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I. Introduction

At the same time that the United States has unveiled its rebalance to Asia, South Korean foreign policy strategists have been carefully considering how their country can more effectively use diplomatic, economic, and military capabilities it has accrued as a result of its own rise to prominence as a G-20 member and top-tier trading economy. The discussion within South Korean foreign policy circles regarding its future strategy has been animated primarily by the idea that South Korea is a middle power. Therefore, a deeper understanding and application of attributes of a middle power to South Korea's situation will assist South Korean policy-makers by providing a constructive blueprint for South Korea's foreign policy.

For instance, if South Korea applies the attributes of a middle power to its own diplomacy, then South Korean strategists must explore how and whether South Korea's positioning as a facilitator, manager, and niche player that can provide intellectual leadership on specialized, well-chosen issues where it has a comparative advantage. In this way, South Korea is developing and testing the limits of its geographic, behavioral, and normative capacity to be a middle power actor on the international stage, cognizant of the fact that its capabilities are constrained by its position at the intersection of interests among great powers that often bring differing perspectives to the table.

Over the course of the past few years, South Korea has sought to play this role on a variety of international issues, most notably as a convener of international meetings and steward of the international agenda on global financial stability, international development policy,



nuclear security and safety, and climate change and green growth, among others.¹ In many cases, South Korean effectiveness as a convener of international forums has indirectly benefited from the context provided by its close relationship with the United States as well as its status not only as an emerging middle power but also as a U.S. ally.²

Thus far, South Korea's enhanced capabilities and the U.S.-ROK alliance have had positive, mutually-reinforcing effects. In principle, South Korean middle power aspirations and a strengthened U.S.-ROK alliance are not opposed to each other and have the potential to work together as complementary concepts that generate and take advantage of shared American and Korean foreign policy interests. South Korea's growing scope of interests and desire to contribute to the international community have benefited the U.S.-ROK alliance as South Korea has become a partner in a broader range of functional spheres and the scope of alliance cooperation has broadened both functionally and geographically. The emergence of a South Korea with capabilities and attributes of a middle power has enabled the transformation of the U.S.-ROK alliance from a peninsula-focused patron-client security relationship to a comprehensive political and security. The June 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement reflects this broadened scope, showing the impact of both South Korea's desires to develop greater capabilities and have a greater impact internationally and the result of the Obama administration's desire to strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance.³ But an outstanding question is whether strengthening the U.S.-ROK alliance might also come at the expense of South Korea's interests as a middle power.

This paper will explore in further detail the primary themes of the U.S. rebalancing strategy and their implications for South Korea. Then, the paper will evaluate South Korea's envisioned middle power contributions and the extent to which American policymakers see these attributes as complementary or at odds with the U.S.-ROK alliance.

II. Main Characteristics of the U.S. Balance

The Obama administration's unveiling of its rebalance to Asia strategy in November of 2011 provided a clear articulation of America's desire to strengthen its involvements in the Asia-Pacific in recognition of the region's sustained economic growth and increasing political importance. The strategy posits that Asia's rise justifies greater American political, economic, and military attention to and investment in relationships with partners across the region. The strategy was built on three principles for Asian diplomacy that were articulated early in



the administration: that the United States would strengthen its traditional alliances in the region, that the United States would improve its relationship with emerging regional powers such as India, Indonesia, and China, and that the United States would support the strengthening of regional application of international norms through active diplomacy and participation in multilateral forums such as the East Asian Summit (EAS).⁴

In her announcement of the rebalancing strategy in Foreign Policy in October of 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made the case that the Asia-Pacific is growing in importance as a result of its economic dynamism and increasing political clout and that “just as Asia is critical to America’s future, an engaged America is critical to Asia’s future.”⁵ Elaborating on the main components of the strategy, Secretary Clinton signaled six major “lines of action” along which the policy would proceed: “strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions; expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.”

In its practical implementation, the U.S. rebalancing strategy has taken three primary tracks: political, economic, and military. The political track has involved stepped-up American diplomatic engagement with Asian allies and efforts to strengthen political cooperation with allies and partners both bilaterally and multilaterally. The military track has involved the implementation of a “geographically distributed, operationally resilient, and politically sustainable”⁶ presence that envisions expansion of basing arrangements, primarily on a rotational basis, to new partners in the Asia-Pacific, efforts to strengthen military cooperation with existing alliance partners, and plans for deployment of the Pentagon’s most capable and modern military assets in the Asia-Pacific. The economic track has primarily been focused on the establishment of a multilateral free trade area that sets a new and higher standard for trade and investment liberalization among the eleven negotiating partners in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

1. The U.S. Rebalancing Strategy and Implications for U.S. Allies in Northeast Asia

The foundation of the U.S. rebalancing strategy starts with the existing “hub-and-spokes” network of U.S. bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Australia, and Thailand, and has had political, military, and economic dimensions. This prioritization recognizes the centrality of the U.S. alliance relationships with Japan and South Korea, in particular, to the broader rebalancing strategy. From the U.S. perspective, the U.S. alliances with



Japan and South Korea are important both because they enable U.S. forward deployment and because of the values that South Korea, Japan, and the United States share as fellow democracies that value the rule of law, norms, and liberal world order. So it is natural that the United States would want to strengthen the alliances with Japan and South Korea as a starting point for the U.S. rebalancing strategy. In addition, the U.S. rebalancing strategy also seeks to extend more active cooperation to Southeast Asia through an enhanced political relationship with ASEAN and through more active participation in ASEAN-led, regionwide forums. While this emphasis does not detract from the longstanding importance of America's Northeast Asian alliances, it does to a certain extent mean that the United States has tacitly supported strengthening of the relationships of its alliance partners with ASEAN in tandem with U.S. efforts to build a more active relationship with ASEAN partners.

