

The ROK-U.S. Combined Defense System in the New Security Environment

Lee Soo-hyung

INTRODUCTION

The June 13-15 inter-Korean summit signalled a turning point in the security climate on the Korean peninsula. The summit will not only contribute immensely to resolution of the half century of animosity between the two Koreas, but it also opens a new era for South-North peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Furthermore, it envisions clear principles and methods for dismantling the Cold War structure on the Korean peninsula and a Korean unification by the Korean people themselves.

The improvement of inter-Korean relations is only the first step in achieving the goal, which is to completely dismantle the Cold War structure and establish a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula. As a matter of fact, the Korean issue is closely related to the four great powers surrounding the Korean peninsula. Thus, there are two major factors to be considered in resolving the Korean issue; the parties directly concerned, i.e., South-North Korean relations, and the power structure of the four powers, namely, the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia. The ROK-U.S. alliance especially relates to those

two factors.

The ROK-U.S. alliance was established to prevent invasion by the North, and during the last half century, the alliance has remained central to the stability of the Korean peninsula and Northeast Asia. However, with the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, the strategic environment has changed drastically. Owing to the changed environment, efforts to normalize U.S.-North Korea relations, as well as improve South-North relations ironically, has weakened the rationale of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Nevertheless, the governments of the South Korea and the U.S. have officially emphasized the continuation of the alliance.¹⁾ As a result, it is time for South Korea and the U.S. to work to restructure the ROK-U.S. alliance to fit the newly-changed security environment.

In this paper, certain anachronistic aspects of the ROK-U.S. alliance, such as residual effects of the Cold War era, will be examined, and plausible restructuring of the alliance will be proposed in order to maximize the self-reliance of South Korea and to strengthen security under the drastically-changing Northeast Asian security environment. The restructuring of the alliance will be the first step in the process of South-North relations and for establishing a peaceful, unified system on the Korean peninsula.

THE POST-COLD WAR ERA AND THE CHANGING SECURITY STRUCTURE IN NORTHEAST ASIA

International relations in the 20th century were formed through complex interactions of the two World Wars and the Cold War. Even though these wars were finished in the 20th century, they are still influencing 21st century international relations. Especially, since the

1) The U.S. government has the intention to maintain U.S. Forces Korea after the unification. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Vision 2020* (Washington, D.C.: US GPO, 2000).

end of 1980s, post-Cold War international relations have shown two distinguishing characteristics: asynchronicity and duplication.

Asynchronicity characterizes the relationships of Northeast Asia. Even though changes at the end of the Cold War shook the geopolitical structure of Europe to its foundation, the Cold War order has remained albeit, partially, in Northeast Asia. Duplication indicates that the Northeast Asia security structure still has Cold War characteristics as well as attributes of the post-Cold War. That asynchronical duplication provides Korea with both new opportunities and challenges simultaneously, as far as a peace system on the Korean peninsula is concerned.

Basically, the security structure on the Korean peninsula in the Cold War era consisted of two axes: Inter-Korean relations and the ROK-U.S. alliance. Instead, the complexity of the post-Cold War characteristics in Northeast Asia, asynchronical duplication, created dissonance in the U.S.' global-regional interests and its security strategies,²⁾ and this finally led to a triangle in strategic relations; South-North Koreas, South Korea-U.S., and North Korea-U.S. North Korea's declaration of withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), on March 12, 1993, encouraged the triangular relations even more.

While the asynchronic-duplicate nature highlighted the U.S. role regarding South and North Korea in the 1990s, the security environment at the beginning of the 21st century has become more volatile. That is, the characteristic could further reconciliations between the hostile countries as well as relax the existing alliance. Thus, the changing environment of the post-Cold War on the Korean peninsula might cause potential

2) While the possibility of attack of the U.S. mainland resulted in attempts by the U.S. to coordinate its global with regional interests and strategies, the current complexity of the post-Cold War era has relatively weakened that possibility. Les Aspin, *Report of the Secretary of Defense to the President and the Congress 1994* (Washington, D. C.: USGPO, January 1994), pp. 2-3.

conflicts between South Korea and the U.S. foreign policies toward North Korea.

