

**Statement before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**

***“WHAT’S NEXT FOR THE U.S. – KOREA
ALLIANCE”***

A Statement by

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June 6, 2012

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TESTIMONY OF DR. VICTOR D. CHA
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BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, COMMITTEE
ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
JUNE 6, 2012

Chairman Manzullo, Congressman Faleomavaega and members of the committee, it is a distinct honor to appear before this committee to discuss the challenges on the Korean peninsula.

I have testified before this committee in the past and I can say without hesitation that the challenges of dealing with North Korea, while advancing our alliance with South Korea, are more multifaceted and more complex. Allow me to offer some thoughts on how to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance.

How do we strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance?

There is no denying that the U.S.-ROK relationship is at an all time high. At a personal level, the chemistry between the two leaders, Barack Obama and Lee Myung-bak is very good. One can never underestimate the influence that this has on the overall tone of a relationship. When I worked at the White House, Presidents Bush and Roh Moo-hyun did not share the same chemistry, and while we probably reached more agreements during that period than any other in the history of the alliance (e.g., Iraq/Afghanistan deployments, KORUS, Visa Waiver, WEST program, NATO-plus-three status), the tone of the relationship was always a bit discordant as the two leaders had differing ideologies and incompatible personalities.

But it is not only personalities that have contributed to the relationship. The Lee Myung-bak government's globally-oriented outlook has mattered greatly to an Obama administration that has been looking for allies to step up and to burden-share. When European countries shied away from the U.S. calls for help with the surge in Afghanistan, Korea sent a provincial reconstruction team of 100 civilians and 35 police officers and a military detachment of 320 troops (currently 336¹) to Parwan Province in June 2010.² When others balked at the U.S. agenda for climate change at Copenhagen, Korea supported the American position and unilaterally voluntarily pledged to reduce its own

¹ ROK, Ministry of Defense, International Peacekeeping Operations
http://www.mnd.go.kr/mndEng_2009/DefensePolicy/Policy12/Policy12_2/index.jsp.

² ROK, Ministry of Defense, Q&A: Troop Deployment to Afghanistan, 3 Mar 2010.
<http://www.mnd.go.kr/mndMedia/mndNew/foreignDispatch/20100303/1_11640.jsp?topMenuNo=1&leftNum=7> ROK, Ministry of Defense, International Peacekeeping Operations
http://www.mnd.go.kr/mndEng_2009/DefensePolicy/Policy12/Policy12_2/index.jsp.

carbon emissions 30 percent by 2020.³ When the financial crisis led countries to question whether the U.S. model should be replaced by the “Beijing model,” Korea was one of the first economies to recover and trumpet the virtues of an open market economic model. The ROK has hosted the G20 summit, the nuclear security summit, and in 2018, it will host the Winter Olympics – the first Asian country to do so since Japan in February 1998. The ROK is the first international aid recipient to become a major provider of overseas development assistance, with Afghanistan as its top aid recipient. Like the United States, it has created a Peace Corps of over 4,000 young men and women serving everywhere from Central Asia to Southeast Asia. The platitudes go on. A White House reporter once asked for my input on a story she wanted to write about how Obama admired Korea so much that his constant references to the country in his domestic policy speeches meant that he secretly wanted Americans to adopt the Korean work ethic (I do not know if this reporter ever managed to get her editor to approve such a piece).

Other external factors have contributed to the strength of U.S.-ROK ties. North Korea’s belligerence – in the forms of the missile and nuclear tests of 2009, the Cheonan sinking and artillery shelling of 2010, and the missile test of April 2012 – has helped to bring the two allies closer. Japan’s inward turn as a result of domestic political changes and the March 2011 triple disaster constituted the biggest strategic surprise for the U.S. in Asia, and this unforeseen stepback by the traditionally key U.S. ally in Asia has also helped upgrade the U.S.-ROK relationship.

The Next Korean Presidency

Contrary to popular expectations, I do not think the presidential elections in South Korea (or here for that matter) will have a dramatic impact on the U.S.-ROK alliance. Whether the Korean people elect a conservative or progressive to occupy the Blue House, we can expect to see two trends with regard to the alliance. First, the tone of the relationship, while positive, will “normalize” to an extent, absent the string of superlatives used to describe the relationship today. This is the natural course of politics as the successor in Seoul will want to show a degree of distance from the predecessor’s policies. A little more talk about a balanced relationship. Perhaps a little more outreach to China, but not a major turn in strategy that we saw, for example, under Roh Moo-hyun. Even progressives in Korea are aware of the public’s general affinity for the alliance. Recent polls by the Asan Institute show 7 out of 10 Koreans holding a favorable view of the United States and 75 percent believing the alliance must remain even after reunification.⁴ Moreover, they have learned from the examples of Roh in Korea and Hatoyama in Japan to strike a more centrist course. Thus, we may see a change more in tone than in strategy.