(1) Political

Under the rubric of the rebalance, the Obama administration has intensified policy coordination with South Korea on both political and military issues. President Obama has visited Seoul four times in the first six years of his presidency, more than any other country in Asia. Moreover, U.S.-ROK summits have routinely occurred on the sidelines of international gatherings in Asia and Europe. The secretaries of state and defense are regularly in touch with South Korean counterparts for strategic and security consultative dialogues, and the first "2+2" meeting between American and South Korean minister-level foreign and defense officials was held in 2012, with a second such meeting held in October of 2014.

In response to the ongoing challenge posed by North Korea's nuclear development, the United States and South Korea have built a closer political and security partnership with each other. The 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement envisions a broader scope for cooperation that extends to regional and global areas as well as a comprehensive political partnership that extends to nuclear, economic, and non-traditional areas. The closeness of the U.S.-Korea relationship was evidenced by requests to Seoul to host the 2010 G-20 and the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit.

(2) Military

The institutional ties afforded by the two alliance relationships, with Japan and with South Korea, has required all sides to maintain close policy coordination, including regularized political attention from senior leaders both to manage the close institutional ties that are part of the alliances and to provide constant reassurance of the credibility of U.S. alliance commit-



ments to the defense of both Japan and South Korea. The alliance frameworks thus provide the backbone for U.S. political and military engagement in the region and require the maintenance of a high operational tempo of communication at all levels to effectively manage issues in the alliances. The effective implementation of the U.S. rebalance has resulted in an intensification of coordination efforts so as to provide constant assurance and promote close coordination on bilateral and multilateral issues.

The intensification of U.S.-ROK security coordination under the Obama administration is consistent with the spirit of the U.S. rebalance, but the primary catalyst for intensified coordination has been North Korea's persistent efforts to expand its asymmetric nuclear and missile capabilities. North Korea's provocative rhetoric under Kim Jong Un has put both the United States and South Korean militaries on alert and has catalyzed ever-closer defense cooperation through the establishment of a regular Korean Integrated Defense Dialogue to coordinate defense strategy and the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee to discuss the U.S. response to North Korean nuclear threats, as well as the negotiation of a joint Counterprovocation Plan in spring of 2014 to ensure a joint response to future North Korean low-level provocations such as the shelling of Yeonpyong Island in November of 2010.

The United States has sought to strengthen alliances in Northeast Asia while deepening political dialogue and security relationships in Southeast Asia. Another significant component of the rebalance has been the extension of the U.S. footprint to Southeast Asia and Australia through regular rotational deployments to the Philippines and Australia as well as through stationing of new naval vessels in Singapore. Thus, it is important for the United States to assure Tokyo and Seoul that the expanded U.S. footprint does not come at the expense of alliance commitments in Northeast Asia, but indeed underscores the importance of Japan and South Korea to U.S. presence in the Asia-Pacific.

As the United States has attempted to strengthen its political engagement and rotational presence in Southeast Asia, the United States has also welcomed the strengthening of lateral relations with U.S. partners in Southeast Asia. Japan in particular has strengthened its development assistance and defense relationships with Southeast Asia, in essence shadowing the U.S. pivot through a stepped up focus on assistance to countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam. South Korea has also provided military vessels to the Philippines and sent ROK military troops to the Philippines for humanitarian relief operations in the aftermath of typhoon Haiyan in the summer of 2013.



(3) Economic

The main thrust of U.S. economic policy under the rebalance has been its effort to promote multilateral trade liberalization negotiations through the TPP. The TPP includes twelve founding countries, including a number of important Southeast Asian countries as well as Japan. While South Korea is not a member of the original negotiation group, the TPP negotiations have proceeded on the basis of the template provided by ratification of KORUS FTA in early 2013. The ratification of KORUS thus played a central role in paving the way for U.S. involvement in the TPP.⁷ Ratification of KORUS served as the catalyst to draw Japan into TPP negotiations, which in turn provides the TPP with sufficient size and weight economically to represent a meaningful step forward toward trade liberalization in the Asia-Pacific: with Japan in the TPP, the agreement would comprise nearly 40 percent of the global GDP and 8.6 percent of global trade.⁸ Although South Korea did not join the initial group of countries that are part of TPP negotiations, South Korean officials have given indications that the country will seek to join the grouping once the negotiations are finalized and the TPP is formally launched.⁹

2. South Korean Views of the U.S. Rebalance

For the most part, the U.S. rebalance has been welcomed in the region as evidence of renewed American commitment to Asia. But the rebalance announcement has also been interpreted by Chinese analysts as evidence of a U.S. policy of containment toward China. Chinese analysts have arrived at this judgment despite continuous assertions by U.S. officials that the policy is driven primarily by Asia's rising importance. At the same time, U.S. officials constantly encourage China to abide by global norms and institutions. Moreover, the U.S. rebalancing strategy has been subject to a wide range of interpretations by various American partners within Asia, many of which have their own interest in promoting calibration of U.S. participation in the region against their perceptions of China's rising influence.

As an ally of the United States, South Korea has welcomed the U.S. rebalancing strategy as evidence of U.S. desire to sustain its traditional commitment and its role as a leader and trusted partner in the Asia-Pacific. Given that the first priority of the rebalance involves strengthening U.S. alliances, this prioritization has had clear benefits for the U.S.-ROK alliance. South Korea has welcomed U.S. efforts to strengthen the alliance through both the 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement and the 2013 60th Anniversary Statement on the Joint Vision for the Alliance. Economically, the ratification of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) provided a critical jumpstart and foundation point for



efforts to negotiate an even more wide-ranging multilateral FTA through the TPP.