In this context, South Korea needs to establish a new national security strategy to minimize the negative aspects, while maximizing positive ones, caused by the asynchronic-duplicate character of the post-Cold War. However, since the South Korean security strategy is closely related to the ROK-U.S. alliance, it is impossible for South Korea to maximize its national interests without restructuring the alliance. The restructuring of the alliance is necessary to create a trilateral security coordination among South Korea, the United States and North Korea; to dismantle the Cold War system on the Korean peninsula, and to create the basis for unification.

ANALYSIS OF THE ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE

Implications of the Alliance

In general, the alliance is a mixed blessing, in that it offers the parties benefits such as shared material and human resources and assured security, as well as disadvantages restricting each party's sovereignty. In contrast to a symmetric alliance established between and among similar powers, each party's obligation and benefits are different in an asymmetric alliance, and each party's perception and expectations regarding the alliance are out of balance. An asymmetric alliance is used by a major power as a means of controlling other parties, while providing a security guarantee unilaterally.

Even among asymmetric alliances, the extent of influence and control over other parties by a stronger party varies according to whether the alliance maintains bilateral or multilateral relations. For instance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an outcome of the Cold War, has held an asymmetric power structure. However, NATO's multilateral nature allowed it to develop both

political and military functions simultaneously. In practice, the NATO structure is separated into political and military functions, and moreover, its political structure controls the military.³⁾

In contrast with NATO, the ROK-U.S. alliance based on Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) between the Republic of Korea and United States of America signed on October 1, 1953, maintains an asymmetric bilateral structure, and its military relationship is prioritized.⁴⁾ Article 2 of the MDT reserves a base for “political consultation,” and the ROK-U.S. Combined Defense System (CDS) institutionalized since the late 1970s.⁵⁾ Nevertheless, the alliance still remains asymmetric, that is, the development of political function enabling it to control the military showed relatively little development. In consequence, the alliance emphasized a military structure and consolidated asymmetric relations. In particular, the ROK-U.S. CDS was biased toward military structure and function, conspicuously on the wartime operational control issue⁶⁾ and information and crisis-management functions.⁷⁾

3) NATO, *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization 1949-1989* (Brussels: NATO Office of Information and Press, 1989); NATO, *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Office of Information and Press, 1995).

4) Lee Sam-sung, *The U.S. Foreign Policy toward South Korea and Korean Nationalism* (Seoul: Hangil Press, 1993), pp. 473-86.

5) While “political consultation” according to the multilateral asymmetric nature of NATO is based on Article 4—the parties will consult together, when any party’s territorial integrity, political independence, or security is threatened by external aggression—of the North Atlantic Treaty, “political consultation” in the asymmetric and bilateral ROK-U.S. alliance on Article 2 of the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America. Article 2 states that the parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of either of them, the political independence or security of either of the parties is threatened by external armed attack. Separately and jointly, by self-help and mutual aid, the parties will maintain and develop appropriate means to deter armed attack and will take suitable measures in consultation and agreement to implement this treaty and to further its purposes.

6) Despite the fact that, on December 1, 1994, peacetime operational control authority over all South Korean military units, then under the Command-in-Chief (CINC)

Structure and Function of the ROK-U.S. Combined Defense System

A. Security Consultative Meeting (SCM)

The security consultative meeting was established to promote efficiency of military cooperation between South Korea and the U.S., and to encourage consultation on security matters on the Korean peninsula, including the *Cheong Wa Dae* (the Blue House) terrorist incident and the *Pueblo* hijacking in 1968, and the dispatch of South Korean soldiers to Vietnam. In February of 1968, former U.S. Defense Secretary Cyrus R. Vance proposed establishing the SCM. It was established at the ROK-U.S. summit in Hawaii in April 1968, and the first Defense Minister level-meeting was held in May of the same year.⁸⁾

