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The U.S.-ROK Alliance and China: Beyond the Sinking of the *Cheonan*

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Ji-Young Lee, Visiting Assistant Professor at Oberlin College, explains that “Seoul and Washington have sent a strong political message to Pyongyang and the international community by standing united, but a real test of their post-*Cheonan* strategic relationship lies in how they, as allies, can cooperate with China concerning North Korea.”

The sinking of the South Korean navy vessel *Cheonan* on March 26 is rapidly changing the security landscape on the Korean peninsula. While Pyongyang continues to deny its involvement, an official announcement of the investigation’s results on May 20 clearly points the finger at North Korea. One of the most important security implications from this incident is that it has forced South Koreans to think hard about how China is likely to react to a North Korea contingency, such as a succession crisis in North Korea. From a U.S.-ROK alliance perspective, this is a time to address the lack of shared vision on *how to cooperate* with China.

South Korean media reporting on the *Cheonan* incident has devoted an unprecedented level of attention to the Chinese response to the sinking. Throughout the investigation, South Korean worries appeared to be twofold. One is that Beijing’s reserved response to the *Cheonan* incident went against Seoul’s hope of getting Chinese support to put pressure on Pyongyang. In particular, Beijing permitting Kim Jong-il to travel to China only days after President Lee Myung-bak’s Shanghai visit, without informing Lee of Kim’s impending trip, stirred deep dissatisfaction and heated debates within South Korea about China’s policy regarding the two Koreas.

The second concern centers on growing Chinese influence over North Korea against the backdrop of increasing uncertainty about the future of the Kim Jong-il regime. China has been North Korea’s largest trading partner since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and is the primary provider of energy and food to the North. In 2008, China supplied approximately half of all North Korea’s imports amounting to \$2 billion, up 46% from 2007, while receiving a quarter of the North’s exports valued at \$754 million. Compared to 2004 when ROK-China relations went downhill over the historical ownership dispute concerning Goguryeo, an ancient kingdom spanning northern Korea and northeastern China, Seoul realizes that it now faces a stronger and more confident Beijing and an even frailer Pyongyang whose economy largely depends on China for survival.

What exactly does the *Cheonan* incident mean for the U.S.-ROK alliance? In addition, what steps should South Korea and the United States take to ensure that their diplomatic efforts can be pooled together to prepare for a possible North Korea contingency? Seoul and Washington have sent a strong political message to Pyongyang and the international community by standing united, but a real test of their post-*Cheonan* strategic relationship lies in how they, as allies, can cooperate with China concerning North Korea.



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dynamics and politics today at the Six-Party Talks are going to spill over into future strategic configurations among the six countries in the event of a North Korea contingency. Alliance handlers in Washington and Seoul should approach the interactions and coordination at the Six-Party Talks as creating long-term conditions for a peaceful security environment surrounding the Korean peninsula. Washington and Seoul should take into account the possibility of reunification of the two Koreas when cooperating with China at the Six-Party Talks, and China’s interests if indeed there is reunification. Due to the fact that China shares a border with North Korea, the conventional wisdom that multilateralism tends to produce an equalizing effect on participants’ influence over outcomes may not necessarily be the case in this situation.

Therefore, ironic as it sounds, *good* Seoul-Beijing relations come from *superb* Seoul-Washington relations within a big-picture, long-term perspective. Seoul’s and Washington’s engagement efforts at the Six-Party Talks can be more effective when U.S.-ROK policy is based on tight bilateral coordination regarding their joint position towards China. In order for South Korea and the United States to better coordinate with China regarding North Korea, they must enhance the quality of the U.S.-ROK alliance by working on a joint strategy towards China. If security threats from North Korea have been driving Washington’s and Seoul’s bilateral security cooperation with Beijing respectively, alliance handlers in Seoul and Washington should now think ahead and come up with a shared vision on China’s future role on the Korean peninsula.

One possible positive outcome of the *Cheonan* tragedy could be the fact that South Korea will begin to take China more seriously in thinking about the future of the Korean peninsula, and not just in terms of trade and investment. There have to be more measured discussions between Seoul and Washington with regard to how to jointly engage with Beijing strategically over the future of the Korean peninsula, by first recognizing that China also has its own concerns about North Korea’s irresponsible behavior pertaining to Chinese national security. In Northeast Asia, North Korea’s strategic value to China is to provide a safe buffer zone to block access of hostile maritime powers to Beijing. In that regard, China has good reason not to want North Korean contingency situations that can result in a massive influx of North Korean refugees into northeastern China, or the presence of the U.S.-ROK alliance forces on North Korean territory. For Seoul’s part, it should exercise great care to avoid letting negative speculations about future Chinese action flame anti-Chinese sentiments within South Korea.

In pursuing a clear strategy to deal with China in the context of the U.S.-ROK alliance, it is critical that Seoul, Washington, and Beijing all understand and effectively communicate that the strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance is not aimed at confronting or containing China. A fine balancing act of the U.S.-ROK security relationship towards China should strive to avoid polar opposites of “pushing too hard” and “not doing anything” about China. The key here is to understand the complexities of the security relationships between China and the Korean peninsula.

As demonstrated in the case of the Korean War, if there is future Chinese military intervention during a North Korea contingency, it may not occur because China seeks an offensive expansionist policy on the Korean peninsula, but because it feels threatened by potential hostile forces in areas close to Beijing. With this in mind, the goal of the U.S.-ROK alliance should be directed toward a viable pattern of security cooperation in which the national interests of Washington, Seoul, and Beijing are all respected and implemented accordingly.