Although South Korea has generally welcomed the rebalance, South Koreans are watching U.S. implementation of the rebalancing strategy and making their own assessments about its implications. These assessments are being made in the context of South Korea's own desire to enhance its role and capabilities as a middle power, implying a certain distance from the United States. Concerns revolve around several areas: 1) credibility of the United States, both as a military ally of South Korea and U.S. ability to uphold its security commitments in the region, especially in the event of U.S. military dominance being challenged by China's military modernization as a byproduct of China's rise; 2) whether the U.S. rebalance policy and Chinese response might feed an arms race or heighten competition and confrontation in Sino-American relations, in which case South Korea might feel greater pressure to choose between its number one trading partner and its primary security guarantor; and 3) whether the U.S. rebalance and Chinese response might have negative ramifications for Korean reunification prospects.

Most South Korean concerns revolve around the question of whether the United States, in light of its fiscal constraints, will be able to continue to play its role as primary guarantor of security in the region, especially in light of China's sustained and rapid military growth. Thus, the critical question is whether the United States can sustain the political will necessary to make good on the credibility of its defense commitments in the region. Another question is whether the U.S. rebalancing strategy might prematurely or unnecessarily incite competition between the United States and China. At the same time, South Koreans see the rebalance primarily through the lens of U.S. policies and posture toward North Korea, and the aims of the rebalance thus far have been filtered through outstanding issues in U.S.-ROK deterrence toward North Korea, including questions such as the structure of operational control arrangements between the United States and South Korea.

(1) Credibility of the U.S. Rebalance

As the rebalance has unfolded, some South Korean analysts have expressed concerns regarding the sustainability of the rebalancing strategy, especially as they have watched the U.S. budget debate over sequestration. Some of those concerns have been expressed in the context of worries that U.S. fiscal constraints will lead the United States to make greater demands on South Korea to shoulder its own defense burdens or to provide greater financial contributions to the support of U.S. forces deployed there. Overhanging these near-term tactical concerns is the question of the extent to which U.S. credibility will be sustained long-term in the context of China's rapid military modernization.¹⁰



Despite these specific concerns, South Korea has generally shown great confidence in the alliance and the commitment of the United States to South Korean security, especially vis-à-vis North Korea. In fact, North Korea's capacity to provoke limited conflict near the DMZ and its efforts to develop nuclear weapons have provided a catalyst for strengthening U.S. and South Korean policy coordination dialogues such as the Korean Integrated Defense Dialogue and the Extended Deterrence Policy Committee. These new challenges have had the effect of binding the United States and South Korea together even as they have respectively grappled with the challenges posed by North Korea.¹¹

Moreover, negotiation of the Special Measures Agreement defining respective financial burdens in support of the U.S. presence in South Korea went relatively smoothly, at least on the surface, in late 2013 and early 2014, with the main issues revolving around transparency of U.S. management of funds contributed by South Korea to be used for completion of a consolidated U.S. basing arrangement at Camp Humphreys near Osan and Pyongtaek. Contrary to South Korean media expectations driven by concerns over sequestration, the United States did not make demands for dramatic increases in South Korean financial support for the alliance.

More broadly, the challenge for the United States is to show sufficient strength and reliability to keep its commitments under the alliance credible to South Korea as a security partner while also keeping South Korea invested in expanded cooperation within the alliance. South Korea's growth in capability as a middle power means that it has some capabilities that it can contribute to its own defense while also pursuing its own self-strengthening, but South Korea's indigenous capabilities remain insufficient to assure its survival and avoid coercion in the face of larger neighbors. The growth of South Korean capabilities also introduces a quiet tension between self-help through indigenization of South Korean capabilities (for instance, for economic reasons through development of the military export sector) and internal balancing versus strengthening of alliance-based capabilities that may serve to bind alliance partners even more closely to each other.¹² This ambivalence over indigenization of ROK defense capabilities versus making those capabilities available in service to alliance needs can be seen to a certain extent in the debate over the timing and structure of wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer. In addition, credibility of U.S. commitments, the broadening of U.S.-ROK cooperation across a wide range of fields, and South Korea's ability to derive political benefits from enhanced stature that comes in part from the platform provided by the alliance. These are all factors that may influence the "stickiness" of the alliance relationship as well as the likelihood that third parties could seek to limit or divide alliance-based cooperation.



(2) Sino-American Competition

The primary South Korean concern regarding the U.S. rebalance has centered on China's negative response to the rebalance as a U.S. effort to contain China. South Korean concerns revolve primarily around China's interpretation of the rebalance as a factor that could lead to greater Sino-American tension or confrontation. South Korea has shown sensitivity to the potential for Sino-American confrontation as a background factor that could limit South Korea's options and force it to make an undesirable choice between South Korea's largest economic partner and its main security guarantor. Thus, South Koreans are sensitive to any factor that appears to induce great power rivalry between the United States and China because such rivalry carries with it constraints on South Korea's ability to maneuver between the two larger parties and in the worst case, may force South Korea to choose between the United States and China as its primary partner. South Korea is actively seeking lessons from middle power behaviors that can be borrowed from other countries in similar circumstances. The goal is to increase South Korea's strategic space and maintain (admittedly limited) control over its own strategic environment.

A component of the U.S. rebalance strategy that should be reassuring to South Koreans despite Chinese protests is the extensive U.S. effort to engage with China as an emerging power. This engagement is designed to strengthen U.S. capacity to coordinate with China on a wide range of issues so as to manage, if not to deconflict, potential areas of competition in the great power relationship.¹³ The fact that the United States has committed itself to extensive high-level Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) consultations and that it has actively sought to deepen its military-to-military exchange with China should be reassuring evidence to South Korea that the United States does not seek to contain China.