With South Korea and the U.S. Defense Ministers heading each delegation, the Chairmen of the respective Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), high-level military staff members and foreign service officials have also participated in the SCM. The SCM consists of a ministerial-level plenary session and five working-level subcommittees: Policy Review, Security Cooperation, Logistics Cooperation, Defense Industry and Technology Cooperation, and Joint Communiques.

of the Combined Forces Command (CFC), was transferred to the ROK Armed Forces, the CINC still holds operational control authority in peacetime, because he has the ultimate responsibility for war operations. Thus, to expand its self-reliance and establish a new national security strategy, South Korea should complete the transfer of operational control authority as soon as possible.

- 7) Intelligence capability is a critical factor in a nation's decision to establish strategies and war plans. Since South Korea is completely dependent on the U.S. for the Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) and the Imagery Intelligence (IMINT), South Korea is hardly free from U.S. influence on information management and situational analysis.
- 8) The meeting held in May of 1968 was an annual meeting of the ROK and the U.S. Defense Ministers. However, it developed into the ROK-U.S. security consultative meeting in the fourth Defense Ministers' annual meeting in February of 1971, since the Foreign Ministries of both the ROK and the U.S. participated in it.

The main functions of the SCM are establishment of the ROK-U.S. combined measures against North's provocation on the Korean peninsula; effective operations of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces; establishment of communication and coordination system between South Korea and the U.S.; and strengthening of the ROK-U.S. CDS following the establishment of the ROK-U.S. Combined Command in 1978.⁹⁾

B. Military Committee Meeting (MCM)

The MCM, a working organization of the SCM, was established at the 11th SCM in July of 1978, and assumes a consultative-coordinating roles for the ROK-U.S. combined military strategies. The plenary meeting of the Military Committee (MC) takes place prior to the SCM, and the results of the MCM are reported to the SCM which is held soon after the MCM is over. Current military issues related to the Combined Forces Command are discussed at the MC standing meeting whenever necessary

The plenary session consists of five persons—two Chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, representatives delegated by the respective Chairmen, and the Commander-in-Chief of the CFC (CINCCFC). In the plenary session, participants analyze possible threats on the Korean peninsula and take preventive military measures against them. Moreover, they annually review the achievement of the Combined Forces' development and the direction of its military strategy, and give strategic instructions and tactical guides to the CINCCFC.¹⁰⁾ On the other hand, the task of the permanent session, as a consultative body, is to take rapid and proper measures in any contingency. The session can be held at any time by the request of either of South Korea or the U.S.¹¹⁾

9) Yu In-taek, *Understanding Military Issues on the Korean Peninsula* (Seoul: Pubmum Press, 1996), p. 38.

10) The ROK Ministry of Defense, *White Paper 1997*. [www.mnd.go.kr].

11) Baek Jong-chun, "Direction for the ROK-U.S. Combined Command System," in *ROK-*

The MCM's missions are, first, to analyze the North's military threats on the Korean peninsula and to consult on preventive measures, second, to hear the CFC's annual reports, and third, to review the CFC's military operational directions and to propose strategic instructions and tactical guides to CINCCFC. Fourth, it reports results of the session to the SCM and receives additional guidance from the SCM. In 1978, the MCM implemented "Strategic Direction No. 1," providing for establishment of the CFC. In addition, to ensure the successful hosting of the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games, the MCM assisted the South Korean government in securing it from certain military threats.

