China’s Rise, the Changing Northeast Asian Security Environment, and U.S.-ROK Strategic Response

An interview with CSIS Senior Advisor and Korea Chair, Victor D. Cha
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With the advent of the G2 era, the security dynamics of Northeast Asia have changed rapidly, and new security and North Korea policies are in demand. While this issue is fervently debated among policymakers and scholars, CSIS visiting fellow from the Republic of Korea (ROK) National Assembly, Mr. Ilkwon Kim, met with the CSIS Korea Chair Dr. Victor Cha for a special conversation. Below is Mr. Kim’s interview with Dr. Cha. (This interview was published in Gookhwe Go [The National Assembly Review] in December 2010).

Kim Ilkwon: International relations these days can be best characterized by the era of G2 with the United States on the one hand and the economically and militarily rising China on the other. The Northeast Asian region is especially sensitive to China’s rapid rise as it significantly affects regional security dynamics. For example, the North Korea issue, South China Sea territorial disputes, the Taiwan dilemma, and the Senkaku/Diaoyu island disputes have deepened the confrontation between China and the United States. Therefore, countries in the region must correctly analyze the implications of China’s rise for Northeast Asia’s security dynamics and need to devise appropriate response strategies. First of all, could you please explain how the rise of China is affecting the security dynamics in Northeast Asia?

Victor Cha: Well, through the latter half of the 20th century, the rapid rise of Asian powers such as Japan, China, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and India have led many to dub this 21st century as the “Asian Century.” The fast growing economic and military might in the region, especially of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), has even led some to espouse the virtues of a new “Beijing Consensus” of authoritarian development economics, leaving the formerly preeminent “Washington Consensus” of international liberal economics in its wake. Further, China’s above-9% growth rates through the global financial crisis make a sharp contrast with the United States’ position, being mired in

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recession and bogged down for nearly a decade in two highly-expensive foreign wars. In the past couple of years the United States has, in some ways, been relegated to a meeker China policy, with officials being relatively quiet on Chinese human rights and President Obama being accused of “kowtowing” to Beijing for declining to meet the Dalai Lama. China’s holding of almost a trillion dollars of U.S. treasury securities has also led many to assume it has or will have disproportionate amounts of influence over the United States. And with large U.S. global initiatives such as the global warming agreements and currency revaluation issues having been forestalled or derailed by China’s opposition, there is little doubt surrounding the new global influence assumed by China.

Despite these realities, the rise of China is not expected to bring any profound changes to the current Northeast Asian security structure, the so-called American-centric “hub-and-spokes system” that has been in place for the past six decades, because there are basic fundamentals of the regional security landscape that will remain unchanged in the foreseeable future. First, in spite of a slight regional shift in relative economic and military power, the United States still retains the most powerful economy and military in Northeast Asia and the world. The Chinese economy is still less than a quarter the size of that of the U.S., and America outspends China militarily almost seven-fold. Another important factor are the remnants of the Cold War security structure that refuse to die out. The region is divided between liberal-democratic powers (the U.S., the ROK, Japan, Taiwan) and authoritarian states (China, the DPRK, Russia), and there seems to be little movement in a democratic direction among these autocratic states. In light of these dynamics, China has adamantly fought for the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, simultaneously attempting to prevent a North Korean collapse and its unification with the Western-aligned ROK.

Because of the above-mentioned relative shift in regional power, Beijing has, of late, assumed a more assertive foreign and regional security policy. In the early 2000s, the phrase that was very commonly associated with China was of their “peaceful rise.” Yet in recent years and months we have witnessed a marked shift in China’s policy stance. From the recent Senkaku dispute with Japan, to its silence regarding North Korea’s uranium enrichment program, to its sanctions busting behavior, China is increasingly evoking mistrust, anxiety and fear among regional states, and this raises uncertainty regarding the emerging Northeast Asian security outlook. Its position on North Korea particularly has not served China well, undercutting its legitimacy as a rising power and responsible stakeholder in the global order. Although there have been wobbly moments in the United States’ alliances with both the ROK and Japan over the past number of years, China’s new, aggressive foreign policy stance has in many ways driven these powers together and strengthened the traditional alliances. In sum, while important shifts have taken place in
the regional balance of power, American preeminence, Cold War-remnants, and traditional alliances will continue to dominate in the future.