Park Geun-hye's strong rhetorical support for the U.S. rebalancing policy reveals that her China engagement strategy is predicated on the existence of a strong U.S.-ROK alliance. But this positive-sum view of the relationship between the U.S.-ROK security alliance and a stronger Sino-South Korean relationship comes into conflict with Chinese perceptions that the U.S. rebalance may be aimed at containing China.¹⁴ To the extent that Beijing is concerned that the U.S.-ROK alliance may one day become focused on China rather than North Korea, China will seek to persuade South Korea to marginalize the importance of the alliance or even to abandon the alliance with the United States. Thus, China has sought ways to limit the scope of the alliance with the United States and potentially to increase costs South Korea may incur as a result of continuing the alliance. Chinese analysts have already stated that they are carefully examining the U.S.-ROK alliance because they do not want it to have a broader application beyond the mission of deterring North Korea.¹⁵ One example of this desire to



constrain the scope of the U.S.-ROK alliance within the region was China's objection in late 2013 to South Korean exports of trainer aircraft to the Philippines.¹⁶ Another example is China's public opposition to South Korea's acquisition of Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense capabilities, ostensibly on the basis of the fact that THAAD radar arrays could extend into the Chinese mainland but perhaps primarily out of concern that South Korean mid-range missile defense capabilities might someday be integrated into the U.S.-Japan missile defense system.¹⁷ China is likely to continue to criticize South Korean defense cooperation in the region with other U.S. allies if they perceive that the goal of expanded cooperation is to apply the U.S.-ROK alliance to other missions within the broader Asia-Pacific region.

Such efforts to weaken and circumscribe the scope of the alliance by containing the application of U.S.-ROK joint cooperation to the Korean Peninsula will pose a challenge to South Korea. Although the Park administration has tried to improve the tone and substance of China-South Korea relations, it has refused to do so at the expense of the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹⁸ The task of improving relations is enormously difficult given the fact that China's views of its relationship with South Korea often seem to be mediated by its views of its respective relationships with North Korea and the United States, in addition to its perception of the nature and state of inter-Korean relations. If Sino-South Korean relations are to improve, it will involve a desire by China to gain a direct strategic benefit from its relationship with South Korea, but this objective may come into conflict with or threaten to weaken the U.S.-ROK alliance.

At this stage, there is little for the United States to be concerned about in Park's efforts to improve South Korea's relationship with China, especially since the strategic stakes for South Korea in getting its relationship with China right are much higher than the likely costs to the United States of any South Korean missteps. Yet, over the long term, there is concern in some circles that Seoul's pursuit of a better relationship with Beijing—fueled in part by a shared distrust of Japan—might have the effect of weakening the U.S.-ROK alliance.¹⁹ Another concern is that South Korea's relatively small size and high dependency on China could make it vulnerable to Chinese pressure to limit the scope of Korean coordination with the United States. As discussed below, Korean reunification could be a game changer for the future of Korea's geopolitical preferences and orientation between China and the United States.

(3) The Goal of Korean Reunification and the Need for Sino-American Cooperation

The United States and South Korea stated a clear vision for Korean reunification in the June 2009 U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement, leading to a single democratic, market-based, unified



Korean state that presumably would maintain alliance ties based on common values with the United States.²⁰ For both countries, it is easy to agree to such an end state but potentially much more difficult to achieve a consensus with neighbors—namely China—on the process and division of labor necessary to achieve this goal. Even within South Korea, the debate over the desirability of reunification is colored by a generation gap between older Koreans who desire reunification regardless of cost and a younger generation that has grown increasingly wary of the impact of reunification costs on their potential tax burden and quality of life. President Park Geun-hye’s description in her January 2014 New Year’s press conference as a “jackpot” or “bonanza” was widely perceived to be directed at such sentiment.²¹

The U.S.-ROK shared vision regarding the preferred end state of a reunified Korea is an area where U.S. and South Korean policies toward reunification might come into direct conflict with Chinese policy preferences regarding the Korean Peninsula. China’s primary interest on the peninsula has been to support stability by shoring up a comprehensive relationship with North Korea. To the extent that China sees the Korean Peninsula in geostrategic terms as an object of rivalry with the United States. China’s objective of promoting stability on the peninsula ultimately comes into conflict with the U.S.-ROK objective of achieving Korean reunification.

This circumstance poses a particular challenge to South Korea, which seeks to square the circle between the United States and China by making space for dialogue and cooperation with respective major powers so as to open a pathway toward peaceful reunification. This sort of effort is behavior that relies on South Korea’s diplomatic capabilities as a middle power and as the party with the greatest direct interest in achieving the objective of peaceful reunification on the Korean peninsula. Under the Park administration, South Korea has made enhanced efforts to bridge the Sino-American gap over North Korea by proposing a trilateral track 1.5 dialogue, the first round of which was successfully held in July of 2013. However, the failure of the dialogue to continue reveals the scope of the challenge that South Korea faces as a smaller middle power wedged between two major powers. There are stark limits to South Korea’s leverage even as a middle power that require sustained efforts and special capabilities to bridge, even on an issue such as North Korea which both major powers can rationally acknowledge is one where South Korea’s intensity of interest, essential involvement, and rights to exercise leadership are clear.

At the same time, broader regional stability in the Asia-Pacific is increasingly dependent on Sino-American cooperation. Although conflict between U.S. policies toward South Korea and China is not inevitable, how the United States prioritizes the objective of Korean reunification in its respective policies toward South Korea and China will influence the scope, aspirations, and nature of U.S.-ROK cooperation within the alliance. While the United States



must avoid an approach to Korean reunification that unnecessarily provokes conflict with China, the scope of U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation should not neglect the fact that both sides have identified unification essentially on South Korean terms as a main objective of the alliance. South Korean policymakers realize that Korean reunification is unlikely to be attained without regional cooperation, including with China. But they also realize that South Korea will have little leverage to influence China's stance toward Korean reunification outside the context of strong policy coordination with the United States.