C. Combined Forces Command (CFC)

The ROK-U.S. CFC was established on November 7, 1978, according to the "Terms of Reference for the Military Committee and ROK-U.S. CFC" agreed at the 10th SCM on July 26, 1977, and "the Strategic Direction No. 1" of the MCM in 1978.¹²⁾

The CFC consists of a Commander-in-Chief (a U.S. four-star General), the vice Commander-in-Chief (a South Korean four-star General), seven General Staff offices, and six Special Staff offices. In principle, the South Korean and the U.S. staff members are symmetrically assigned to each posts from chiefs to general managers in the CFC. Currently, around 280 South Korean and 260 U.S. soldiers are serving.¹³⁾

The command systems of the CFC are; First, the CINCCFC is a U.S. four-star general who holds two positions concurrently as commander of the UN Forces and commander of the USFK. The CINCCFC exercises wartime operational authority, directing the

U.S. Military Cooperation: Present and Future (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 1998), p. 44.

12) Oh Kwan-chi, Cha Young-ku, and Whang Dong-jun, *Prospects for ROK-U.S. Military Cooperation* (Seoul: Sekyung, 1990), p. 204; The ROK Ministry of Defense, *White Paper 2000* (Seoul: Ministry of Defense, 2000), p. 89.

13) Yu In-taek, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

Army, Navy, and Combined Force Air Component Commanders. Second, since peacetime operational control authority over the ROK Army was returned to South Korea on December 1, 1994, the CINCCFC is only in charge of the Combined Delegated Authority (CODA) by the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). In 1994, South Korea and the U.S. totally revised the CODA, and the MCM assigned a new mission on the peacetime operational control authority to the CFC, issuing “the Strategic Direction No. 2.”¹⁴⁾

As the peacetime operational control authority was transferred to South Korea, overall authority over military operations, including deployment, standing guard, patrolling, combined tactical training, and alert system were returned to the South Korean JCS. However, since the CINCCFC has final responsibility over war operations, he is still endowed with various essential responsibilities over peacetime operations. These responsibilities include establishment of a wartime operational plan, Combined Forces military training, early warning system, and management of military information. In addition, the CINCCFC is given the final authority to decide the alert-level for the ROK and the U.S. Forces in case the possibility of war increases.

Evaluation of the Korea-U.S. Combined Defense System

Under the changing security environment on the Korean peninsula, the CDS centered on the USFK and the CFC, has greatly contributed to deterring the North’s military provocations. The CDS has played a positive role in both deterrence and defense, complementing the ROK Forces. It has likewise improved ROK Force military operations, has upheld the Armistice Agreement, promoted Korea-U.S. cooperation, and has cut military expenditures.¹⁵⁾

14) The UN Command, established by a UN resolution, still holds a supervisory mission to implement the 1953 Armistice Agreement. The ROK Ministry of Defense, *White Paper 1997-1998* (Seoul: Ministry of Defense, 1997), p. 75.

However, it cannot be denied that the CDS has also negatively influenced South Korean national strategic development. First, it has weakened South Korean efforts toward self-defense. Second, while the USFK is not under the operational control of the CINCCFC, most of the South Korean Forces are under its control. Third, the South Korean government is restricted in crisis management, because of the Combined Forces's commanding system and the CINCCFC's overwhelming strong position. Fourth, it has limited South Korea's negotiation power both with the U.S. and North Korea. The exposure of its military intelligence to the U.S. places South Korea in a disadvantageous position. Furthermore, the Combined Forces' command and control structure inspires the North to consider the U.S. as a major concerned party in South-North military confrontations, and it works as a pretext for the North's argument that it can sign a peace treaty directly with the U.S. On the other hand, the South is fundamentally restricted from implementing its own foreign policy related to certain military matters, since it has no direct channel of negotiations on military issues with the North.

In short, despite apparent positive roles of the CDS for the security on the Korean peninsula, it has negatively influenced the South's military sovereignty and self defense. Consequently, as the security structure on the Korean peninsula formed the South-North-U.S. triangular relationship due to the asynchronic duplicate character of the post-Cold War era, the absurd situation surrounding the ROK-U.S. combined defense should be resolved in order to improve the relationship between the two Koreas, following the principle of concerned parties.

