

Core U.S.-ROK Issues

Overview

Over the long-term, the current political and economic regime in North Korea is not sustainable. There is little doubt that the DPRK -- and therefore the status of the Korean Peninsula -- will change. While the actual events leading to a unified Korea are virtually impossible to forecast, it is safe to assume (barring unforeseen or catastrophic events) that the Korean Peninsula, politically and economically, will eventually come to resemble South Korea's current democratic government and open-market economy. The question is simply, when?

Managing the Korean Peninsula's transition -- from status quo to an unknown, but more peaceful and stable regional Northeast Asian system -- therefore becomes essential. Until that time, an overriding U.S. concern is ensuring regional security while maintaining the conditions for sustained regional economic growth.

In considering any proposed regional security settlement and its related elements, including a possible Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ), it is useful to reference this "end state" and examine principal objectives for the U.S. with regard to a Korean Peninsula in transition. As additional context, it is also helpful to review core U.S. interests in the Korean Peninsula/Asia Pacific as well as reflect on relevant ROK-DPRK/Korea interests.

Policy Objectives for the U.S. with regard to a Korean Peninsula in Transition

- Maintaining stability and preventing war or conflict from breaking out on the Korean Peninsula;
- Reducing the risk of ROK proliferation;
- Denuclearizing the DPRK and preventing proliferation of nuclear technology, materials and know-how;
- Sustaining U.S. presence on the Peninsula and strengthening the U.S.-ROK and U.S.-Japan alliances;
- Maintaining positive relations with China; and
- Creating the conditions for the integration of the Korean Peninsula into major global systems.

Any policy approach must seek to secure in parallel each of the vital policy objectives listed above. Such framework needs to be flexible and dynamic enough to deal with the many contingencies that may emerge, whether they be DPRK collapse, reform, military coup, disaster, or just plain muddling through.

Relevant Core U.S. interests in the Korean Peninsula and Asia generally

Though not intended to be comprehensive, the following is a list of core U.S. interests in this part of the world, which should be the touchstone for any joint U.S.-ROK policy approach:ⁱ

- Establish productive relations with China, the U.S.'s major strategic competitor in East Asia, and facilitate China's emergence as a responsible member of the international community;

- Ensure the survival and independence of the ROK and Japan as well as their active cooperation with the U.S. in shaping an global system based on the promotion of free markets and democracy;
- Prevent, deter, and reduce WMD attacks (as well as conventional) on the U.S. and its military forces in Korea and elsewhere in Asia;
- Ensure stability of, and access to, major global systems (trade, financial markets, supplies of energy, maritime navigation, cyberspace, and the environment) and other public goods;
- Reconciliation between China and Japan on terms that benefit U.S. interests;
- Prevent, manage, and, if possible at reasonable cost, end conflicts in other regions of the Asia Pacific, including the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea;
- Suppress terrorism, transnational crime, drug trafficking, and pandemic risks.

Core ROK-DPRK/Korean Regional Interests

With the possible exception of how to define the ROK's ability to engage in full nuclear fuel cycle activity, the ROK's core interests are now remarkably compatible with U.S. policy objectives toward a transitioning Korean Peninsula. This in many ways is a testament to the breadth and depth of a matured U.S.-ROK relationship that has been the product of years of intense cultivation by the governments and people of both countries.

Core ROK-DPRK/Korea regional interests are also consistent with U.S. core interests in Asia, though the priority of these interests may differ from those of the U.S. The ROK, the DPRK, and a unified Korea will inevitably maintain traditional interests common to many states. Some of these may include homeland defense from external adversaries as well as continued access to the economic stability ensured by participation in the global commons, in the case of the ROK, or regional commons and China, in the case of the DPRK.

Assuming security conditions permit, these "Korean" interests would also focus on the need to overcome decades of North-South separation and North Korean isolation.