Heightened tension surrounding North Korea has provided a moment of opportunity for the United States to press China for greater cooperation vis-à-vis North Korea, especially given that North Korean provocations are adversely affecting China's security environment and are detracting from the regional stability necessary for continued economic growth. But the United States also faces a paradox in its efforts to induce stronger cooperation from the Xi Jinping administration: to the extent that the United States takes advantage of North Korean provocations to press for increases in missile defense or stronger Chinese cooperation with the United States at a perceived cost to North Korean stability, Chinese leaders are reminded of their own geostrategic equities on the Korean Peninsula vis-à-vis the United States and distracted from focusing on North Korea as the original instigator and source of instability.

On the other hand, South Korea's perceived need for Chinese cooperation in order to achieve Korean reunification may provide the biggest temptation for South Korea to make compromises with China that could limit or damage the future effectiveness of the U.S.-ROK alliance. In particular, the need for cooperation with China may inhibit South Korean cooperation with other U.S. allies such as Japan. South Korean progressives, for example, have often cited the emergence of a U.S.-Japan-ROK security triangle as a development that could result in a "second cold war." The effects of this domestic political division in South Korea suggest that domestic consensus may be one critical prerequisite for South Korea to effectively pursue a middle power diplomatic strategy given its intermediate position between China and the United States.

3. Implications of the U.S. Rebalance for American Expectations of South Korea

On the one hand, the U.S. rebalance underscores the importance of strong alliances as a foundation for U.S. strategy. This means that the United States seeks closer cooperation with alliance partners in the Asia Pacific, and it makes South Korea more important to the United States as both a capable partner and a "lynchpin" of security in the Asia-Pacific. But alongside the strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance comes a higher set of American expectations for



how South Korea will perform as a part of the U.S. network of alliances in Asia. In addition, the U.S. objective of alliance strengthening means that while the United States is grateful for the increased capabilities represented by South Korea as a middle power, it primarily views those enhanced capabilities as a support for joint action and cooperation with South Korea and less in terms of what South Korea can do on its own as a middle power. In this respect, as the rebalancing strategy unfolds, issues such as the relative importance of the North Korean threat and the right balance between cooperation with China and hedging against the negative effects of China's rise could produce different priorities in the United States and South Korea. If not managed well, this priority gap could be fed by differing expectations regarding South Korea's role and contributions, both within the context of the alliance and as South Korea seeks to independently assert itself as a middle power in the region.

The first area in which the two countries' priorities could diverge as a result of the rebalancing strategy is related to the United States' emphasis on a broader geographic distribution of its forces, which might hypothetically draw U.S. attention and resources in the direction of Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean at the expense of South Korea.²² The broadening of the scope of U.S. operations and policy to cover the whole of the Asia-Pacific rather than a more geographically limited prioritization of Northeast Asia could create new stresses on the U.S.-ROK alliance, especially when combined with U.S. budget constraints. South Korean defense specialists have already expressed concerns that the United States will seek to extract greater financial support from South Korea to pay for costs related to the U.S. presence on the peninsula.²³

Second, a broader U.S. strategy that encourages horizontal cooperation among alliance partners has run into some initial roadblocks as a result of South Korean reluctance to establish an agreement for intelligence sharing and pursue closer security cooperation with Japan, a country that would be called on to support U.S.-ROK military operations in the event of a conflict with North Korea. U.S. interests in strengthening the combined defense posture toward North Korea include promoting high levels of cooperation with South Korea but also with Japan on many rear-area support issues. More effective Japanese involvement in information sharing and logistical support for the United States and South Korea during a crisis would require that South Korea and Japan are able to cooperate with each other, a step that has been facilitated through a December 2014 information sharing agreement among the three countries.

The United States has made its need for and support of such cooperation clear through efforts to promote greater trilateral coordination, including through maritime exercises on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The United States has also encouraged South Korean involvement in U.S. and Japanese joint research on and implementation of advanced



missile defense technologies. The U.S. desire for closer cooperation among allies is rooted in a realist calculation that South Korea and Japan, as fellow democracies with common values and parallel security ties with the United States, are natural partners that should also be able to work with each other. But such a view fails to recognize a deeper set of tensions between Japan and South Korea over historical issues and territorial disputes that in fact are tied to identity issues between the two countries.²⁴ Many of these issues are traced to Japanese imperialism, the aftermath of the post-World War II settlement, and perceived power inequities reflected in the post-war settlement that have prevented South Korea and Japan from achieving a sufficiently deep reconciliation to fully embrace a “future-oriented relationship.” Unless these core issues are addressed satisfactorily, the United States faces a situation where the “ceiling” of what can be done between South Korea and Japan is well below the full potential that would derive from trilateral cooperation based on a stable and fully functioning Japan-South Korea relationship.

In addition to U.S. pressure on South Korea to strengthen horizontal relationships with Japan, Washington may seek to work together with Seoul to enhance South Korea’s role in providing security in the region based on its increasing capabilities. Thus far, U.S.-ROK off-peninsula cooperation has primarily supported global stability and has occurred outside the Asia-Pacific region. But there may also be possibilities to enhance the nontraditional and functional roles of the U.S.-ROK within East Asia as well—for instance, in maritime security cooperation.