23) Yu Jae-kap, "South Korea's Position on the USFK," in Kang Sung-hak (eds.), *The USFK and ROK-U.S. Security Cooperation* (Seoul: Sejong Institute, 1996), pp. 113-122.

PROPOSALS FOR RESTRUCTURING OF THE COMBINED DEFENSE SYSTEM

Enforcing the SCM's Political Functions

Without improvement in the security consultative meeting's structure and function, the "subordinate security situation" that has continued for the last half-century will perpetuate. That subordination will weaken the South's independent security function which enables it to proactively deal with the ever-changing security situation on the Korean peninsula, and it will prolong the asymmetric structure of ROK-U.S. relations. In this vein, the SCM's political structure and function should be reemphasized.

The changed international security environment offers a strong reason for restructuring the SCM. The Cold War system has changed, resulting in several phenomena such as decentralization of power, proliferation of actors and issues, and regional diversification.¹⁶⁾ Moreover, such phenomena have interacted, leading to collapse of the system. As a result, the end of the Cold War system has created a new international security environment that has forced either transformation or even abandonment of the Cold War alliance. Changes in NATO, which had saved Western Europe from the Soviet threat during the Cold War era, is a good example.

The new face of NATO instructs us that the SCM, considered the ROK-U.S. alliance, should be restructured to emphasize its political or diplomatic role, rather than its military function. Therefore, in the short-term perspective, the South Korean Foreign Minister and the U.S. State Secretary should participate in the SCM, and the South Korea-U.S. armaments control committee should be established to deal with future South-North Korea armaments

16) Glenn P. Hastedt, *American Foreign Policy: Past, Present, and Future* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1991), pp. 11-17.

issues. In addition, the SCM needs to be a standing one. Consequently, all those measures will increase South Korea's self-reliance, in consideration of the broad concept of security from the 1980s, the triangular relationship of the security structure on the Korean peninsula in the 1990s, recent Four-Party Talks, and discussions on establishing North Korea-U.S. and North Korea-Japan diplomatic relations.

For the long-term perspective, if the Korean peninsula is to be stabilized and if the ROK-U.S. alliance is to be maintained, the SCM must be reformed in order to promote peace and unification on the Korean peninsula more efficiently. Then, a newly-established committee, such as "the ROK-U.S. defense planning committee" represented by the ROK and U.S. Defense Ministers, could carry out functions of the SCM. Consequently, through the long-term restructuring of the SCM, South Korea will be more able to adapt independently to rapidly-changing security situations around the Korean peninsula without loss of security.

Political Symbolism of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces

The U.S. Forces Korea and the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces must be fundamentally changed; in size, structure, and function. Thus far, South Korea and the U.S. have taken some plausible steps,¹⁷⁾ however, those steps have not met the fundamentally changed security environment on the Korean peninsula.

First of all, the political function of the USFK should be emphasized. Even though U.S. Forces first stationed troops in Korea at the South Korean government's request, presently, the stationing of troops there works mainly in the U.S.'s own strategic interest.

Needlessly to say, the primary role of the USFK is to prevent a war on the Korean peninsula and to defend South Korea. However,

17) For instance, South Korea and the U.S. agreed to dismiss the Combined Field Command on July 1, 1992, and to establish a new Combined Marine Corps.

it has emphasized its military function only. Therefore, there was worry that withdrawal or reduction of the USFK would weaken South Korea's security. Of course, the concern was also caused by the psychological effect of playing a subordinate role throughout the long-lasting ROK-U.S. alliance.

While at the time of the 1950-1953 Korean War, 327,000 troops were on the peninsula, now there are only 37,000, less than 1/10 of the number 50 years ago. Following each USFK reduction, fearing the loss of U.S. deterrence, South Korea has worried about the military threat from the North. However, despite gradual reductions, there have been no major military conflicts between the two Koreas. In fact, the U.S. commitment to security on the Korean peninsula is more valuable than the practical deterrence--i.e. number of troops--against the North.

