

Policy Forum 04-09A: The Reality Behind South Korea-US Alliance March 12, 2004 By Koo Kab-woo



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by Koo Kab-woo

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I. Introduction

This essay is by Professor Koo Kab-woo from Kyungnam University. Koo argues that the intervention for dismantling the unbalanced South Korea-US alliance is essential and could be done through the solidarity of the South Korean civil society with the civil society in other East Asian countries. East Asia must be re-discovered as a new space for action. Changing the historical structure of global politics in East Asia can only be possible with the intervention of the civil society

II. Essay by Koo Kab-woo

"The Reality Behind South Korea-US Alliance"

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1. How to Analyze South Korea-US Alliance

The South Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty was concluded on the basis of 'common threat awareness' between South Korea and the US. However, the process of conclusion was not fair and the South Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty was signed with the US passively agreeing to the demands of South Korea. Based on the treaty, the withdrawal or retrenchment of troops became a leverage for the US in maintaining flexibility in the alliance while flexing its influence on the South Korean government. Even recently, the US used the repositioning of the 2nd Infantry Division to influence South Korean policies on the US. During the Cold War, the South Korean government attempted to include in the defense treaty a clause of 'automatic intervention' in times of emergency as well as a clause defining mutual agreement over the withdrawal of US troops. Furthermore, the South Korean government attempted to exchange stronger cohesion in South Korea-US alliance with the dispatch of troops to Vietnam. Thus, the history of South Korea-US relations can only be summarized as a 'patron-client' relationship.[[1](#)]

In such historical conditions, South Korea-US alliance continued in a unique way whereby security and autonomy are exchanged with the transfer of operational rights during the course of the war. As such, despite the increase in state capacity and the changes in the international political environment, the South Korean autonomy, the lowest unit in the alliance, did not immediately get augmented.

In order to analyze 'actively' the South Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty, the main point of the treaty to be emphasized is "until the development of a more comprehensive and effective organization to guarantee regional security in the Pacific region." That is, if a regional security framework were to be established in the Pacific region, the South Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty would be reformed or scrapped. The post-Cold War era demands the re-structuring of the South Korea-US alliance.

2. Reforming the South Korea-US Alliance

The reasons for the restructuring of South Korea-US alliance must be distinguished from the structural reasons of the international systems and the restructuring of the interests and preferences based on the changes in awareness of the players. Structural reasons on the international scale meant the dismantling of the Cold War, the simultaneous progress of both the Cold War and post-Cold War structures and the alleviation of tensions between North and South Korea. On the level of the players, there are changes in awareness with the lessening of a common threat due to the dismantling of the Cold War. And as democracy develops in South Korea, anti-US

criticism from civil society grew stronger. Furthermore, the civil society in the US is also changing. These changes within South Korea and the US have also called for the restructuring of South Korea-US alliance.

The issues related to the restructuring of the South Korea-US alliance are, 'the ideology behind the South Korea-US alliance', 'North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles', 'the political system of North Korea and human rights', 'US troops in South Korea', 'Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)', 'anti-US sentiments', etc.

The future of South Korea-US alliance has been outlined in three directions: first, the maintaining of the existing South Korea-US alliance; second, lateral or equal relations; and third, improvements into "fair relations". It is clear that the second and third measures weaken the solidarity and cohesion of the alliance. Whether it is the maintenance of the existing mode of South Korea-US alliance or gradual evolution, or essential reform, would be decided according to the relationships and alliances of the internal and international `social powers.' Another issue related in connection to the South Korea-US alliance is the US-Japan alliance and the connection with the multi-party security cooperation in East Asia.

With the dismantling of the Cold War and taking the unsymmetrical and hierarchical structure of the South Korea-US alliance, the politics of alliance of East Asian countries based on the new US strategy, emerged as the biggest variable in the restructuring of South Korea-US alliance. The choice of the US has the potential of becoming a structural pressure limiting the range in choice of South Korea.