III. South Korea’s Middle Power Concept and its Compatibility with the U.S. Rebalance

Seoul National University Professor Chun Chaesung identifies the following characteristics of South Korea’s middle power diplomacy: 1) to help great powers lessen mutual strategic mistrust; 2) to develop an issue-specific dispute settlement mechanism; 3) to develop multi-lateral institutions or to actively participate in and further existing institutions; 4) to preemptively import globally established norms to the region to set up the principle on which East Asians can solve problems; 5) to make a cooperative network among like-minded middle powers to strengthen their positions vis-à-vis great powers; 6) to be a co-architect in making and reforming the regional security architecture.²⁵

The exposition of these six characteristics of middle power diplomacy is helpful in



thinking about U.S. responses to South Korea as a middle power, but it is also necessary to acknowledge that there has not been a formal U.S. recognition or policy toward middle powers as a group, nor is there evidence that middle powerness as an attribute has been consequential to U.S. foreign policy toward countries that classify themselves in this way. In this respect, the concept of middle powerness has not yet had practical consequences or impact on the formation of U.S. policy. Therefore, it is useful to assess the extent to which these six factors are salient in U.S. perspectives toward South Korea as a diplomatic partner and ally of the United States.

An examination of statements by U.S. policymakers on the rebalance reveals that among those six goals, senior officials in the Obama administration have embraced some but not all of the objectives that Professor Chun identifies for South Korea's middle power diplomacy. Regarding the first objective of helping great powers to lessen mutual strategic mistrust, American officials argue that one of the purposes of the U.S. rebalance is to lessen mutual strategic mistrust through efforts to improve relations with emerging powers. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clearly expressed this idea in a speech at the United States Institute of Peace at which she stated that the goal of the Obama administration was "to write a new answer to the question of what happens when an established power and a rising power meet," or to avoid what is otherwise known as the Thucydides trap.²⁶ The Obama administration's support for this idea was also expressed in the wake of the Xi-Obama Sunnylands summit in 2013 as well as through repeated statements by Obama administration officials that they desire to follow a path by which established powers do not inevitably conflict with rising powers such as China. Following the Sunnylands summit, both the United States and China embraced the idea of establishing a "new type of relationship" between these two major powers on the world scene, and both countries have engaged in the single most comprehensive annual bureaucratic effort to discuss a wide range of functional and global issues affecting the two countries and the world through the establishment of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue.²⁷

The Obama administration's proactive efforts to manage the relationship with China so as to forestall a potential conflict is in South Korea's interest and is consistent with an approach that addresses one facet of President Park's "Asian paradox," the concern about negative effects of rising tension between the United States and China. However, there is little evidence that the Obama administration has reached out for help to South Korea as part of its efforts to manage the China-U.S. relationship. Nor is there evidence that beyond President Park's declaratory policy, South Korea has made tangible contributions in support of Sino-American efforts to manage bilateral competition between the major powers. In this respect, South Korea's objective of trying to facilitate better relations with great powers is both chal-



lenging and somewhat awkward, since most great powers are likely to view management of relations with each other primarily as a bilateral matter that does not necessarily require the assistance of third parties.

To the extent that the United States has pursued consultations with allies regarding management of relations with major powers, the dominant framework has been the security alliance and has come in the form of defense planning, but this is a framework that is primarily focused on how to bolster security against the effects of the rise of a new challenge from emerging powers, or alternatively, on the need to assure allies regarding the credibility of American capacity to provide defense. As a result, these defense-oriented dialogues are not framed in such a way that they provide much opportunity for a country like South Korea to facilitate a better relationship between the United States and China.

One practical experiment South Korea has undertaken that is arguably designed to facilitate understanding between China and the United States on the specific issue of North Korea has been the proposal to establish a trilateral dialogue among the United States, China, and South Korea on North Korea. This proposal resulted in a track 1.5 dialogue in July of 2013 at which officials tested the waters with a conversation about the mutual strategic objectives of the three countries, but there was no follow-up to this dialogue in 2014 and no evidence of sufficient enthusiasm on the part of either the United States or China for making the trilateral dialogue a regular subject of official dialogue among the three parties.

With regard to South Korea's second objective of promoting dispute settlement among major powers, the Obama administration has embraced the need to develop issue-specific dispute settlement mechanisms in the region, most obviously through the administration's efforts to strengthen norms for managing maritime conflicts among East Asian countries in the South China Sea and East China Sea. While clearly stating that it is not a party to the conflicts over sovereignty in these areas, the Obama administration has repeatedly stated its desire to see the conflicts managed peacefully according to principles of rule of law and according to the principle of freedom of navigation so that no country might unilaterally exclude others from peaceful use or transit of maritime areas.²⁸ The Obama administration has repeatedly reiterated its desire for progress in adopting a code of conduct between China and ASEAN claimants in the South China Sea and to promote the strengthening of the EAS as a primary means by which to translate international norms on issues such as nuclear nonproliferation and maritime dispute management into a regional context.

In addition, the United States, China, and other parties in the region have made progress laying a framework for managing potential maritime incidents through the establishment of principles of conduct under the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, adopted at a maritime symposium in Tianjin in summer of 2013. Although much remains to be fleshed out in



actual practice, the establishment of principles for managing such conflict in the region constitutes a positive step toward addressing the possibility that an accidental maritime encounter might escalate tensions in the region. South Korea also has an interest in strengthening of dispute settlement mechanisms in the region, and the United States welcomes greater South Korean support for the promotion of measures to strengthen the implementation and application of international norms through the East Asia Summit.