Second, a new administration in Korea is likely to attempt a bit more outreach to North Korea than the perceived hard line position of Lee government. This is not a return to

³ Johnson, Toni. “Copenhagen's Many Agendas. Council on Foreign Relations. 4 Dec 2009. <<http://www.cfr.org/climate-change/copenhagens-many-agendas/p20906#p13>>

⁴ Karl Friedhoff, *South Korea 2011: The Asan Institute’s Annual Survey* (Asan Institute, 2012), pp. 12-13.

unconditional engagement of the sunshine policy, but even the conservative candidate, Park Guen-hye, has evinced a shade more flexibility in her approach to the North. But these sorts of changes are manageable as long as there is adequate consultation between Washington and Seoul immediately after the elections and through the transition periods in both capitols.

A New “Next-Level” Strategic Framework

What is missing today from the alliance, however, is a broader strategic framework. This is understandable because when one reaches the end of an administration, as we have in both Seoul and Washington, the relationship boils down to issues and tactics, not strategy. Thus, during my trip to Seoul last week, senior ROK officials, as well as presidential candidates, incessantly pressed their points on specific issues including missile range guidelines and the 1-2-3 negotiations. These are difficult negotiations. They have been out of the public eye here in the United States. And up until recently, the same had held true in Korea. However, after the North’s April 2012 missile launch, President Lee publicly stated that the ROK needs its own longer-range missiles. National Assembly members have called for the same, as well as the reintroduction of tactical nuclear weapons to Korea. A surprising 63 percent of South Koreans support the indigenous development of nuclear weapons in response to North Korea’s nuclear weapons status.⁵

The missile guidelines and 1-2-3 negotiations have the potential to inflame anti-American sentiments in Korea, particularly if they are framed by wily politicians as “sovereignty” issues in which the U.S. is portrayed as heavy-handedly trying to stop the ROK from acting in its own self-defense. Yet, trying to bulldoze through on such negotiations will meet with strong resistance on both sides as working-level U.S. and ROK officials stand nose-to-nose refusing to yield an inch and essentially waiting for the other’s time in office to run out. Meanwhile, resentments on both sides grow and leave the incoming governments to be elected in November and December 2012 respectively with a depleted reservoir of good will upon which to build.

One cannot make progress on these or other issues unless we embed them in a broader strategic framework designed to take the U.S.-ROK alliance to the next level. Some on the ROK side argue that Seoul has been a good ally of the U.S. on everything from Afghanistan to climate change, and therefore is deserving of some reciprocal treatment. Some on the U.S. side argue that these negotiations are of such consequence that they cannot be simply traded as chips for an ally’s good behavior, and instead must be treated with the strictest objective guidelines. The gap will not narrow unless we conceive of a broad strategic framework in which to think about the future U.S.-ROK alliance. In my opinion, three broad propositions inform such a framework.

Global Scope – Public Goods providers

⁵ Ibid., p. 10.

The first proposition to take the alliance to the next level would be to conceive of it as having a global role. What this means is that the U.S. and ROK must continue to expand the scope of this relationship by joining forces as public-goods providers in the international system. Whether the issue is overseas development assistance, peacekeeping, climate change, G20, nuclear security, PSI, or missile defense, the U.S.-ROK alliance plays or could play prominently in all of these issue-areas. On more issues than not, Seoul stands squarely with Washington, and is a critical Asian player operating with the U.S. on a global stage. While it has not displaced Japan, Seoul has been an extremely relevant, active, and ambitious actor that could handsomely complement Japan's role.

What does this public goods role for Korea mean for the United States? It suggests that with Korea, we can help to ensure compliance with existing international norms as well as to create new ones concordant with our national interests.

