US is a party. Considering certain transactional and isolationist sentiments in the US and ongoing tensions over cost sharing, it is possible that the perception of such a shift could increase calls for US disengagement from the Korean Peninsula.

One US official noted that while some in South Korea may opine that they are ready for the transfer of OPCON, we should be very careful going forward. Additionally, a former US officer assessed that, while it is important to understand both US and ROK sensitivities surrounding the transfer of wartime OPCON, both sides need to avoid any conclusion that putting an ROK commander in charge is a restoration of their full sovereignty. He argued that the ROK's military sovereignty does not require nor depend upon wartime OPCON transition—there are many other ways to affirm ROK sovereignty on the peninsula—politically, economically and through informal and lower-profile military roles and responsibilities that reaffirm ROK sovereignty. Lastly, he noted that the most serious challenge is maintaining unity of command and control—a long-standing and fundamental principle of combat arguing keeping a US lead, especially given other US supporting commands in the region. Any change in C2 construct needs to be entirely based on a military risk assessment of competencies. The clear implication was that OPCON transfer should be delayed and maybe indefinitely, which would require concerted public diplomacy in both Seoul and Washington.

When it comes to military exercises, both US and ROK observers felt there was a significant benefit to exercising the coordination and integration of US-ROK military competencies. Some of the key elements to exercising are not only command and control, but also combined defense planning, intelligence integration, logistical interoperability and effective coordination and communication. The exercise program should be resurrected and repurposed with a focus on logistics and C2 at the theater and command-component level, as well as air defense and air attack missions within the Air Operations Center at Osan. Such exercises should reinforce the complementary military capabilities of the ROK—such as F-35 and F-16 tactics, avoiding redundant, unrealistic capabilities for the ROK—for instance, pursuing advanced electronic warfare, as well as noncomplementary air and sea domain awareness.

US-DPRK Talks and Inter-Korean Relations

As one high-level ROK official observed, the US and South Korea have fundamentally different approaches to peace on the Korean Peninsula. Moon's approach (much like his progressive predecessors Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun) is based on dialogue and interaction, rather than an assessment of North Korea's capabilities; it essentially sets aside the question of Pyongyang's possible retention of some sort of nuclear program. Washington's approach centers on DPRK capabilities and the threat they pose. Addressing those capabilities comes first and is paramount. It is not that the Moon administration is unconcerned about these matters, but it has different priorities. Interaction and dialogue are given precedence, not only to reduce tension in the short-term but also to build trust over time. Conservative and hawkish critics in South Korea and Washington criticize this approach as *talking for its own sake*, and argue that any dialogue with Pyongyang is useless because the Kim regime cannot be trusted and will never relinquish its nuclear capabilities, no matter what it says.

Several ROK officials and analysts stressed that the fallout from the failed Hanoi Summit was quite serious and not properly appreciated in Washington. The possibilities in the run-up to the summit—an end-of-war declaration along with some sort of movement toward normalization of relations between Washington and Pyongyang—aligned closely with Moon's approach. The trauma of Hanoi disabused Kim Jong Un of a certain faith in Trump, caused Kim's loss of trust in Moon's ability to deliver US concessions and exacerbated the fissures in the ROK and US approaches toward the DPRK. The Moon administration cannot help but see Washington's policy as obstructing its preferred approach toward Pyongyang, and Kim has rejected any further movement toward inter-Korean cooperation.

Nonetheless, Moon continues to try to find any space he can to foster inter-Korean cooperation and increasingly speaks of doing so "independently"—an ambition that is more aspirational than actionable. One senior ROK observer noted that, in addition to their fundamentally different geopolitical perspectives, Washington and Seoul have fundamentally different views on the division of the peninsula. For Seoul (particularly progressive political forces), it is seen as an abnormal state of affairs that needs to be overcome as quickly as possible. But, as he opined, "US policymakers tend to take division for granted or seem to pay less attention to this matter in the eyes of Koreans. Any efforts by Koreans to overcome their division through peaceful means seem to be unwelcomed or regarded as too naïve or idealistic by the US policymakers."

Conclusion

Geographic, strategic, political, economic and historical factors inextricably tie the alliance and the Korean Peninsula to the region in complicated ways. The concerns and contradictions raised by various officials and analysts warrant greater attention from Congress and the US policymaking community. One of the more striking takeaways from 38 North's various

discussions was that the US-ROK alliance faces several serious challenges that cast doubt on its ability to adapt to structural and strategic shifts underway. The Trump administration may refer to the alliance as the “linchpin” of its regional strategy and Congress may pass nonbinding resolutions expressing support for South Korea and other Asian allies. But it is not clear that US policymakers fully appreciate the depth of US and South Korean differences on fundamental bilateral and regional issues. None of this is to imply that the alliance is headed for a crack-up. Indeed, there are enduring alliance constituencies in both countries that have deepened ties over time and shepherded the alliance through previous periods of friction. However, many officials and analysts stressed it would be foolish to assume that interests that are vested in alliance maintenance and institutional inertia can, by themselves, overcome the centrifugal forces that are tugging at the relationship. Transforming the relationship might be a bridge too far, but intelligent and diligent alliance management can keep the relationship from going off the rails.