To understand the political environment in the East Asia and the security situation of South Korea after the Cold War, there must be an understanding of the global strategy of the US government and the international political ideology underlying it. After the Cold War, the US was more interested in maximizing its interests rather than seeking a balance of power in the new world order. The world order appears to progress into a US-controlled unipolar hegemonic system. During the US invasion of Iraq, Germany and France, US NATO allies made the choice of balance in regard to their political and economic interests but with the unexpected early termination of the war, both countries are now making efforts to align themselves with the US. In the post-Cold War era, a neo-conservatist organization called the `Project for the New American Century' (PNAC) was formed in 1997 which rationalizes in theory the US global strategy and protects and rallies support for the global hegemony and global strategy of the US.[2] 9.11 simply became an opportunity to accelerate the hegemonic strategies written before 9.11.

With the disappearance of the visible threat of the Soviet Union, the US could change military alliances and its policy of balance based on the forward positioning of its troops. However, the US did not change its hegemonic policies of the Cold War era. Both the Bush Administration and the Clinton Administration did not choose military reductions. The idea that only US `leadership' can alleviate the instability in the world and that global instability similar to that of the 1920s would emerge if the US did not intervene, despite the disappearance of a visible threat, continued even after the collapse of the Cold War.[3] The Clinton Administration inaugurated in 1996 announced "the end of the Cold War" and started to concretize the strategies of "intervention and expansion". New "rogue states" were announced to replace the Soviet Union, the `revolution in military affairs,' (RMA) was rationalized in the name of preventive defense[4]. According to the Quadrennial Defense Review, (QDR) published in May 1997 and September 2001, the US global strategy has been defined as "intervention and war".[5] Consequently, the Clinton Administration undertook the Bosnian and the Kosovo wars while the Bush Administration carried out the Afghan and Iraqi wars. However, there is no difference in the US Democratic or Republican parties. The former prefers multi-lateralism while the former, `unilateralism'. [6] However, differences have weakened

considerably after 9.11. The Bush Administration has nullified multi-lateral preventive diplomacy and introduced the concept of 'preventive war', and has publicly announced the use of pre-emptive strikes as part of legitimate self-defense. The global strategy of the US is closely connected to the transformation of the US economy into one of neo-liberalism.[7] The 2001 QDR clarifies that the new military strategy of the US is to support its economic interests. The US invasion of Iraq is hard to explain without considering the economic interests, i.e, to secure oil resources. In the case of the US economy entering into an economic depression, the US might revert to a 'permanent war economy' to promote economic growth. The US 'new economy', which had reached great heights, is showing signs of slowing down. Therefore, the military tensions led by the US globally are connected to economics, to a certain level.

The US military reform has been cemented into the so-called missile defense system (MD), aiming to achieve absolute military supremacy as a hegemonic state. This strategy of the US has been escalated into a 21st century-style security dilemma after 9.11 and led to increases in armaments under the pretext of 'war against terrorism'. [8] Also with the expansion of the missile defense system, allies are being integrated into the military network controlled by the US. With the weakening of the common threat, the US alliance strategy, instead of transforming into lateral relationships, has vertically restructured to achieve the interests of the US.

After the Cold War, the character of the US alliance with its main allies, NATO and Japan has been changing. With the disappearance of a common threat, the alliances with NATO and Japan have been strengthened. A transformation from unsymmetrical relations to symmetrical relations and the purpose of the alliance has been changed from war deterrence to management of regional stability and conflicts, prevention, resolution, etc. For example, the US-Japan alliance, similar to South Korea-US alliance, is evaluated as being transformed into the position of a strategic partner with the US-Japan New Security Declaration in 1996 and the New Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation released in 1997. Changes in the US-Japan alliance is analyzed by scholars not as the alliance flexibility, but as the 'strengthening' of the alliance.[9] The strengthening of the alliance would probably make Japan 'an ordinary state' or a 'normal state', leading very highly to the collective display of self-defense capacities. On the other hand, it is highly probable that the strengthening of the US-Japan alliance would be promoted in the direction of a vertical military network. The US and Japan are already in the midst of a common research on MD. In the US-Japan Summit Meeting in May 2003, the US and Japan had agreed on Japan to be part of MD system. The US has plans to station MD in actual warfare by September 2004 and Japanese Defense Office is looking at plans to introduce aircraft ballistic missiles that could be fired from the Aegis carriers and the anti-ballistic missile, the Patriot.[10]