One example of this might be in civil nuclear energy. As CSIS President John Hamre has argued, the United States increasingly will recede as a global player in the nuclear energy field. As we reduce our footprint in this area, China, Russia, and other countries in Asia are likely to become the dominant actors. If we are to have any impact on the rules governing safeguards, transparency, and nonproliferation in the future commercial nuclear energy regime, then it is in our interest to find partners to work with like Korea. Japan was one of those partners, but after Fukushima, its future role in global nuclear energy will dissipate. One way to accomplish this might be to have countries like Korea stand as shining examples of full-nuclear fuel cycle states that meet the highest nonproliferation standards of international transparency and compliance. Otherwise, the future of nuclear energy will be left to suppliers like China and Russia who will not hold the same standards of compliance. While this would be a controversial decision on the U.S.-side, it would require a decisional framework that steps out of the reflexive counterproliferation mode, and looks to partner with Korea and others to define the rules of the future civil nuclear regime. On Korea's part, this would require a more realistic negotiating position, rather than the current demands for unconditional reprocessing rights. It would also require much greater international transparency from the nuclear agencies in Korea.

Regional Scope – Shaping China's Rise

The second proposition that informs a new strategic framework would be to view the alliance as a critical cornerstone of democracy and peace in Asia. The U.S.-ROK alliance is an indispensable, indeed, critical piece that plays in the shaping of China's peaceful rise. In one sense, Japan's role is presumed to be with the U.S. in such an effort as a fellow maritime power in Asia (with the U.S. and Australia). But Korea, as a continental state, is the critical case. As Nick Eberstadt once aptly noted, Korea is the cockpit of Asia -- the way in which it aligns will shape the geostrategy of the region.

How does this broad notional thinking impact current policies? Koreans are always wary of becoming entrapped in a Sino-American competition, and therefore they balk at concepts like “strategic flexibility” which allow U.S. forces to flow off the peninsula to other contingencies in the region. But one area where the regional shaping concept suggests better policies on the part of Seoul is on security ties with Japan.

U.S.-Japan-ROK Trilateralism

The Korean Supreme Court’s ruling two weeks ago on the legality of claims by Korean victims of Japan’s labor conscription policies during World War II is certain to complicate the already complex relations between the two East Asian neighbors. But before every politician on the peninsula jumps on the “bash-Japan” bandwagon, serious thought must be given to the importance of stable Seoul-Tokyo relations for the ROK’s well-being.

Japan comprises a critical part of any answer to the strategic question of how South Korea should deal with the rise of China. This is because China’s treatment of Korea will always be determinative of Korea’s relations with its two key regional partners, Japan and the United States. Contrary to the popular view that Korea must avoid too close a relationship with its two democratic friends in Asia for fear of alienating China, Beijing’s respect and treatment of Seoul heightens when the latter is not feuding with its traditional allies. To put the algorithm simply: Strong US-Japan-ROK ties enhance Seoul’s leverage in dealing with China. Weak ties only give China more leverage in dealing with its smaller neighbor to the South.

Opportunities to improve relations are truly afoot. Seoul and Tokyo have completed negotiations on two key security agreements: the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), and the Acquisition of Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). GSOMIA would allow Seoul and Tokyo to systematically share intelligence on DPRK. ACSA would promote the sharing of military supplies and services between the two countries.

These agreements undeniably benefit Korea, but they are being held up in part because of concerns about historically-motivated political opposition to Seoul’s conclusion of security agreements with its former colonial oppressor. Delaying these further is ill-advised. The current government cannot run for office again, so the domestic politics of these agreements, though painful, have no lasting political consequence. And both agreements would help to enhance deterrence against future North Korean provocations. Seoul should also drop its opposition to establishing a trilateral secretariat for U.S.-Japan-ROK relations. Such a secretariat would not be simply to copy the creation of the Korea-Japan-China office, but would represent an important institution for furthering coordinated trilateral alliance cooperation that builds on GSOMIA and ACSA. Moreover, with OPCON transfer approaching in three years, coordinated trilateral relations will become more important to formalize.

Koreans will dislike Americans pushing these recommendations, but the Japanese bureaucracy's incredibly incompetent ability to finesse, even a little, historical irritants like textbooks, Tokdo, or comfort women should not stand in the way of a rational calculation of U.S. and South Korean interests.

Peninsular Scope: Enhancing Nuclear Deterrence

So two legs of the U.S.-ROK strategic alliance are global (public goods provision) and regional (shaping China's rise). The third leg relates to defense and security on the peninsula. Here, the new operational strategic concept should be to adjust the military alliance such that it can deter a nuclear North Korea. With Pyongyang's announcement last week in their constitution that the DPRK is now formally a nuclear weapons state, the alliance can no longer live with the fiction that denuclearization is within reach once we get back to the Six Party talks. The last round of these multilateral talks was in 2008, effectively rendering them not dormant, but dead. While diplomatic efforts should continue, the real task in the alliance is retooling the relationship to ensure effective and stable nuclear deterrence.