Kim: Thanks for the comprehensive explanation. Regarding these recent changes in the security dynamics in Northeast Asia, President Obama has proclaimed a “Return to Asia” as the “First Pacific U.S. President.” Please elaborate on the future course of the Obama administration’s security policies toward Northeast Asia and the future prospects for the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances.

Cha: As you said, when President Obama came into office, he spoke of “returning to Asia” and was referred to by many as America’s “First Pacific President.” Like all incoming administrations, his sought to distance itself from its predecessor’s policies by framing its relationship with China as a “G2” partnership, by “extending a hand” to the DPRK, and by bridging some of the more difficult gaps with the ROK and Japan. In fact, these policies looked strikingly similar to Bush’s second term, but they certainly made for good political rhetoric and likely played some part in Obama’s landslide victory. Obama wanted to come to Asia and be everything for everybody: a global partner with China, a diplomatic interlocutor of North Korea, a preeminent trade partner with South Korea, and a strong ally of Japan. But the President was given a somewhat rude awakening to the reality of regional dynamics. Fundamental differences in interests and outlook have shown talk of a “G2” to be somewhat overly-optimistic. The DPRK has responded to Obama’s outreach with missile and nuclear tests, a uranium enrichment program, and attacks on an ally’s navy and territory. The administration has also thus far proven unable to ratify the pending KORUS FTA, and has seen its alliance with Japan on relatively shaky ground. These aren’t failings of the Obama administration per se, but perhaps an indication of expectations that might have been a notch-or-two too high.

On the other hand, there have been many positive aspects to U.S. relations in Northeast Asia. The six-decade alliance with the ROK has probably never been better. Gone are the days of fractious relations between the Kim and Roh governments and their American counterparts, as we have entered an era of unprecedented uniformity of policy outlook between the White and Blue Houses. The alliance has become so important to the United States that the ROK has been referred to as the “linchpin of Northeast Asian security and stability” by both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton in recent months. President Lee and Obama’s personal chemistry has been an important factor in these relations, and the trust between these two leaders is unprecedented in U.S.-Korea relations. Obama personally has a great deal of confidence in President Lee, and has been impressed with how Lee has handled a number of regional crises, most pointedly the Cheonan incident. This past summer the alliance was also upgraded under that “Strategic
Alliance 2015” plan during the first-ever U.S.-ROK 2+2 meeting of defense and foreign ministers. Throughout the difficult regional situations which have emerged in the past two years, the Obama administration has sought to reassure the ROK of its support and display alliance solidarity to the rest of the world.

With Japan too, the United States has seen recent improvements in relations. After the DPJ’s historic landslide victory, calls from the Hatoyama government for a change in the relationship and distancing from the United States placed the U.S.-Japan alliance on somewhat tenuous ground. But with the stepping down of Hatoyama and the rise of the Kan government, we have seen a return to more pragmatic alliance policy out of Japan. The recent Senkaku dispute, while viewed by some as a sign of Japan’s weakness, nevertheless forced the United States to Japan’s side and isolated China in the perspective of the bulk of the international community. North Korean belligerence has had a similar effect, with the United States closely consulting Japan and reassuring them of their solidarity every step of the way.