The US strategy on East Asia can be read in the restructuring of US-Japan alliance, central in East Asian alliance politics. Where the balance of power has deteriorated, the purpose of the US in East Asia is to effectively manage expansionist China and the "rogue state" North Korea. There are two ways of achieving this.[11] First, to find the reasons for the potential security instability of East Asia and the formation of a structural framework of multi-lateral security cooperation to alleviate the root of the problem. Second, to search for the reasons of potential security instability in the balance of power and to achieve deterrence in an alliance strategy for the prevention and management the instability. And the restructuring of the US-Japan alliance seems to have taken on the latter purpose.[12] This can be summarized as 'formal equality' in the alliance and 'realistic subordination'. The US strategy for the future of South Korea-US alliance can be predicted through the US-Japan alliance. As can be seen from the 2001 edition of QDR and from the restructuring of the US-Japan alliance, the threat-based model of alliances of the Cold War must be transformed into capabilities-based models. So the South Korea-US alliance could become a replica of the US-Japan alliance. From the US perspective, it appears as if the US is providing stronger alliances, but it

appears that the US prefers 'formal equality' rather than a security dilemma. After the South Korea-US Summit Meeting, US policy-makers promised 11 billion dollars over the period of 4 years to increase the military capabilities of the US troops stationed in South Korea. Furthermore, South Korea is demanding an increase in military spending in line with these changes. The defense budget, 'only' 2.7% of the GDP, is considered miniscule. South Korean participation in MD has not yet been confirmed but South Korea-US alliance would be restructured along the lines of the US-Japan alliance. If South Korea participates in MD, the withdrawal or retrenchment of US troops in South Korea would be possible.

If South Korea-US alliance is restructured on US demands, it is highly probable that a new Cold War structure in East Asia, centering on deterrence against China, could be formed. The US has defined China as a 'strategic competitor' progressing from a 'strategic partner'. At the present, China poses no visible threat to the US. However, considering the promotion of MD by the US, the expanding trends for the independence of Taiwan, and the strengthening of US-Japan alliance, China is also contemplating a new foreign security strategy. The 'theory of security development' aiming at the simultaneous strengthening of economic and military capabilities has internally developed into the so-called "big nation new security strategy".[13] The focus of the strategy is the modernization of China's military and aims to transform US-led hegemony into a multi-polar order. Taking into consideration its economy, China would not establish confrontational relations with the US, but the strengthening of South Korea-US alliance and US-Japan alliance could only increase the security dilemma in East Asia.

To prevent the progress of the South Korea-US alliance into the South Korea-US-Japan tripartite alliance, a multi-lateral security cooperation based on cooperative security and comprehensive security must be established in East Asia. However, multi-lateral security cooperation in East Asia has a few essential limitations. First, there is no concept of East Asia for China and Japan, the major players in the region. Second, the human rights situation cannot be ignored if the concept of comprehensive security is to be introduced. Third, China and North Korea would consider multi-lateral security cooperation as threats to the dismantling of their systems. This is the precept received from the experiences of European countries.

3. From South Korea-US Alliance to a Peace Structure on the Korean Peninsula

If the military networking of South Korea-US alliance and the US aggressiveness on North Korea continue, then the formation of a peace structure on the Korean peninsula would become difficult.

The establishment of a peace structure on the Korean Peninsula must start with the abandonment of the North Korean nuclear program and the US guarantee on the North Korea system. The US needs to come up with a strategy to play the role of stabilizer or balancer within the Korean Peninsula and to carry out a policy of non-intervention - to normalize US-North Korean relations, leading to arms control of both South and North Korea and the gradual withdrawal of US troops from the Korean Peninsula. If the US provides a security umbrella to implement a structure for the co-existence of South and North Korea in a loose confederation and not 'reunification by absorption' and if it plays the role of a balancer, controlling North Korean or South Korean aggression, the establishment of a peace structure is possible on the Korean Peninsula.[14]

Furthermore, awareness of the dangers of ultra-nationalism of the militarily- and commercially-privileged forces in Washington and Seoul as well as the conservatives in North Korea must be realized, as this factor could throw the Korean Peninsula into a crisis. That is, the dismantling

process of the dark alliance is the process of peace-making on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, the South Korea-US military alliance is internally subordinated to the US, subordination freely given by former power forces. This subordination is cemented in several structural levels. However, the root of subordination lies more in the mind-set of the government, press, intelligentsia and the people over the supposed importance of an alliance with the US, rather than in the alliance system per se or the physical and structural levels of an unequal relationship.[15]

Therefore, the intervention for dismantling the South Korea-US alliance is important and this could be done through the solidarity of the South Korean civil society with the civil society in other East Asian countries. East Asia must be re-discovered as a new space for action. Changing the historical structure of global politics in East Asia can only be possible with the intervention of the civil society.