Finally, the ROK, the DPRK, and a unified Korea have a paramount interest to ensure the Korea Peninsula remains free from undue pressure from its two neighboring powers, China and Japan -- while in the case of the ROK, doing what it can to facilitate productive relations among the U.S., Japan, China and Russia.

Internal challenges to U.S.-ROK efforts

The direction of the U.S.-ROK relationship is likely to continue to move forward, strengthened to such degree (as represented by the passage of the KORUS FTA and efforts to diversify and institutionalize nonmilitary relationships) that it is arguably now impervious to changes in political leadership in either country in the coming years. However, potential problems could arise:

Anti-Americanism on the Korean Peninsula. Historically, the Korean people have held a deep ambivalence to the outside world, often defining themselves over the past 100 years as "against

something” (e.g. anti-Japan, anti-China, or anti-American, to name a few). With the Cold War’s end and the rise of globalization, South Koreans were forced to find a “positive” national identity. This search (ongoing since the late 1990’s) has led to an intensely polarized body politic today. Despite these divisions, the tag-line “Global Korea,” has gained growing traction, particularly among South Korea’s youth as the country transforms itself into a high-tech hub of social media innovation. This more cosmopolitan perspective is reflected in stepped-up, concrete ROK policy efforts on international issues, including counterterrorism, maritime security, pandemics, peacekeeping, overseas development assistance, nonproliferation, and climate change. This more international orientation notwithstanding, Korean nationalism -- which in the past has translated into anti-Americanism -- remains intense and cannot be underestimated.

The cost of reconciliation becomes too much for South Korea to handle. Bridging the divide between the people of South and North Korea will require an incredible amount of money and time. Estimates range from US\$2 to 5 trillion,ⁱⁱ depending on various scenarios, to “rebuild” North Korea because much of the DPRK’s capital stock is irreparably diminished. In addition to the financial burdens, accompanying social costs will be immense. For example, over 9 percent of North Korean children under 5 years old in 2009 suffered from severe acute malnutrition or “wasting”, with roughly one in three children being slightly less affected, but “stunted” in growth because of the lack of food.ⁱⁱⁱ It is difficult to determine how much societal support this lost generation of children will need in the future. Therefore, if the financial burden of reconciliation becomes too great, one possible consequence would be for a unified Korea to direct virtually all its energy and resources inward. The most likely variation of this scenario would see Korea substantially cutting back its international responsibilities while still voicing verbal support for related efforts.

American isolationism in response to fiscal constraints. There is a similar risk that the U.S. body politic in the coming years may demand U.S. retrenchment in Asia and elsewhere. Despite the recent U.S. government’s “pivot to Asia” and the reaffirmation of U.S. engagement in the region, the pressure for a U.S. withdrawal from global commitments has been a constant refrain from certain parts of the U.S. electorate. Unlike in the past, the U.S. domestic political situation is arguably different and more serious. The failure of U.S. policymakers and leaders to address the long-term U.S. fiscal challenges and systemic budget deficits may force hard choices by administrations to come. Under ideal situations, policy considerations should drive budget decisions. However, the U.S. may soon reach a stage during which budget issues drive policy priorities – with traditional domestic interests prevailing over traditional foreign policy ones.

ⁱ Derived from *America's National Interests: A Report from The Commission on America's National Interests, 2000*; Ellsworth, Robert, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser, Co-Chairs Washington, D.C.: Report for Commission on America's National Interests, July 2000; and USA. The President of the United States. *National Security Strategy*. Washington D.C.: n.p., 2010. Print.

ⁱⁱ Lankov, Andrei. "Asia Times Online:: Korea News and Korean Business and Economy, Pyongyang News." *Asia Times Online* :: *Korea News and Korean Business and Economy, Pyongyang News*. N.p., 12 Aug. 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ The United Nations. UN Resident Coordinator’s Office. *Overview of Needs and Assistance in the Democratic People's Republic Of Korea 2012*. N.p.: United Nations, 2012.