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The ROK-US Alliance at Sixty: Vigorous, But Vigilance Required

BY SUKJOON YOON

Sukjoon Yoon, Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy, explains that “The ROK-US security and defense alliance has been an exemplary model of cooperation, but the world is changing.”

The Republic of Korea and the United States both reaffirmed the indispensable role that the two countries share in the maintenance of peace and security on the Korean Peninsula in their 45th Security Consultative Meeting hosted in Seoul on October 2. South Korean Minister of National Defense Kim Kwan-jin was reassured by his counterpart US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel that the United States was fully committed to the defense of South Korea across the full spectrum of US military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. Secretary Hagel was in South Korea for four days, celebrating the 60th anniversary of the ROK-US Alliance, attending one ceremony marking the 65th anniversary of the founding of the ROK Armed Forces and another for the change of command from General James D. Thurman to General Curtis M. Scaparrotti for the Combined Forces Command between South Korea and the United States (CFC ROK-US).

Minister Kim and Secretary Hagel, speaking at a joint press conference, outlined agreement on several bilateral alliance issues, including closer integration of US and ROK cyber-security networks. Of particular importance, however, is the so-called “Tailored Deterrence Strategy,” which specifies enhanced missile defense cooperation against the threat of North Korean weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and which has been characterized as “one objective and two systems: one shield, two layers.” This system resembles the Flexible Response Strategy which the United States successfully applied in the 1980s in Europe during the Cold War. Since South Korea lacks the full capacity to deter North Korean WMD threats by itself, this agreement is very reassuring and indicates the continuing robust strength of the ROK-US Alliance.

For the United States, however, these are testing times with many in Asia questioning both the credibility and affordability of US regional security commitments.

“Sequestration” has seriously impacted the US defense budget, and US allies worry about future spending cuts at a time when the United States is militarily rebalancing more to the Asia-Pacific region. Moreover, the partial shutdown of the US federal government is perceived as a global humiliation by many in Asia. Meanwhile, the United States and South Korea are in the final stages of negotiating the Special Measures Agreement covering another five-year period of burden-sharing payments to support the presence of US forces in Korea. The United States is requesting that South Korea pay 75 percent of these costs, a goal set by the US Congress for forward deployment of US armed forces. However, South Korea is concerned about the affordability of this request.

South Korean policy makers have other concerns following the US-Japan Security Consultative Committee “2+2” held in Tokyo on October 3, where the United States

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gave tacit support to amending the Japanese constitution. This would lift a ban on collective defense, and allow the Japanese Self-Defense Force to transform from a peacekeeping force into a fighting force ready to respond to specified “expedients.” The Japanese Ministry of Defense has requested \$49 billion for fiscal year 2014, representing a 3 percent year-on-year increase and the second consecutive rise after years of stagnation. South Korea, a victim of Japanese imperialism in the last century, has concerns over future Japanese military expansion.

Some commentators in South Korea have also been seriously concerned by the US failure to punish the Syrian regime for a chemical weapons attack in Damascus last month. If the United States is unwilling to conduct a military strike in response to such provocation, then where is the pressure on the North Korean regime to abandon its nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles? In reality there are no good options for South Korea and the United States to constrain Kim Jung-un.

There are already numerous ROK-US security consultative forums and military committee meetings which discuss specific issues relevant to the bilateral security alliance and North Korean contingencies. A new one was added to review the transfer of Wartime Operational Control (OPCON) from CFC ROK-US to South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff and which has been slated for December 2015. It will be led by Admiral Choi Yoon-hee, former Chief of Naval Operations for the ROK, and the newly appointed South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff. The North Korean military provocations of 2010, together with Chinese protests against ROK-US bilateral naval drills in the West/Yellow Sea, are driving new thinking in South Korea about the use of military force.

The result is a more proactive defense posture that has been described as a “South Korea First” defense strategy. This posture grants more authority and autonomy to on-scene commanders within the scope and structure of the current CFC ROK-US Rules of Engagement. Previous attempts by South Korean governments to take back military authority have foundered over the complexity of the situation, partially because a continuing state of war has technically existed on the Korean Peninsula since the armistice agreement of 1953, rendering the distinction between wartime and peacetime OPCON moot.

The final, stubborn problems of OPCON transfer are being resolved however, and the two countries are increasingly moving towards military interoperability. South Korea, quite understandably, is striving for a “South Korea First” defense strategy, finances permitting. The United States, for its part, is attempting remain the predominant military power in Asia, but with a smaller defense budget. The ROK-US security and defense alliance has been an exemplary model of cooperation, but the world is changing. It is now time to recalibrate roles and responsibilities on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea remains firmly committed to supporting US regional and global influence, albeit even if that influence is somewhat reduced. Regarding the Korean Peninsula, South Korea is therefore pursuing greater interoperability with US forces to facilitate more cohesion when fighting together. To that end, the ROK military is planning to acquire next-generation F-35 fighters for its air force, multi-purposed missile patrol destroyers for its navy, and combat transporters for its army. In response to the massive South Korea military parade held on October 1, the North Korean National Defense Commission condemned South Korean President Park Geun-hye by name; and recent reports suggest that the Yongbyon nuclear facility has been reactivated. North Korean military provocations will surely continue, and will likely escalate, so there is an increased need for the ROK-US Alliance to share their burdens equably, and be ready to fight once again side-by-side should the need arise.

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APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Damien Tomkins

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