The strengthening of the EAS is a U.S. objective as part of the rebalance that is directly related to South Korea's third and fourth objectives as a middle power of developing multilateral institutions as vehicles for the strengthening of international norms. Therefore, the U.S. objective of strengthening regional institutions as a vehicle for promoting regional implementation of international norms is an objective that South Korea and the United States clearly share. Both the United States and South Korea should be able to work together closely and with common purpose to strengthen the EAS. The United States presumably would welcome greater South Korean rhetorical and concrete support at the EAS in favor of building mechanisms and accountability to international norms in addition to South Korean support for concrete efforts to strengthen the EAS as an institution.

However, from South Korea's perspective, in the absence of progress in six party talks, a missing element of this strategy is the absence of a working multilateral mechanism for addressing subregional issues in Northeast Asia. For this reason, the Park administration has put forward the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) as a multilateral institution that can build functional cooperation in Northeast Asia in the absence of progress in the Six Party Talks. In essence, the NAPCI proposal attempts to keep momentum for multilateral cooperation despite North Korea's non-cooperation in Six Party Talks. While North Korea would be welcome to participate in NAPCI-sponsored cooperative projects, NAPCI efforts work to promote cooperation regardless of progress on denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

Despite the broad convergence between South Korean middle power aims and the U.S. rebalance listed above, there is an element of tension between the fifth and sixth objectives of South Korea's middle power diplomacy and the objectives of the U.S. rebalance. American encouragement for enhanced regional cooperation among middle powers as part of the rebalance has to date been expressed solely in terms of U.S. alliance partners working together with each other to support U.S. objectives, including preservation of regional stability, while the South Korean concept of promoting cooperation of middle power cooperation aims to enhance leverage as a means to balance against great power domination. These two concepts are not necessarily contrary to each other, but they do envisage distinctly different positions, orientations, and security concepts. The U.S. envisages alliance partners working together



with each other, if not to balance against rising threats to regional security, at least to preserve characteristics of the current environment that they view as favorable to the preservation of regional stability. On the other hand, the South Korean concept of joining with other middle powers envisages a balancing role among major powers as a form of restraint against unfettered major power rivalry. This concept appears to downplay the role of alliances in order to avoid the perception that South Korea is taking sides with one major power against another.

Neither does the United States appear to be concerned with enlisting co-architects in the management of regional security architecture, except to the extent that other partners join with the United States in preserving and upholding international norms that have come to be a part of an international order whose dominant architect and influencer has been the United States. As a result, the United States does not see a need to enlist co-architects in the formation of a new regional order, given that it seeks to strengthen cooperation among like-minded states to preserve the characteristics of an existing regional order that the United States judges as having been extraordinarily successful in preserving the peace in East Asia.

In sum, the United States has not yet embraced fully every manifestation of South Korea's desire to play a middle power role. This is not surprising because the United States is likely to view the relationship with South Korea through the lens of the alliance, a concept which emphasizes South Korea's tie to and convergent interests with those of the United States. Therefore, the United States will naturally be slower to recognize middle power attributes that do not feed into the enhancement of the alliance relationship. In addition, the United States will have to be convinced of the value of middle power roles, processes, or functions that do not feed directly into strengthening of the alliance relationship. This means that the United States is likely to be slow to recognize the value of South Korea facilitation or management of issues outside of the alliance framework. To the extent that the United States recognizes South Korea's middle power attributes, it will be because South Korea undertakes these roles independently and goes about to prove their utility in strengthening the U.S.-ROK relationship rather than because the United States has given a prior blessing to the concept of South Korea as a middle power or has expectations that South Korea will play such a role.

1. Alliance and Middle Power: Contending or Complementary Concepts in South Korean Foreign Policy?

The United States and South Korea both share an interest in strengthening of institutions and norms within East Asia, as well as a more energetic application of existing global norms to the regional environment. On the premise that U.S. and South Korean interests are well-aligned and that shared interests have strengthened alliance-based cooperation, the United



States is likely to welcome and encourage these sorts of South Korean contributions. We can see evidence of this in U.S. encouragement to South Korea to take an active role in offshore post-conflict stabilization in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Gulf of Aden, in U.S. willingness to cooperate with South Korea in international development projects in Africa and in strengthening review and evaluation of existing development projects, and in U.S. expectations for South Korea as an advanced nation with shared interests to contribute to international stability through policy coordination on a range of global and non-traditional security issues from counter-terrorism to shared objectives in global health and implementation of sanctions against Iran and North Korea.

South Korea's middle power concept has in many respects been a great boon to enhanced U.S.-ROK alliance cooperation and to the idea of building a comprehensive security alliance between the United States and South Korea. On many of the subject areas where South Korea has carved out a hosting or catalyst role as a middle power, its policies have already been closely aligned with those of the United States. On the G-20, South Korea strongly supported anti-protectionist stances in the midst of the global financial crisis. And South Korea's development agenda, objectives, and example are generally in concert with U.S. views. South Korea hosted the Nuclear Security Summit, a special project of the Obama administration, at the behest of President Obama himself, and South Korea worked closely with the United States to forward nuclear security objectives defined in the first summit despite South Korean interests in broadening the scope of the agenda to also include nuclear safety issues post-Fukushima. Given South Korea's diplomatic orientation and interest in perpetuation of conditions and rules that reinforce the current global order, South Korean activism in international affairs would not likely conflict with U.S. interests through the alliance in most areas, although U.S. flexibility may be required to accommodate creative South Korean contributions to the global order.