One element of this would be to engage in serious discussions about extending ROK missile ranges. The ROK has been pushing hard to extend their missile ranges beyond a U.S.-ROK 2001 bilateral agreement to adhere to the MTCR guidelines of 300 km or 183 miles. Given the DPRK's efforts to develop missiles ranging as far as 2500 miles, the Lee government wants a revised agreement that would permit development of longer-range (800-1000 km) missiles. Such an agreement solely on missile ranges would not, however, enhance deterrence without a ROK commitment to strengthen intelligence surveillance and command and control systems as the alliance prepares for OPCON transition in 2015. Seoul's comprehensive commitment to missile defense as well as an agreement on joint operational guidelines for a new missile force would also be critical to enhancing deterrence.

There are other unorthodox elements of a new deterrence strategy. One would be to engage the DPRK in a serious discussion about nuclear deterrence. The point here would be to convince the North that they are in the worst of two worlds with their handful of weapons. First, this cache, absent a demonstrated long-range missile reentry capability, and any evidence of warhead miniaturization, does not come close to the definition of a credible nuclear deterrent. So they get no added security from these weapons. And second, Pyongyang's mistaken belief that they have a credible deterrent can get them into deep trouble. The recent string of unprecedented provocations against the South in 2010 gives one the uneasy feeling that Pyongyang may believe that they are invulnerable to retaliation given their nuclear capabilities. This erroneous belief is a recipe for escalation as Seoul is determined to respond militarily and lethally to the next provocation. Responsible parties need to sit down with the North and explain the ABCs of nuclear deterrence, just as we did with the Soviet Union at the beginning of the nuclear era.

Another area of engagement with the DPRK might be on nuclear safety. The nuclear meltdown that took place in Fukushima, Japan was at an old but relatively safe complex by international standards. By contrast, the Yongbyon nuclear complex in North Korea is anything but safe. The IAEA almost one decade ago deemed North Korea nuclear facilities, radiation shielding systems, cranes, and waste disposal sites as seriously defective, but has been unable to implement any safeguards measures in recent years. Construction practices at both the old plutonium complex and at the modern centrifuge enrichment facility revealed by the North Koreans in November 2010 are not compatible with international reactor safety standards, according to an American scientist who visited the site. One nuclear expert, who now serves in the Obama administration, stated after a 2007 visit to Yongbyon that the levels of radioactive contamination leaking at the site because of past operations and poor upkeep would force its closure in any state in the United States. North Koreans admit to South Korean nuclear experts that their design team for the new LWR is composed of young engineers trained in the DPRK who learned by “trial and error.” Experts at the Nautilus Institute cite the locating of spent fuel rods near the reactor cores or inside reactor secondary containment buildings as an incredibly dangerous design flaw and contributing factors to a possible meltdown scenario. North Korea’s unreliable power grid has also been shown to be an identified pathway that could lead to accidental crash shutdowns for nuclear power generation.

Engaging in a discussion on nuclear safety would be in the interests of all parties. Reactors and their related facilities in North Korea need to be made safe before they can be safely dismantled. The last safety management training session for DPRK officials by international experts took place in July 2002. Disasters, either man-made or natural, of much lesser magnitude than the Fukushima tsunami and earthquake, could result in an unstable nuclear complex. A meltdown at Yongbyon, though smaller than the Fukushima-Daiichi complex, would have broader implications by virtue of the plant’s proximate location to the Asian mainland.

Finally, a third avenue of engagement relates to energy. What the DPRK has wanted in the past two nuclear agreements is light water nuclear reactors. The 1994 agreement promised them two and started a process to build them. The 2005 agreement followed the spirit of the previous agreement. In the aftermath of Fukushima, light water reactors should not be in North Korea’s future. They were never a viable energy source for the North (it would take two decades to build the necessary power grids to avoid a meltdown), and after Fukushima, it would be hard to sleep at night knowing Pyongyang were operating these things safely. It would be in everyone’s interests to find an alternative energy quid pro quo for denuclearization. When I participated in the Six Party talks, one alternative put forth by the South Koreans was conventional electricity. The recent talks between Russia and the DPRK about gas pipelines might be another. But nuclear energy for the DPRK should be off the table.

These ideas are admittedly out of the box. But the point is that advancing any of these issues outside a strategic framework for the alliance is unlikely to reach resolution. Whether in the remainder of the two administrations’ terms or as a start to the next administrations’ tenures, both sides must do a “step-back” and devise the broader

strategic objectives they have for the alliance. Only then can Seoul and Washington address the specific alliance issues on the table in a way that strengthens rather than weakens the overall relationship.