End Notes

1 Shin, Wook-hie, *The Internal Turbulence of South Korea-US Alliance: Consideration of Analytic Models*, *National Strategy*, 7: 2 (2001).

2 This organization was formed in 1997. First formed by internationalists of the US Democratic Party and selected the following goals to protect US global hegemony. First, the modernization of military capacity and a greater increase in the military budget. Second, strengthening solidarity among democratic nations and countering enemies against US values and interests. Third, promoting the principles of political and economic freedoms abroad. Fourth, to create a global order friendly to US security, prosperity, and values. *Joongang Daily*, May 27, 2003.

3 However, that is not to say that the US government carried out hegemonic-oriented policies continuously after the Cold War. During the Clinton Administration, from 1995 to 1999, a total of 1 trillion dollars was cut from the military budget. Meaning that the US global strategy after the Cold War was not consistent and is sometimes evaluated as going from "blockade to confusion". R. Hass, "Paradigm Lost," *Foreign Affairs*, (January-February 1995).

4 Lee, Hae-jung, "Understanding the US Hegemonic Strategies in a Unipolar World", *South Korea & International Politics*, 16: 2 (2000).

5 Lee, Hae-jung, "Understanding the US Hegemonic Strategies in a Unipolar World", *South Korea & International Politics*, 16: 2 (2000).

6 The Clinton Administration used international organizations as the medium to carry out hegemonic strategies. Their principles are 'commercial liberalism', 'Democratic peace, and structural liberalism'. On the other hand, the Republicans pursue a balance of power in 'defensive realism' and goes a step further in understanding the continuous pursuit of hegemony and select 'offensive realism' as normal.

7 For more explanation on US militarism and hegemony in connection with the accumulation inconsistency of modern capitalism, refer to Kim, Yoon-ja. 2003. "The US Hegemony & Limitations of Bourgeois Democracy." *Rethinking the US Academic Symposium*.

8 The US defense budget for 2004 is 399.1 billion dollars. The budget for MD is 9.1 billion dollars. The US aims to increase the defense budget by 502.7 billion dollars in 2009. During the Cold War, the total ratio of defense spending of the US and NATO members was 5:3, now the figure is at 5:2 and by 2007, it is expected that the defense spending of the US will be greater than the total defense spending of all the countries in the world combined.

- 9 Kim, Seong-cheol, *The Diplomacy of the US-Japan Alliance* (Songnam: Sejong Institute, 2001).
- 10 "Joongang Daily", May 27, 2003.
- 11 Park, Gun-young, Nam, Chang-hie, Lee, Su-hyung, "The US strategy of the East Asian alliances, the security dilemma and agreements on the national security strategies of South Korea," *South Korea and Global Politics*, 18: 4 (2002).
- 12 One dissertation describes the US-Japan alliance as an 'alliance of security dilemma.' For example, if Japan were to pursue balanced changes in relations with China and the US, this could result in the relaxation in alliance politics. With the disappearance of conflicts in different camps, it is now possible to consider alliance partners freely. Accordingly, the security dilemma in alliance could lead to the abandonment and possible dangers of unwanted entrapment. However, with the US checking 'defensive realism', the threat of entrapment could become bigger but abandonment difficult.
- 13 Kim, Jae-gwan. 2003. "The Big Nation New Security Strategy of China in the 21st Century: Centering on the US-China Security Diplomacy". *South Korea and International Politics*, 19: 1.
- 14 Selig Harrison, *Korean End Game* (Seoul: Sam-in, 2003).
- 15 Lee, Sam-sung, "Proposals for the Flexibilization of the South Korea-US Alliance," *National Security*, 9: 3 (2003).

Source: Korea Peace Report- Proposals for Peace, Disarmament and Cooperation. Seoul, Korea: People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, 2003. Pages 83-93.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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