According to the perspective of political symbolism, the USFK presence is meaningful in that it represents common security interests of the ROK-U.S. on the Korean peninsula, not to mention its role to augment South Korean Forces. Thus, considering that the South's military forces are superior to the North's,¹⁸⁾ the mere presence of the USFK, regardless of its size, signifies the U.S. commitment.

Regarding the current ROK-U.S. CDS, the CFC size should be reduced. However, CFC reduction preconditions its restructuring. Restructuring would mean classification and specialization of the forces, that is, the CFC should be restructured into the Main Defense Forces (MDF), the Reaction Forces (RF), and the Augmentation Forces (AF).

The MDF would assume the role of maintaining current deterrence against the North. Therefore, it is desirable that the MDF be composed of South Korean troops. However, South Korea could assign the agreed number of soldiers to the MDF, even if the

18) Ham Taek-young, *The Political Economics of National Security: South-North Korea's Economic, Military and National Power* (Seoul: Pubmun Press, 1998)

CINCCFC still holds the wartime operational control authority. That is, South Korea can adjust the proportion of South Korean soldiers in the MDF, according to its own judgement of situational changes in wartime, by employing "the Force Quota System." The RF would be composed of a Rapid Deployment Forces (RDF). In this case also, South Korea has the right to decide the quota of South Korean soldiers in it. The AF would preferably be composed of U.S. soldiers as a deterrent factor against the North.

After completion of restructuring of the CFC, most South Korean soldiers would be under the control of South Korea in peacetime, and a limited number of soldiers would be assigned under the control of CINCCFC by mutual decision of the two governments. Then, restrictions on South Korea's military sovereignty, related to wartime operational controls, could be lifted. In peacetime, the CFC would maintain at a politically symbolic level, a very small number of forces including some defense systems--early warning, surveillance, and an air defense system.

Such restructuring would provide a basis for a more symmetrical partnership between South Korea and the U.S. than before. Furthermore, while South Korea can establish a solid defense system through its own command and control authority, the U.S. would be able to contribute to the stabilization on the Korean peninsula through its participation to the restructured CFC. In short, to maximize South Korea's political-military independence in light of the shifting circumstances on the Korean peninsula, the political symbolism of the USFK and the CFC should be strengthened.

CONCLUSION

This paper proposes to find a way to maximize South Korea's self-reliance and efficiency in terms of military strategy, and to point out anachronistic discrepancies in the ROK-U.S. alliance, a remnant of the Cold War era. Thus, the focus of this paper was on the

alliance's asymmetric structure, based mainly on military rationales.

During the past half century, the ROK-U.S. alliance played a proper and important role, considering circumstances on the Korean peninsula at the time. However, as the security structure on the Korean peninsula has changed in the wake of the post-Cold War era, especially as U.S.-North Korea relations have changed, the ROK-U.S. alliance, based on the Cold War rationale, has lost its purpose.

Thus, the alliance should be reformed according to the changed international security environment. The first principle for restructuring the alliance is to maximize South Korea's self-reliance. Secondly, it is to promote South-North reconciliation, according to the principle of concerned parties.

With such principles, the alliance needs to be restructured in order to strengthen political and diplomatic structure and function, while subduing the military function that has overemphasized the asymmetric alliance. As for ROK-U.S. security consultative meetings, the structure and function should be improved to revitalize the political consultation articulated in Article 2 of the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of Korea and the United States of America. In an asymmetric-bilateral alliance, increasing the independence of the weaker party and taking political and diplomatic approaches are much more desirable than military action.

Gradual restructuring of the ROK-U.S. Combined Defense System will not be an easy task, nor will reforming the system. Moreover, it is possible only with a national consensus in South Korea and the reliable political leadership of both South Korea and the U.S. To be sure, beyond the ROK-U.S. CDS restructuring proposed in this paper, further discussion is necessary in order to bring about a desirable ROK-U.S. alliance.