However, there are potential areas and/or issues where a middle power concept for framing South Korean diplomacy could come into conflict with U.S. objectives. As South Korea seeks a modicum of balance and seeming neutrality as an arbiter among major powers, South Korean middle power behavior could potentially deviate from U.S. political objectives to the extent that South Korean facilitation involves compromise or "balancing" efforts to bridge the gap between Chinese and American differences in approach on global issues. South Korea has experienced limited success thus far as a facilitator of compromise or broker of differences between the United States and China on specific international issues. On the one hand, South Korean efforts to address differences between the United States and China on global "rebalancing" in the run-up to its hosting the 2010 G-20 meeting in Seoul were unsuccessful. On the other hand, South Korea's efforts to incorporate new donor perspectives



into the OECD-DAC conversation on standards for international development, South Korean brokering efforts attempted to bridge gaps between established and emerging donors by broadening and reframing the focus on “development effectiveness” as opposed to the “aid effectiveness” paradigm that established donors had already adopted as the basis upon which to coordinate standards by which to evaluate international development programs.²⁹

Increasingly, however, South Korea’s position and influence is likely to play an important role, in concert with other regional middle powers, as a brokering and background influence on issues where China sets out to take a greater share of leadership or otherwise challenge the contours of the U.S.-led international order. In fact, 2014 saw the emergence of several issues that have the potential to either alter or reinforce international norms and patterns of interaction. South Korea might be well positioned to play a brokering role between China and the United States on such issues.

First, China’s move to establish the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB) as an international institution devoted to financing Asian infrastructure projects has been highlighted as a potential challenge to the roles and practices of existing international financing institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB), and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Yet it is also possible to argue that these institutions have dragged their feet in recognizing and revising their own governance structures to reflect China’s relative weight as a player in the international financial community. Given this background, China’s proposal to establish the AIIB has invited a great deal of scrutiny and mixed regional reactions as its establishment poses a potential challenge to international institutions and a choice to those regional actors who must decide whether to join.³⁰ That sense of choice has been heightened by perceptions that the Obama administration has actively dissuaded others from joining the AIIB because it represents a direct challenge to existing norms of international governance on the one hand, while Asian neighbors see a clear need for enhanced infrastructure investment in the region and a potentially useful niche role and justification for the establishment of the AIIB. In particular, decisions of American allies such as Australia and South Korea on whether to join AIIB have come under great scrutiny. President Park deferred a response to an invitation from President Xi in July of 2014 to join the AIIB, with Deputy Prime Minister Choi Kyung-hwan subsequently stating that South Korea’s decision will be made on the basis of whether or not the AIIB establishes transparent structures of governance consistent with international standards of other international financial institutions.³¹ Ultimately, it is likely to be in South Korea’s interest to participate in the AIIB project, but countries like South Korea and Australia that have been beneficiaries of a U.S.-led international order and know directly the value of promoting good governance as an essential component of development policy will surely seek to use their leverage to convince China to



run the organization transparently and in a manner that conforms with best practices in international governance.

A second area of apparent conflict between the United States and China involves how to conceptualize the future of regional security in East Asia. In particular, China has challenged the role and utility of bilateral alliances as part of a future regional security structure while Xi Jinping has put forward a “New Security Concept” that borrows from European concepts of cooperative security and emphasizes inclusion, cooperation, and win-win outcomes.³² However, this security concept has yet to be reflected in the reality of regional relations, especially in the context of China’s aggressive assertion of maritime claims in the South and East China Seas. On this issue, South Korea has stood apart from China’s concept, refusing to endorse it at the Conference on International Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) despite Chinese efforts to push it forward. In view of the fact that there is so much that must be done to strengthen trust in East Asia as a prerequisite for the effective functioning of a cooperative security concept such as the one proposed by President Xi, it is clear that South Korea has made the right choice. Moreover, the “New Security Concept” as currently envisioned is directly antithetical to the U.S.-ROK security alliance, on which South Korean security depends at present.

A third area of where the United States and China appear to be in competition is related to the architecture of regional economic cooperation, but China’s relaxation of opposition to the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations and its embrace of the concept of a Free Trade Area in the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) at the November 2014 APEC meeting held in Shanghai appears to have substantially deconflicted U.S. and Chinese competitive impulses on trade. Nonetheless, this is an area where South Korea has a unique role to play at the fulcrum of overlapping concepts for how to efficiently liberalize regional trade relations. On the one hand, the starting point and catalyst for meaningful TPP negotiations was the ratification of the Korea-U.S. (KORUS) FTA, which billed itself as a high-standard, comprehensive free trade agreement. On the other hand, South Korea and China have also agreed to establish a bilateral FTA, albeit one that still contains many exclusions. South Korea has also stated its willingness to join the TPP at an early date. Thus, the South Korea-China FTA could in theory be used as a stepping stone toward China’s eventual move to join the TPP as a platform for the realization of FTAAP, or the idea of FTAAP may prove to require additional time to realize. However, the South Korea-China FTA appears to be relatively modest at present; South Korea will want to push much harder toward a higher-standard and more comprehensive FTA with China to be an effective catalyst to China in preparation for a full-fledged FTAAP negotiation following the adoption (and South Korea’s likely joining) of the TPP.



The final issue that will no doubt prove to be critical in testing South Korea's capability to bridge the gap between the United States and China is the question of the future of Korean reunification. This issue involves strategic interests on both sides, and South Korean positions will likely be decisive in influencing how the United States and China respond in the event that Korean reunification indeed proves to be achievable. For now, the U.S. rebalance and the U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement provide clear parameters regarding combined alliance objectives, but it remains to be seen whether China can find the envisioned U.S.-ROK outcome acceptable. Instead, China and North Korea are likely to remain united in opposition to this vision for as long as possible. But despite this assessment, there is clear value in South Korea's continued efforts to engage with both China and the United States in in-depth conversations that will lay the framework for managing the Korean reunification process more effectively. In this respect, there is likely to be no more consequential or decisive test of Korea's ability to play a middle power role than its future diplomacy between the United States and China, respectively, as it manages specific issues in the event of Korean reunification, if it proves to be feasible. ■



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