And so, in many ways the rise of China and its most recent aggressive tendencies and North Korea’s bellicosity has tightened the strategic triangle of the United States, Japan, and the ROK. Historically antagonistic relations between the ROK and Japan have warmed as a result of North Korea’s two recent provocations, and we are seeing unprecedented levels of congeniality and cooperation between the ROK and Japan. With China taking its usual, ambiguous stance on the North’s uranium enrichment program and calling for “calm” and “mutual restraint” after the Yeonpyeong artillery shelling, the United States, Korea, and Japan are looking more and more like comfortable, long-term partners in dealing with these crises. Although the historical mistrust and animosity is embedded in the ROK-Japan relationship that won’t die out and could erupt at any time, shared security interests and challenges posed by North Korea and China will drive the United States, Japan, South Korea to continue to reinforce and reinvigorate the strength of their alliances.

Kim: With the strategic objectives of peaceful denuclearization of North Korea and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula, the Republic of Korea (ROK) is in a position to embrace both the United States, “a critical security partner,” and China, “an essential economic collaborator.” Do you have any advice or suggestions for the ROK government’s security and reunification policies with which South Korea can win the support from both the United States and China and accomplish its national strategic objectives (of denuclearization in the Korean peninsula and the reunification)?
Cha: In this respect, the ROK is in a bit of an awkward position. Its security fortunes most certainly rest with the United States, and yet its economic future is increasingly turning in the direction of China. China’s geographic proximity and rapid economic growth make it an attractive contact for the ROK to establish, and as a result China has been the ROK’s number one trade partner for the past number of years. And the benefit of this relationship goes both ways, with the ROK sitting in fourth place in China’s trade partners, not far behind the Chinese Special Administrative Region (SAR), Hong Kong. Given these divergent dynamics, with South Korea possibly having its loyalties increasingly divided, a number of things can be said about the potential unification of the Korean Peninsula.

China’s traditional policy has been to prop up the regime in Pyongyang to avoid both the catastrophe of collapse and the potential of having a large, U.S.-aligned, unified Korea on its border. What is becoming increasingly clear though, and even to many in the PRC, is that the regime in Pyongyang is more of a strategic liability than a strategic asset. The nuclear and missile tests, the Cheonan incident, the unveiling of the uranium enrichment facility, and the Yeonpyeong artillery strike are only the most recent in a long history of North Korea’s actions putting China in very awkward diplomatic positions. Not only has China sought to rise peacefully and make economic growth its number one priority, but it is also looking to pull greater weight on the global stage and North Korea’s actions over the past number of years have hurt its reputation as a responsible member of international community. Seoul therefore, would do well to continue to present itself to the Chinese as a non-threatening, economically beneficial alternative to their restive northern neighbor. The closer Chinese-South Korean relations are, the easier potential unification will be.

It is also important to note that unification is not necessarily in the short-term interests of either of the parties. As stated above, China is not comfortable with the notion of a unified Korean Peninsula, nor does it want to deal with the chaos of a DPRK collapse. But South Korea too would prefer a gradual, well-orchestrated unification process taking place over many years, to a sudden collapse, and so here we see a bit of an alignment of interests. Of course the end goals are different, but the mutual interest in the passage of time hints at some convergence.

The inherent weakness of the North Korean regime is another important factor in this regard. Far from being a “socialist paradise,” it has a stagnant economy, a starving population, and is ranked in the Failed States Index as the 19th-most “Failed State” on earth. The fact that North Korea could collapse tomorrow or, in the words of Richard Armitage, “may be able to stagger on indefinitely” makes it imperative that all regional
parties are closely coordinated in potential collapse policies. Here is another area in which China and South Korea can work together for the attainment of mutual goals in the name of mutual interests. It is also important to remember that while the ROK is China’s fourth-greatest trade partner, the U.S. is its greatest. What this shows is that economic relationships need not be abandoned in the presence of strategic rivalries because they often prove to be so mutually beneficial. To sum up then, while there is an inherent tension in the ROK’s position, there are enough ways in which it can continue to work with the PRC to attain their overlapping security interests and therefore potential unification is not necessarily doomed from the start.

Kim: Thank you so much for your time and valuable insights.